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Critical Assessments of
Leading Philosophers

Edited by
Claire Katz with Lara Trout

Volume III
Levinas and the Question of Religion

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INTRODUCTION

Levinas, Judaism and religion: the unlikely match between philosophy and religion

Levinas's explicit focus on the tension between the Bible and philosophy resulted in two bodies of work – his philosophical writings and his writings on Judaism. These two genres of writing leave many scholars wondering how to classify him as a thinker and how to classify the relationship between the two bodies of thought. Levinas himself viewed his philosophical project as negotiating the tension between the Bible and the Greeks – between Judaism and philosophy. By 'Greek', Levinas does not mean only the grammar and vocabulary of the Greek language. He also means its expression of universality and as opposing itself to the local particularism of the quaint, traditional, poetic or religious. When Levinas identifies Greek as the inevitable discourse recommended by the Bible itself, he is referring to the language of justice and the response to the other that we find in the Bible. The move to the universal, to justice, is only warranted by the original imperative in the face of the other. This is what Levinas believes the West has lost. We are concerned with the universal and with justice, but we have forgotten why. The original saying of the Bible necessarily does not translate into Greek. Thus, the particularity of the face and our responsibility to the other, both of which give justice meaning, have become obscured.¹

Nonetheless, the similarity of themes that connect these two bodies of work and Levinas's own insistence that his philosophical project is an attempt to translate the Hebrew into Greek requires that we address how his readers are to understand his own apparently disparate modes of expression. In a frequently cited statement from an interview, Levinas told his interlocutor that he wished to keep his confessional writings separate from his philosophical writings and that he even used separate publishers for each. He separated these two modes of writing for good reason, and the debate surrounding their relationship to each other arises in part from his own comments on this topic. But nowhere does he say that his religion has not been an influence on his work. In fact, he says the opposite.

In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas admitted that he always believed that philosophy was somehow linked to God. And later in this

same interview, in response to the question of whether he intended to harmonize the two modes of thought, biblical and philosophical, Levinas replied that while he never aimed explicitly to harmonize these two traditions, if they are in harmony it is because every philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences – and for Levinas, the Bible belonged to those founding experiences.

In several places Levinas makes fairly strong claims linking his work in philosophy to Judaism. He claims that philosophy is derived from religion and that the relation to God is already ethics. We can concede that Levinas has two different styles of writing. But his intention for keeping these styles separate is not primarily about the relationship that the themes in each have to the other. Rather, he suspects, and probably rightly so, that he will be taken less seriously as a philosopher if his readers confuse his religious writings with his philosophical writings. His confessional style does not offer a philosophical argument and should not be judged in the same manner as we would judge a philosophical argument. His philosophical writings do offer an argument and should be judged on that basis.

Additionally, we should recall the political climate which permeated France at the time when he arrived to study in the early 1920s.² He arrived on the heels of the Dreyfus affair, the residue of which hung in the air. Many in France were still yelling ‘Kill the Jews’, and thus it should come as no surprise that Levinas wished to keep his philosophical work separate from his writings on Judaism. But as noted above, Levinas does not tell us that these two bodies of work did not influence each other; in fact, he explicitly states the opposite. He tells us that the Bible was among the first of his pre-philosophical experiences, and in several of his essays on Judaism he tells us that his task is to translate the Bible into Greek – the language of Judaism into the language of philosophy.

Levinas’s characterization of the subordinate position of philosophy to religion cannot easily be dismissed. He frequently quotes from the Book of Isaiah and uses other expressions from the Hebrew Bible in his philosophical work. Although he is clear that he does not cite these passages to serve as proof, he does cite them as examples or illustrations. These passages, found in his ‘Jewish writing’, rehearse themes that we also find in his philosophical writings. My point here is not to reduce Levinas’s philosophical project to ‘merely’ religious musings. Rather, reading his Jewish writings as complementary to his philosophical writings enriches our appreciation of his philosophy by aiding us in understanding the difficult themes that he discusses in his project. Levinas concedes that the putting into question is philosophical, even if the inspiration for it is religious. He observes that the verse often displays a philosophical accent, in which case he draws that verse into his philosophical writing. When he does so, however, he stays true to its original formulation in verse. The Bible renders the Greek necessary, and Europe comprises both the Bible and the Greek.

References to Jewish writings and the reliance on the Jewish tradition do not undermine the universal nature of Levinas's philosophical arguments. For him, the ethical message of the Hebrew Bible applies to everyone, even if in a particular way for each. Thus, Levinas asserts that philosophy is derivative of religion, the latter of which he equates with ethics. He sees the inseparability of God and Torah as fundamental to the Judaic faith. And he understands Torah as the ethical, the recognition of the other person.

In addition to this ambivalent relationship between philosophy and religion in general, there is also the relationship that Levinas has to several Jewish thinkers. For example, Levinas explicitly tells us that his conception of ethics departs from Buber's insofar as the latter's formulation of the 'I and thou' is not radical enough. Buber's 'I and thou' implies a reciprocal relationship, whereas Levinas's project emphasizes asymmetry. In Levinas's view, Buber's relation resembles friendship, not ethics.

Franz Rosenzweig's work *The Star of Redemption*, Levinas tells us in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, is 'too present in this book to cite'. Levinas repeatedly credits Rosenzweig with his critique of totality, and a close reading of both *The Star* and *Totality and Infinity* reveals that Rosenzweig's influence on Levinas's philosophical thought extends well beyond the critique of totality found in *The Star*.

Finally, there is the question of theology, a term typically seen as Greek-Christian in its origins: what does theology mean to Judaism and what does it mean to Levinas? Several scholars have tried to accommodate Levinas's philosophy to their own theological positions, arguing that Levinas's work can yield a philosophy of religion that is not confined by any one religion – Judaism or Christianity. Others have been influenced by Levinas's emphasis on transcendence, a view of God without being, and ethics; they endeavour to apply it to their own theological positions. Finally, many scholars placed Levinas in dialogue with explicitly Christian thinkers to see what benefit this conversation might have. The essays collected in this volume represent the diversity of scholarship, although by no means exhaustive, on Levinas and the philosophy of religion. These essays engage this topic from several different angles: they directly engage his writings on Judaism; they examine the role of Judaism in his philosophical work; and they put in dialogue questions that are common to both Christianity and Judaism to see what Levinas might offer to this conversation.

Notes

- 1 See Claire Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). See in particular Chapter 1.
- 2 See Howard Caygill's discussion in *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002).

DEPENDENCY AND VULNERABILITY

Jewish and feminist existentialist
constructions of the human

Leora Batnitzky

Source: H. Tirosh-Samuelson (ed.), *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming, pp. 127–52.

Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Levinas describe the human being as dependent and vulnerable. Significantly, each of these philosophers uses gendered terms to make his arguments. This essay describes the ways in which their Jewish existentialist accounts of what it means to be human have a number of important affinities with contemporary “women-centered” feminist philosophies, and feminist philosophies of care more specifically.

Within feminist circles, “women-centered” arguments are diverse and contested. Some feminist thinkers argue that “woman” is wholly separate from “man,” while others are more inclusive. Particularly controversial is a strand of contemporary “women-centered” thought that associates “women” and “the feminine” with “mothering.” Some feminists claim that this line of thought is reactionary, relegating women to the very roles from which the women’s movement hoped to emancipate them. Feminist philosophers arguing in favor of “mothering”—to whom I will refer for the sake of brevity as “feminist philosophers of care”—respond by maintaining that such a conception of “women” and “the feminine” has critical if not transformative value not only for feminist thought but also for moral and political theory at large.¹

Unlike feminist philosophers of care, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas use the terms *feminine*, *women*, *mother*, *maternity*, and *pregnancy*, with few, if any, qualifications.² While they make it clear that these terms could to varying degrees be applied to men as well as to women, they do not engage

critically with the meanings of these terms for the purposes of feminist thought. Nonetheless, these Jewish philosophers share some important philosophical arguments with feminist philosophers of care. Like contemporary feminist philosophers of care, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas seek to elucidate a notion of the self who is not wholly autonomous but who is dependent on others and responsive to the vulnerability of others. Like feminist philosophers of care, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas suggest that ethics and responsibility emerge from human dependence and vulnerability. And like feminist philosophers of care, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas describe human dependence and response to vulnerability as “feminine” in character, and in fact as a kind of “mothering.”

In the first two parts of this essay, I argue that contemporary feminist philosophy can help us to understand better both the philosophical functions of and historical reasons for the use of gendered terms in modern Jewish philosophy. In the third part of the essay, I contend that the account of the human as dependent and vulnerable is philosophically and politically valuable. However, I suggest that, perhaps ironically, the notion of “the feminine”³ attached to Jewish existentialist and feminist views of the human as dependent and vulnerable undermines the critical value of this construction of the human, for historical, philosophical, and political reasons. In the conclusion, I consider a number of alternatives to considering dependency and vulnerability as fundamental to what it means to be human, without calling these characteristics “feminine.”

I. Receptivity and subjectivity: Judaism, ethics, and “the feminine”

The “existentialism” of Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir is predicated on a philosophical affirmation of a human subject that bestows meaning onto the world. Applying existentialist philosophy to feminist thought, de Beauvoir criticized in particular the notion that woman is man’s *other*.⁴ It is a rethinking if not a rejection of de Beauvoir’s radically individualist and voluntaristic outlook of the human subject, or indeed the very view that de Beauvoir advocates such an individualist and voluntaristic view, that mark important if contested trends in recent feminist philosophy.⁵ Many recent feminist philosophers both in the European continent and in the United States have insisted instead that *woman* is truly other and that an elucidation of her otherness should orient not only feminist theory but moral and political philosophy as well. These “women-centered” feminist philosophies are themselves rather diverse—some of them call for a separation between men and women, some of them are inclusive and less essentialist—but what they have in common is the notion that there is a distinctively “women’s” experience that calls into question “male” accounts of experience, accounts that contrast with the “male” project of self-constitution.⁶

While these diverse “women-centered” feminist theories take as their starting point the rejection of a certain type of existentialist subjectivity, the premises of this line of thought nonetheless share in another strand of philosophical existentialism, which emphasizes the fundamentally receptive nature of human being.⁷ Jewish existentialist thinkers such as Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas focus on the philosophical import of the particularities and vulnerabilities of human existence. These Jewish existentialist thinkers have a greater affinity with contemporary “women-centered” feminist philosophies and with feminist philosophies of care more particularly than they do with either Sartre’s or de Beauvoir’s existentialism, which focus on the process of self-constitution. Indeed, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas maintain, like a number of rather diverse “women-centered” feminist philosophies, that the process of self-constitution is inherently “male.” Most basically, these Jewish philosophers and contemporary feminist philosophers of care agree that the fundamental experience of relationality grounds existence. As Levinas puts it:

Contemporary philosophy denounces as an abstraction the subject closed in upon itself and metaphysically the origin of the world. The consistency of the self is dissolved in relations: intentionality in Husserl, being-in-the-world or *Miteinandersein* in Heidegger, or continual renewal of *durée* in Bergson. Concrete reality is man always already in relation with the world, or always already projected beyond his instant. These relations cannot be reduced to theoretical representation. The latter would only confirm the autonomy of the thinking subject. In order to demolish the idea of the subject closed in upon itself, one must uncover, beneath objectification very different relations that sustain it: man in situation before situating himself.⁸

Levinas emphasizes here a view of the human subject who is both active and passive. As we will see in greater detail, Levinas argues that it is in the passive capacity of the human being that we find our ethical relation to others. Levinas, following Rosenzweig and Buber, suggests that this passive capacity, the locus of ethics, is fundamentally “feminine” in nature. Many contemporary American feminist philosophers of care have emphasized this same connection between receptivity, care, and “the feminine.” Drawing on the philosophy of Martin Buber throughout her work, Nel Noddings, one of the most articulate proponents of what she calls “a feminine ethics of care,” puts it this way:

The receptive mode is at the heart of human existence. By “existence” or “existing,” I mean more than merely living or subsisting. When existentialist philosophers refer to “existence,” they mean to include an awareness of and commitment to what we are doing, what we are living. . . . Existence involves, then, living with heightened awareness.⁹

In the philosophies of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas, the receptivity of the human being gives meaning not only to ethics but also to the relationship between the Jewish people and God. Each in his own way argues that the receptive capacity of this relationship is what defines Judaism, making it relevant not only for Jewish people but for all philosophical and ethical thinking. Significantly, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas all use notions of "the feminine" to make their respective cases for defining the human as receptive, dependent, and vulnerable to the encounter with other people and God.

Buber is probably best known for his dialogical philosophy. Simply put, Buber maintains that there are two fundamental types of relation: the I-It which is purely instrumental and objectifies the other as object and the I-Thou which treats the other as subject to which the I responds and by which the I is transformed. Perhaps more profoundly, Buber regards the I-Thou relation as the true meaning of being (*Wesen*).¹⁰ As Buber puts it in *I and Thou*, "In the beginning is the relation—as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the *a priori* of relation; the innate You."¹¹ Significantly, Buber describes this fundamental relationality with reference to "the womb of the great mother":

Every developing human child rests, like all developing beings, in the womb of the great mother [*im Schoß des großen Mutter*—the undifferentiated, not yet formed primal world. From this it detaches itself to enter a personal life, and it is only in dark hours when we slip out of this again (as happens even to the healthy, night after night) that we are close to her again.¹²

For Buber, however, this primal relation to the womb of the great mother is nonetheless immature and differs from the mature I-Thou relation that comes only after the separation from the great mother and the formation of I-It relations. The I-Thou relation thus involves freedom and commitment, which are not present in the immature relation. Significantly, when Buber writes of the mature I-Thou relation, he does so as a male speaker:

When a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the You of her eyes allows him to gaze into a ray of the eternal You. But if a man lusts after the "ever repeated triumph"—you want to dangle before his lust a phantom of the eternal?¹³

The primal relation to the womb of the great mother thus makes possible first the separation from the mother into the I-It world and then the free male's mature confirmation of the Thou.

Yet Buber's I-Thou relation is not so one-sided. As he describes at great length, the I-Thou relation is one of mutuality and reciprocity: "Relation is

reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. . . . Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity."¹⁴ It is for the lack of reciprocity that Buber criticizes Heidegger's notion of *Fürsorge*, care for others:

In mere solicitude [*Fürsorge*] man remains essentially with himself, even if he is moved with extreme pity; in action and help he inclines towards the other . . . he [does not] accept any real mutuality, in fact he probably shuns it; he is "concerned with the other," but he is not anxious for the other to be concerned with him.¹⁵

In order to appreciate Levinas's more radical notion of the dialogical situation and its implications for his understanding of "the feminine," we must appreciate his criticism of Buber precisely on this point. Levinas criticizes Buber for his insistence on mutuality, maintaining that the dialogical relation is fundamentally asymmetrical in character. Ethics, for Levinas, is not about mutuality but about a one-sided responsibility. In Levinas's now well-known words paraphrasing Dostoevsky, "the I always has one responsibility more than all others."¹⁶

Prefacing his remarks with the qualification that "It is not, surely, to Heidegger that one should turn to for instruction in the love of man or social justice," Levinas defends Heidegger against Buber on the issue of care and mutuality:

But *Fürsorge*, as response to essential destitution, is a mode of access to the otherness of the Other. . . . But Buber allows himself to say "All dialogue draws its authenticity from consciousness of the element of *Umfassung* [embracing]." [Yet] Consciousness reappears behind *Umfassung*. . . . Relation itself, apart from its goal, differs from knowledge.¹⁷

Levinas's point here is important for an appreciation of the fundamental direction of his own thought as well as for understanding his relation to contemporary feminist philosophies of care. The dialogical relation, Levinas maintains, is both non-cognitive and not reciprocal. Here Levinas is in agreement with Noddings's feminine ethic of care, which maintains that "an ethic of caring locates morality primarily in the pre-act of consciousness of the one-caring."¹⁸ Moreover, Levinas is in agreement with Noddings's statement that "To demand such responsiveness is both futile and inconsistent with caring. The one-caring is motivated in the direction of the cared-for and she must, therefore, respect his freedom. She meets him as subject—not as object to be manipulated nor as a data source."¹⁹

It is precisely a notion of "the feminine" that Levinas uses to describe this non-cognitive and non-reciprocal relation. Levinas's constructions of Judaism and "the feminine" serve as fundamental components of his effort to offer

an ethical critique of what he argues are modernity's totalizing tendencies. Just as Levinas claims that Judaism (or Hebrew) destroys philosophy's (or the Greek) quest for totality, so too he argues that "the feminine" resists the logos quest for the universal: "To overcome an alienation which, fundamentally, arises from the very virility of the universal and conquering logos, and which stalks even the shadows that could have sheltered it—such would be the ontological function of the feminine."²⁰ Levinas makes two claims about the "feminine." The first is in his first major philosophical work *Totality and Infinity* (1961) in which he describes the role of "the feminine" in what we might call the economy of morality. The second claim is in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Existence* (1974), in which he describes, I shall argue, "the feminine" as ethics itself.

Levinas's first description of "the feminine" is in keeping with Buber's notion of the womb of the great mother as the source of an independent person who is capable of responding to the other. In Part Two of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests that "the feminine" is the condition for ethics: "The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, the inhabitation."²¹ "The feminine" creates the home so that the pre-ethical, independent man can leave it and become ethical. In this sense, "the feminine" functions as the pre-condition of the condition of ethics (the independent "man" who is capable of becoming ethical). In Part Four of *Totality and Infinity*, "the feminine" is not the pre-condition of the condition of ethics but is now the condition itself. Levinas argues that the erotic encounter with the feminine other is a necessary prerequisite for ethics:

[T]he encounter with the Other as feminine is required in order that the future of the child come to pass from beyond the possible, beyond projects. The relationship resembles that which was described for the idea of infinity: I cannot account for it by myself, as I do account for the luminous world by myself. . . . The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity.²²

Though Levinas calls voluptuousity the "future in the present," the encounter with the feminine other remains "an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words."²³ Nonetheless, this irresponsible animality literally produces an ethics of responsibility, which is embodied in the relationship between parent and child. Significantly, this relationship is not a gender neutral one. Levinas writes: "This alteration and identification in fecundity—beyond the possible and the face—constitutes paternity. In paternity desire maintained as insatiate desire, that is, as goodness, is accomplished."²⁴ Once again, the feminine other makes ethics possible but does not participate in the realm which she literally creates. Here Levinas's analysis of "the feminine" parallels aspects of the psychologist Carol Gilligan's description of the way women and men understand "women's morality":

[W]omen not only define themselves in a context of human relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Women's place in man's life cycle has been that of nurturer, caretaker, and help-mate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies.²⁵

Perhaps in response to feminist criticisms of his view of "the feminine" in *Totality and Infinity*, most notably from Simone de Beauvoir,²⁶ Levinas seems to change the direction of his argument in *Otherwise than Being*, arguing there, as I will detail below, that "the feminine" is not merely the basis for ethics but ethics itself. Yet attention to contemporary feminist philosophies of care shows, I think, that the direction of his argument does not actually change but rather intensifies. The progression of Levinas's thought about "the feminine" shares in the general direction of feminist philosophers of care who have argued that the care of mothers is and should be the basis of all ethics. Indeed, Levinas's complex phenomenological formulations of "the feminine" and "maternity" find more colloquial expression in, for example, the feminist philosopher Virginia Held's arguments about the ethics of maternity:

The feelings characteristic of mothering—that there are too many demands on us, that we cannot do everything we ought to do—are highly instructive. They give rise to problems different from those of universal rule vs. self-interest. They require us to weigh the claims of one self-other relationship against the claims of other self-other relationships, to try to bring about some harmony between them, to see the issues in an actual temporal context, and to act rather than merely reflect.²⁷

We will see that Levinas's arguments share three important features with Held's characterization of mothering. First, Levinas uses "maternity" to show that ethics is an infinite task ("that we cannot do everything we ought to do"). Second, he uses "maternity" to refigure the relation between the self and other. And third, and most basically, Levinas uses "maternity" to highlight the priority of praxis over theory within philosophy.

We have seen already that Levinas's ethical theory describes ethics as a kind of "natural" relation that become ethical. The "natural" relation to "the feminine," first in the home and then between lovers, provides the basis for ethics. Levinas's argument about the "natural feminine" precondition for ethics is intensified in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas's arguments about "the feminine" and "maternity" are in accord with Noddings's statement that "Ethical caring, the relation in which we do meet the other morally, will be described as arising out of natural caring—that relation in which we respond as one caring out of love or natural inclination."²⁸

Catherine Chaliel has commented on the highly significant role that "the feminine" plays in *Otherwise than Being* or *Beyond Essence*, and I follow her

in asserting that in *Otherwise than Being*, “the feminine” is not merely a condition for ethics, but ethics itself.²⁹ *Otherwise than Being* turns directly to questions of material existence in order to describe the phenomenality of ethics as first philosophy, as Levinas states that “Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.”³⁰ It is by way of the attempt to think deeply about questions of materiality that we find some of Levinas’s most provocative and perplexing statements about what it means to exist as a being oriented by ethics. Ethics, Levinas suggests, must be understood in material terms. Ethics is “to give to the Other . . . a gift of my own skin.” Responsibility is “a denuding, an exposure to being affected, a pure susceptiveness.”³¹ Reference to “maternity” is a fundamental component of Levinas’s attempt at articulating the materiality of the ethical, human task.

Again, Levinas argues that “the I always has one responsibility more than all others.”³² Responsibility is excessive and, as Levinas argues in *Otherwise than Being*, each “I” must “bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the Other, and even the responsibility that the Other can have for me.”³³ In one of his most provocative statements, Levinas suggests that to bear the “wretchedness and bankruptcy of the Other” is to “bear responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.” It is maternity that gives material meaning to this perplexing statement. Levinas writes:

Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.³⁴

Maternity, for Levinas, is the flesh and blood of the one-for-the-other. It is in fact maternity that gives meaning to Levinas’s at times equally perplexing references to “incarnation”:

Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible—maternity, vulnerability, apprehension—binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my body.³⁵

In maternity, the body exists for the sake of the other. Of course, the body being referred to here is not just any body; it is a female body. The embodied disembodiment of maternity *is*, for Levinas, the flesh and blood of the

one-for-the-other. Here, in *Otherwise than Being*, "the feminine" is no longer a condition of ethics, but ethics itself. In maternity, the natural becomes ethical.

On the one hand, Levinas's philosophical formulation of maternity is in keeping with Sara Ruddick's comment that "Maternal practice begins with a double vision—seeing the fact of biological vulnerability as socially significant and as demanding care."³⁶ Yet Ruddick differs from Levinas in maintaining that she "deliberately stress[es] the optional character first of perceiving 'vulnerability' and then of responding with care. Maternal responses are complicated acts that social beings make to biological beings whose existence is inseparable from social interpretations."³⁷ Levinas's difference from Ruddick is also broadly speaking his difference from Buber. Levinas argues that maternal caring is not an option, nor is it reciprocal. I cannot (ethically) choose to turn away from the vulnerability of the other, nor can I expect any response from the other. Where Ruddick deliberately emphasizes that maternal caring is "one kind of disciplined reflection . . . with identifying questions, methods, and aims," Levinas is emphatic that what he describes as "maternity" is non-reflective in character. "Maternity" is concerned neither with identifying questions, nor with methods and aims. Rather, "maternity" is an unchosen responsibility that chooses me.

While Levinas goes to great lengths, especially in some of his later essays, to emphasize that what he calls "ethics" not only requires but grounds justice, he maintains nonetheless that caring for the other is and must be the primary ethical orientation of the human being.³⁸ Indeed, Levinas's description of ethics shares with Noddings's the general suspicion that ethics of principle are, to use Noddings's words, "ambiguous and unstable" and that "when we must use violence or strategies on the other, we are already diminished ethically. Our efforts must, then, be directed to the maintenance of conditions that permit caring to flourish."³⁹ Levinas and Noddings do not reject instrumental thinking in ethics outright. Their argument, instead, is that ethics (or caring) orients principles. When principles are said to orient ethics, ethics is destroyed. In Noddings's words, "Instrumental thinking may, of course enhance caring; that is, I may use my reasoning powers to figure out what to do once I have committed myself to doing something. But clearly, rationality (in its objective form) does not of necessity mark either the initial impulse or the action that is undertaken."⁴⁰ In Levinas's words, "Every love or every hatred of a neighbor as a reflected attitude presupposes this prior vulnerability, this mercy, this 'groaning of the entrails.'"⁴¹ Significantly, Levinas notes that his use of the term *mercy* in the above quotation is in keeping with the rabbinic term *rahamin*, which also means "womb": "[I]t is a mercy that is like an emotion of maternal entrails."⁴² Once again, we see the intimate connection between Levinas's arguments about the nature of vulnerability, "mothering," and ethics, arguments that we have seen resonate with much of Noddings's writings. It is important to note that other

feminist philosophers of care, such as Ruddick and Joan Tronto, have criticized Noddings for this very position that she shares with Levinas that denies the fundamentally reflective character of “mothering.” We will return to some of these arguments in the conclusion of this essay.

II. Articulating philosophy’s “other” in gendered terms: why?

We have seen that Buber and Levinas use notions of “the feminine” to articulate their dialogical philosophies that also purport to criticize aspects of the Western philosophical tradition that deny the fundamental ethical relation between people. Some recent discussions amongst feminist philosophers can help us to begin to think about why Jewish philosophers use “the feminine” in this way. Let me begin by saying that I don’t think Levinas uses “the feminine” because he is any way concerned about articulating a “women’s morality” or because he is concerned with actual women.⁴³ He is not. As we have seen, he is concerned with articulating a notion of ethics that is pre-cognitive and that cannot be subordinated to consciousness. As a number of feminist philosophers, including Annette Baier, Selya Benhabib, and Joan Tronto have pointed out, modern philosophical articulations of ethics after Kant focus on the rationality of ethics.⁴⁴ These feminist thinkers have John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* at the forefront of their arguments, but their criticism of a notion of morality limited to rational agents is one that has an important affinity with what Levinas maintains is Western philosophy’s totalizing tendency to deny care for the other. Indeed, Levinas’s contrast between “Hebrew” and “Greek” is premised on his argument that philosophy (“Greek”) silences the cries of the stranger, orphan, and the widow, whose cares are the primary orientation of Judaism (“Hebrew”).

As Benhabib, along with Carole Pateman, Marilyn Friedman, and Lorraine Code, have argued, the focus on moral agents in the history of modern moral and political philosophy has the effect of *privatizing* women’s experience.⁴⁵ In Benhabib’s words:

[T]he definition of moral autonomy . . . in universalistic, contractarian theories from Hobbes to Rawls, lead to a *privatization* of women’s experience and to the exclusion of its consideration from a moral point of view. In this tradition, the moral self is viewed as a *disembodied* and *disembodied* being.⁴⁶

It is important to see that the privatization of women’s experience begins historically with the privatization of religion and notions of the good. This double privatization has the effect of placing concerns about the good and caring into the private realm while leaving only discussion of justice in the realm of public discourse.⁴⁷ As Benhabib puts it, “Justice alone becomes the center of moral theory when bourgeois individuals in a disenchanted

universe face the task of creating the legitimate basis of the social order for themselves."⁴⁸ The contours of Jewish modernity and its relation to the privatization of religion and women's experience deserve special consideration, which are obviously beyond the scope of this essay.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, I think we can fairly say in the context of Benhabib's analysis that it should not be surprising that when a modern Jewish philosopher such as Levinas attempts to bring a philosophical account of Judaism ("Hebrew") into philosophical discourse, then he should do so by reference to "the feminine"—for both "Judaism" and "the feminine" have come to represent spheres of morality that have been silenced by philosophy's modern concern with rationality and calculable justice.

In the next section, I turn to the problem of Levinas's as well as Rosenzweig's and Buber's uncritical use of gendered terms (such as *the feminine*, and *maternity*). For now I would like to continue to focus on how Benhabib's analysis helps us not only to account for Levinas's use of "the feminine" in his account of ethics but also for the theological background of his arguments. Here I suggest that we look at the theological use to which a notion of "the feminine" is put to use in the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig, Levinas's self-acknowledged most important influence.⁵⁰ Attention to two aspects of the analysis of care in recent feminist philosophy helps us appreciate the ways in which Levinas's use of "the feminine" is a de-theologized and de-politicized version of Rosenzweig's arguments about the relation between Judaism and Christianity.

First, as Gilligan and a number of feminist philosophers of care have noted, the care orientation of women is, in developmental psychology, political theory and indeed Western philosophy, subordinated to "male" moral reasoning.⁵¹ Feminist philosophers of care attempt to argue that care is not an immature relation but the primary relation that itself grounds morality. I suggest that Rosenzweig uses a similar strategy in arguing against Christian supersessionism. Using "feminine" metaphors to describe Judaism, Rosenzweig maintains that Judaism, contrary to Christian opinion, is the complete revelation, to which Christian revelation is eternally trying to catch up.

Second, Rosenzweig's arguments about Jewish eternity as opposed to Christian worldliness are similarly couched in gendered terms. Here, too, Rosenzweig relies on a notion of "the feminine" to describe what he argues is the Jewish experience of "eternity in time." As Benhabib puts it, "The private sphere, the sphere of care and intimacy, is unchanging and timeless. . . . The dehistoricization of the private realm signifies that, as the male ego celebrates his passage from nature to culture, from conflict to consensus, women remain in a timeless universe, condemned to repeat the cycles of life."⁵² My suggestion is that in the post-Holocaust era, Levinas relies on Rosenzweig's explicitly theological thought and turns his notions of Judaism and "the feminine" into an interpersonal ethic. Levinas represents

the ethical obligation to the other as the eternal mark of humanity while Rosenzweig describes the Jewish people as themselves living this timeless ethic for the sake of others.

Rosenzweig's use of gender is perhaps most blatant in Book Two of Part Two of the *Star*, in the section on revelation in which his analysis of the Song of Songs also appears. Rosenzweig begins this section with an argument not only about an abstract feminine element but also with an argument about real women. He begins by quoting the Song of Songs:

Love is as strong as death [Song of Songs 8:6]. Strong in the same way as death? But against whom does death display its strength? Against him whom it seizes. . . . The beloved is seized, her love is already a response to being seized. . . . Initially it is for the beloved that love is strong as death, even as nature has decreed that woman alone, not man, may die of love. What has been said of the twofold encounter of man and his self applies strictly and universally only to the male. As for woman, and precisely the most feminine woman above all, even Thanatos can approach her in the sweet guise of Eros. Her life is simpler than that of man by reason of this missing contradiction. Already in the tremors of love her heart has become firm. It no longer needs the tremor of death. A young woman can be as ready for eternity as a man only becomes when his threshold is crossed by Thanatos. . . . Once touched by Eros, a woman is what man only becomes at the Faustian age of a hundred: ready for the final encounter—strong as death.⁵³

Before offering an interpretation of this very strange passage, I want to point out that even within the *Star*'s own context, this reference to real women, and to "the most feminine women above all," is deeply perplexing. A bit further on, Rosenzweig seems to contradict his own statement. He writes:

Between man and woman the roles of giver and receiver of love pass back and forth, the higher the blossoms which the plant of love generates between them, the more that it rises above itself and its subterranean roots like a veritable palm-tree, although the roots of sexuality ever restore the unambiguous relationship to nature.⁵⁴

Though maintaining a reference to an "unambiguous relationship to nature," Rosenzweig suggests here, in seeming contradiction to his comments at the beginning of Part Two, Book Two, that the roles of masculine lover and feminine beloved are not literally confined to men and women. Here, as opposed to the earlier passage, the implication seems to be that "male and female," "masculine and feminine," are being used metaphorically.

The only way to resolve this contradiction, in my view, is to recognize the connection between the argument for revelation in Part Two of the *Star* and

Rosenzweig's construction of Judaism in Part Three. While Rosenzweig does use "feminine" and "masculine" metaphorically to suggest the give and take of a romantic encounter, it is no accident that he also uses "feminine" and "masculine," and indeed "woman" and "man," in a consciously literal way. For Rosenzweig, while all people are capable of participating in a dialogical relation, and while "masculine" and "feminine" can apply to both men and women, the Jewish people, like real women, have a special, ontological share in revelation. The argument about real women that he makes in Part Two of the *Star* is intimately connected to the argument that Rosenzweig makes in Part Three, about the reality of the Jewish people. Real women, who are not reducible to a metaphorical "feminine," function for Rosenzweig in this text as a foil for real Jews.

Recall Rosenzweig's statement: "Once touched by Eros, a woman is what man only becomes at the Faustian age of a hundred: ready for the final encounter—strong as death." What does it mean for a woman to be ready for eternity in a way that a man is not? And how might this readiness for eternity relate to being "strong as death"?

For Rosenzweig, a woman is a priori ready for eternity just as the Jewish people are a priori eternal. Just as Rosenzweig argues that a woman has already reached the goal towards which a man is always striving—again, "a woman is what a man only becomes at the Faustian age of a hundred: ready for the final encounter—strong as death"—so too does Rosenzweig argue against Christian supersessionist arguments that "The Jewish people has already reached the goal toward which the nations are still moving."⁵⁵ The Jewish people, like the "most feminine woman," are naturally disposed to revelation. I use the word *naturally* because Rosenzweig's argument about the Jewish people, as is well known, is an argument about the "true nature" of the Jewish people, which is found, he argues, in the natural substance of Jewish blood. In the *Star*, Rosenzweig suggests that just as her sexual nature prepares a woman for the final encounter with the other, so too the blood running through Jewish veins prepares the way for the Jews' eternity. In the case of both actual women and actual Jewish people, Rosenzweig argues that the "natural" provides a kind of transcendental condition for the supernatural. A woman embodies a natural openness to the supernatural realm of love, just as Jews embody in their blood God's revelation to them.

Rosenzweig's constructions of "the feminine" woman and the Jewish people are even more intimately connected. In fact, though he does not use the word *maternity*, Rosenzweig's understanding of Judaism is expressed precisely through an explicit reference to pregnancy. He writes as follows:

For it [the Jewish community] alone the future is not something alien but something of its own, something it carries in its womb [*Schoße*] and which might be born any day. While every other community that lays

claim to eternity must take measures to pass the torch of the present on to the future, the blood-community does not have to resort to such measures. It does not have to hire the services of the spirit; the natural propagation of the body guarantees it eternity.⁵⁶

As in Levinas, pregnancy, or maternity, is used by Rosenzweig as *the* expression of the natural moving beyond the realm of being. And as for Levinas, for Rosenzweig pregnancy, or maternity, is so powerful because of the particular sense of embodied disembodiment that it represents.

Rosenzweig's claim that Judaism is a blood community is in necessary conjunction with his claim that Judaism is *not* a community oriented by land. Recall the famous words from the *Star*: "To the eternal people, home never is home in the sense of land, as it is to the peoples of the world who plough the land and live and thrive on it, until they have all but forgotten that being a people (*Volk*) means something besides being rooted in a land."⁵⁷ For Rosenzweig, the eternal people are a people in exile. Rooted not in land but in blood, the Jewish people exist in a state of embodied disembodiment. The natural propagation of the Jewish body guarantees it eternity, but the Jewish people remain physically dispersed in exile.

Though Rosenzweig is more explicit about the theological dimension of Judaism's embodied disembodiment, his claims also have—to be anachronistic for a moment—a Levinasian ethical dimension to them. For Rosenzweig, the meaning of the eternal people's embodied disembodiment is found in Israel's role as witness to the nations. He writes "Israel intercedes with him [God] in behalf of the sinning peoples of the world and he afflicts Israel with disease so that those other peoples may be healed. Both stand before God: Israel, his servant, and the kings of the peoples; . . . so inextricably twined that human hands cannot untangle them."⁵⁸ For the sake of the nations, Jews literally bear the burden of homelessness. For Rosenzweig, Judaism disembodies itself in order to propel the nations toward redemption, in order to make the world a better place.

The similarity between this claim and Levinas's claim that responsibility is bearing responsibility even for the persecutor is striking. Indeed, Levinas makes the explicit link between an ethics of embodied disembodiment and martyrdom when he states "Signification is witness or martyrdom."⁵⁹ For both Levinas and Rosenzweig, it is the construction of "the feminine," and the explicit references to maternity and pregnancy, that allow for the development of an ethics or theology of embodied disembodiment, of the natural becoming supernatural, of the natural becoming ethical.

We have already seen that Rosenzweig uses a notion of "the feminine" in order to argue against Christian supersessionism. His gendering of the Jewish-Christian relation goes even deeper. Rosenzweig contrasts Judaism as the feminized, rootless other that has contributed to the creation of Christian masculine culture:

Christian life leads the Christian into the outside. The rays radiate evermore, till all the outside shall be irradiated. Jewish life is just the opposite. Birth, the whole natural Here, the natural individuality, the impartible participation in the world—already exists here. . . . The Christian way becomes expression and expropriation and irradiation of the outmost, while Jewish life becomes memory and internalization of the innermost.⁶⁰

Judaism is not just “feminine,” but in remaining homeless “she” makes Christianity and the nations of the world more “feminine.” By not allowing Christianity to become totalitarian, Judaism forces Christianity to remain somewhat rootless and thereby more “feminine,” Jewish, and ethical. Again, my suggestion is that in the post-Holocaust era, Levinas relies on Rosenzweig’s explicitly theological thought and turns his notions of Judaism and “the feminine” into an interpersonal ethic. Instead of producing a blatant critique of Zionism and an argument for Jewish homelessness, Levinas presents an interpersonal ethic of homelessness, and feminine metaphors are again used to describe this condition. In the same way that, for Rosenzweig, Judaism exposes itself for the sake of the nations, each “I,” for Levinas, exposes itself, to the point of disembodiment, for the sake of the other.

III. What to say about “the feminine”?

What should we say about the use of “the feminine” in the philosophies of the Jewish thinkers examined here? We have already seen that contemporary feminist theory helps us to understand better the ways in which “the feminine” functions within the philosophies of the Jewish thinkers considered in this essay. But can we say that their notions of “the feminine” have any critical value? In my reading, Buber’s, Rosenzweig’s, and Levinas’s use of “the feminine” does much of the same moral work as it does in feminist philosophies of care. The broad, shared claim of these two sets of thinkers is that something characterized by “the feminine” represents an ethic of caring in which responsibility is excessive, not contractual, and, at least at its most basic level, profoundly non-cognitive in nature. It is no doubt significant that Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas offer no account of their use of their gendered terms—a significance to which I turn below. And while feminist philosophers are no doubt more sophisticated in their use of these gendered terms, I would like to suggest that the equations of Judaism and “the feminine” and of women and “the feminine” are historically problematic and therefore philosophically problematic.

To begin with, both of these equations obscure the ways in which differences are really different. Ironically, the equations of women and “the feminine” and of Judaism and “the feminine” both undermine the broader shared philosophical goal of the Jewish philosophers under consideration here as well as feminist philosophies of care, which is to take philosophically

seriously the particularities of existence. In the case of feminist philosophy, the goal of this philosophical approach is both positive and negative: to appreciate philosophically the forms of life particular to women but also to appreciate the ways in which these same forms of life have contributed to women's oppression. In the case of Jewish "existentialist" philosophy, the goal of this philosophical approach is to appreciate the nature of praxis for philosophical reflection and the ways in which a de-emphasis on praxis obscures the vitality of the Jewish tradition. The conception of the human as dependent and vulnerable offered in both of these analyses is philosophically valuable and important for ethics, but this importance is undermined by the use of "the feminine."

Sandra Harding has commented on the strangeness of the comparison between what are called "feminine" and "African" moralities.⁶¹ As Harding notes, both African morality and feminine morality are said to be primarily relational as opposed to rule-oriented, and significantly both "world views" link "nature" with morality. Harding argues that this strange confluence ought to give us pause in two ways. First, we should be wary of the kind of a-historical reductionism that posits essentialized views of "the feminine" or "the African," for such reductionism obscures the differences within both "the feminine" and "the African." Second, the fact that what is claimed to be essentially "feminine" is also claimed to be essentially "African" should give us pause in attempting to link biology to philosophical world views.⁶² The seeming confluence between "Jewish" and "feminine" world views should equally give us pause, even more so than the comparison between "African" and "feminine" world views, because in the former case, as opposed to the latter, the claim is that "the Jewish" *is* "the feminine." The historical and therefore philosophical absurdity created by this double identification should make us very wary indeed.

Yet despite this very profound problem, I suggest nonetheless that engaging Jewish existentialist philosophical constructions of "the feminine" is philosophically useful for feminist philosophy and moral philosophy more broadly. Harding points to what she calls "the problem of metaphoric explanation—what the anthropologist Judith Shapiro has happily called gender totemism."⁶³ By this Harding means the dichotomies that are created by white European men and that are then perpetuated by the "others" of these dichotomies. Harding's point is to caution feminist and Africanist philosophers against internalizing and reifying white, Eurocentric views.⁶⁴

Levinas and Rosenzweig were surely "white bourgeois men," but they were also Jewish men trying to articulate an alternate conception of philosophy and ethics from within the Western philosophical tradition that was historically largely Christian and hence in important ways anti-Jewish. We have already seen some of the ways in which much of Rosenzweig's argument about "the feminine" is an argument against Christian supersessionism. This Jewish philosophical appropriation of "the feminine" does have the

constructive effect of calling into question the category of "white bourgeois men." Nonetheless, it would be too easy to conclude simply that the category of "white bourgeois men" is more complex than we might think. The reality to which the category refers is surely more complex than the category, as reality always is. What we see in regard to Levinas's, Rosenzweig's, and Buber's use of "the feminine" are some of the ways in which oppressed communities knowingly and unknowingly reproduce majority prejudices. Indeed, Sander Gilman has made precisely this point in regard to Freud's arguments about women. In an effort to dispel racial prejudice against Jews, Freud displaced these very biological and cultural arguments onto women.⁶⁵

There is of course an important difference between Freud on the one hand, and Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas, on the other. Where Freud sought to displace everything negative onto "woman," Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas displace everything positive onto "her." Nonetheless, what these four have in common is their use of "the feminine" to define men. Without excusing Freud, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas, we see that their use of gendered categories adds to our understanding of the complexity of the ways in which identities are constructed philosophically. At the very least, we must recognize that the uncritical use of gendered categories serves to obscure rather than illuminate this complexity. And part of the task of feminist philosophy, it seems to me, is to shed light on the complex interplay of identity. In this sense, then, an engagement with the role of "the feminine" in Jewish philosophy is constructive for feminist philosophy.

But are these points generic—that categories themselves are always more complicated than they present themselves and that oppressed groups internalize the categories of their oppressors, often oppressing members of their own groups with these very categories? Or is there something to Jewish philosophy itself that may aid feminist theory and moral theory more broadly? I would like to suggest briefly that there is also a particular critical contribution of Jewish philosophy to feminist and moral philosophy.

As we saw in our brief discussion of Benhabib above, the privatization of women's life into a sphere of care was also historically a privatization of religious life. As the French feminist Julia Kristeva has put it, feminism is "situated within the very framework of the religious crisis of civilization."⁶⁶ Marilyn Chapin Massey expands Kristeva's point, arguing that "women-centered" feminists

are saying that if Western woman, along with man, gave up a divinizing mirror, she would be left with man's science. She would be left hoping that someday she would be an equal partner in his projects of transcendence. . . . But women-centered feminists do not want to be left with man's science or his secular project of transcendence. . . . Not at home with their new identity as equals with men . . . women who have

entered into the project of transcendence do not experience the joy of being free, autonomous subjects of history, but the pain of being split, divided subjects. . . . What they hope to discover . . . is not merely the virtues of nurture and intimacy as the necessary complements of man's ethics of transcendence and his definitions of justice and equality but a completely new, transformative ethic.⁶⁷

Massey's description could well describe the Jewish philosophers under consideration here. They, too, are involved in the attempt to develop a "new, transformative ethic" that questions precisely the notions of autonomy, "man's science," and the "secular project of transcendence." It is in the particular contours of this transformative ethic that I believe something of value lies for the critical projects of feminist philosophy as well as moral philosophy. But while Massey's analysis is very useful, it nonetheless assumes and advances a Christian subtext. Her notion of "religion" to which "women-centered" philosophies respond and transform is, as she acknowledges, the Christian religion. I want merely to suggest that some aspects of "women-centered" philosophies remain entrenched (often unconsciously) in a kind of post-Christian rhetoric that aspects of Jewish philosophy can call into question.⁶⁸

IV. Conclusion: on trying to do without "the feminine"

I have argued that, despite profound problems, an engagement with Jewish existentialist uses of "the feminine" contributes to discussions that concern feminist and moral philosophy. Nonetheless, I suggest, by way of conclusion, that Jewish philosophy and feminist philosophy would do better without the use of "the feminine." It is worth mentioning again that whatever shortcomings there are to feminist constructions of "woman" and "the feminine," these constructions arise at least within the context of an attempt to engage critically the complex social and political systems that constitute real women. No such disclaimer can be attributed to the Jewish existentialist philosophers under discussion here. Nonetheless, in a broad sense, the question for the Jewish and feminist philosophers under consideration here is the same: when does the notion of "the feminine" do more damage than it does critical work?

Joan Tronto has argued perhaps most persuasively that "we need to stop talking about 'women's morality' and start talking instead about a care ethic that includes the values traditionally associated with women."⁶⁹ Tronto rightly points out that, among other things, a notion of "women's morality" obscures the class divisions within contemporary American society that relegate the work of care to low-income groups and minorities. Moreover, Tronto points out that an exclusive emphasis on care leads to two major dangers: paternalism/maternalism and parochialism.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, she maintains that

"Care is not a parochial concern of women, a type of secondary moral question, or the work of the least well off in society. Care is a central concern of human life. It is time that we began to change our political and social institutions to reflect this truth."⁷¹ That we are all dependent and vulnerable means that ethics must be based upon this recognition.

As Tronto, Ruddick, and most recently Eva Feder Kittay argue, care as practice involves not only an acknowledgment of our mutual dependency and vulnerability, but also the recognition of the necessary social structures that allow for the cultivation of the moral possibilities and virtues of others.⁷² "Mothering" does not end with the (albeit infinite) response to a crying child but with the raising of the child to independence. In different ways, Ruddick, Tronto, Kittay, and most recently drawing on the work of these feminist philosophers of care, Alasdair MacIntyre, have all advocated what might loosely be called a virtue ethic based on recognizing that the human being is fundamentally dependent and vulnerable.⁷³ These arguments are admirable on a number of counts. First, they seek to show that we are all dependent and vulnerable. Second, they maintain that the cultivation of virtue is necessary if members of a society are to care for those who are dependent and vulnerable. And third, they suggest that a virtuous society must strive to secure for all of its members precisely the possibilities for independence. While we are all at one time or another dependent and vulnerable, each of us should be given the opportunity and means to become an independent reasoner. A virtue approach to "maternity" saves "maternity" from essentialism. In so doing, feminist and Jewish philosophers do not confine women (and, as Tronto rightly points out, minorities and low-income groups) to positions of care, allowing these groups the possibilities of independence to which all citizens should be entitled.

We must return, though, to the question feminists often ask about feminist philosophers of care. Does a philosophy of care relegate women to the very roles from which the women's movement wants to provide potential freedom? And here we see the most basic consequence of Buber's, Rosenzweig's, and Levinas's uncritical use of "the feminine." In the end, these thinkers relegate women to the roles of mother and keeper of the home. Rosenzweig's and Levinas's traditionalism is particularly apt in this regard. It is not a coincidence that these two philosophers (and Rosenzweig more particularly) are considered more theologically "Jewish" than some of their more rationalist predecessors. Their view of the human being is post-liberal in questioning the most basic liberal assumption that human beings are naturally free and equal. We have seen that Rosenzweig and Levinas do not put equality among persons first but argue, as feminist philosophers of care do, that notions of equality are secondary to ethics. While there are profound if not essential differences between Jewish and feminist philosophy, they currently share the same underlying problem, which is to elucidate their respective relations to political liberalism. Undeniably, Jews and women

alike have benefited enormously from political liberalism, but as we have seen throughout this essay, Jewish and feminist thinkers argue also that a philosophically liberal framework depletes something vital about Jewish and women's experience respectively. From a Jewish philosophical perspective, is it possible to hold onto the very valuable view of the human as dependent and vulnerable in a more egalitarian manner?

To begin to address these issues, let us turn to the more nuanced discussions of "the feminine" in feminist philosophies of care. In the first part, I referred briefly to Sara Ruddick's argument that what she calls maternal thinking is a "disciplined reflection . . . with identifying questions, methods, and aims." Ruddick goes a long way in making the case for "maternal thinking" as a kind of reasoned practice. Ruddick's criticism of Noddings should be applied in equal if not greater measure to Levinas. Seeing Levinas's "maternity" as "maternal thinking" allows for the re-emergence of the elements of critique and volition that are missing (purposely) in Levinas's analysis. Indeed, though Levinas and Rosenzweig have enjoyed more philosophical popularity than Buber has in recent years, when we consider these Jewish philosophers in light of feminist philosophy, Buber's stress on reciprocity and on consciousness as an essential mode of relation is a welcome antidote to Levinas and Rosenzweig's more Heideggerian emphasis on the primacy of non-cognitive praxis.

Yet the quest for an analysis of an ethic of care as a kind of practice requires more, I think, than Buber's philosophy. For Buber, as for Rosenzweig and Levinas, a notion of justice follows from the account of the phenomenality of relation. We must remember in this context that the phenomenological, existential account of relation, as opposed to the calculability of reason and justice, is historically an attempt to emphasize an aspect of human experience that had been de-emphasized by overly rationalistic accounts of the human. Recognizing the historical give and take of philosophical positions opens the door to rethinking aspects of the Jewish rationalist tradition that had been de-emphasized in the attempt to compensate for what was left out. I suggest that it is Hermann Cohen's thought that can potentially supplement Jewish existentialist accounts of the human on the question of "the feminine."

The interdependent and vulnerable human being is a conception that is very much in keeping with Cohen's ethical Socialism and the philosophical specifics of his position, but it is a view of the human that is often overshadowed by Cohen's neo-Kantian framework that emphasizes, often with profound tensions, the priority of consciousness, a priority that is rejected by Jewish existentialists. Still, it is Cohen's concept of compassion (*Mitleid*) that serves as a source for Buber's, Rosenzweig's, and Levinas's notion of the interdependent human being. Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas take these ideas out of Cohen's neo-Kantian framework and make them the center of also much that is lost. To begin with, Cohen is the one modern Jewish

philosopher who focuses on the virtues, both for philosophical reasons and for what we might call socio-political reasons. Indeed, in one of his last essays before his death, Cohen argued that the renewal of Judaism in the modern world should be based on the renewal of the virtues of truthfulness and humility.⁷⁴ One of the central virtues that Cohen explicates (drawing on Avodah Zarah 20b) in his posthumous *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* is the virtue of pious loving-kindness (*liebestätige Frömmigkeit; hasidut*) that could provide the basis for a virtue approach to the existential ethic derived from the notion of the human as dependent and vulnerable. Indeed, Cohen's rationalized account of virtue provides the possibility of viewing pious loving-kindness not only as the "natural" response to human dependence and vulnerability but as importantly as disciplined reflection. Just as contemporary feminist philosophers of care are attempting to balance their arguments with stronger accounts of justice, so too could Jewish existentialist approaches benefit from reconsideration and a re-appropriation of these aspects of Cohen's thought.

Notes

- 1 Feminist literature on mothering is, of course, diverse and complex. For an alternative view of mothering and the institution of mothering, see Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995).
- 2 Levinas expresses his most extended disclaimer about his use of "the feminine" in his early work *Time and the Other*, published in 1947. See in particular *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 86–87.
- 3 I will use the term "the feminine" for the sake of brevity to designate the multiple female-gendered terms used by these thinkers.
- 4 See in particular *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1974), xxxiii–xxxiv.
- 5 For more nuanced views of de Beauvoir, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1992). See also Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).
- 6 What I am calling "women-centered" thought is itself rather diverse and includes the rather disparate voices of, in the American context, Mary Daly, Eva Feder Kittay, Nel Noddings, Adrienne Rich, Sarah Ruddick, the many feminist philosophers who have responded with mixed reactions to Carol Gilligan's pioneering work in developmental psychology (such as Annette Baier, Selya Benhabib, Virginia Held, Joan Tronto and others), as well as French feminist thinkers, including perhaps most prominently Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. All of these thinkers approach the problem of "the feminine" critically, yet all to varying degrees maintain nonetheless that the concept is a critical one, not only for feminist philosophy but for moral and political philosophy more broadly.
- 7 As I detail below, this strand of existentialism takes its bearings from Heidegger's reading of Husserl.
- 8 "Martin Buber in the Theory of Knowledge," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 19.

- 9 *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 35.
- 10 "Every word must falsify; but look, these beings live around you, and no matter which one you approach you always reach Being" [*die Wesen* (creatures) *leben um dich herum . . . du kommst immer zum Wesen* (essence)], *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 67.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 76–77. Buber's relationship to his own mother was quite complex as she left him before he was three. For Buber's account of this abandonment and its effect on his thought, see his autobiographical statement "My Mother" in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1967), 3. See also Buber's early essay, "Das Zion der jüdischen Frau," *Die Welt* 5, no. 17 (April 26, 1901): 3–5, now translated in *The First Buber: Youthful Zionist Writings of Martin Buber*, ed. and trans. Gilya G. Schmidt (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 112–18.
- 13 *I and Thou*, 154. The German actually uses the indefinite pronoun "wer" (whoever) and not, as the English translation indicates, "a man": "*Wer ein Weib, ihr Leben im eigen vergegenwärtigend, liebt: das Du ihrer Augen läßt ihn in einen Strahl des ewigen Du schauen*" (*Ich und Du*, p. 150, in *Werke*).
- 14 *I and Thou*, 67.
- 15 *Between Man and Man*, trans. R. G. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 170, translation altered.
- 16 *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 99.
- 17 "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," pp. 33–34, translation altered slightly.
- 18 *Caring*, 28–29. Noddings defends Buber's view of reciprocity, maintaining that it is not a matter of consciousness but of receiving something back from the one who is cared for. Her point is well taken, but, as I will suggest briefly below, Levinas is right to recognize that there is an element of consciousness in Buber's notion of reciprocity. On this point, I believe Buber's is actually the stronger position (as opposed to both Levinas and Noddings).
- 19 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 20 *Difficile liberté*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 53, trans. E. Wyschogrod; "Judaism and the Feminine Element," *Judaism* 18, no. 1 (1969): 33.
- 21 *Totalité et infini*, 4th ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971). Trans. Alphonso Lingis as *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 115.
- 22 *Totality and Infinity*, 267.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 263.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 272.
- 25 Carol Gilligan, "Women's Place in Man's Life Cycle," *Harvard Educational Review* 49 (1979): 440.
- 26 *The Second Sex*, xix; de Beauvoir maintains that Levinas disregards the consciousness of woman. She refers here not to *Totality and Infinity* but to Levinas's earlier *Time and the Other*. A consideration of this text is beyond the scope of this essay, but Levinas's arguments about "the feminine" are similar to the ones he makes in *Totality and Infinity*. De Beauvoir maintains that Levinas is incapable of understanding reciprocity between the sexes, a charge also leveled by Luce Irigaray (see "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, 109–18).
- 27 "Feminism and Moral Theory," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Savage, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1987), 119.

- 28 *Caring*, 4–5.
- 29 *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981). See Catherine Chaler, "Ethics and the Feminine," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 119–29.
- 30 *Otherwise than Being*, 74.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 117.
- 32 *Ethics and Infinity*, 99.
- 33 *Otherwise than Being*, 117.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 36 *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 18.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 See in particular Levinas's discussion of justice in *Otherwise than Being*, 158–59.
- 39 *Caring*, 5.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 35–36.
- 41 "Identity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers), 146–47.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 147. Levinas writes "biblical," but the biblical term would be "*rahamim*" from which the Aramaic "*rahamin*" is derived. I have described the term "*rahamin*" as rabbinic to avoid confusion.
- 43 See note 1 above.
- 44 See Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Selya Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Moral Theory," in *Women and Moral Theory*, 154–77; and Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). These are all discussed below.
- 45 See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988); Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For? Feminist Perspectives on Personal Relationships and Moral Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- 46 "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," 158.
- 47 Benhabib mentions the role of religion in this process only briefly (159–60).
- 48 "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," 160.
- 49 David Sorkin's *The Transformation of German Jewry, 1780–1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Marion Kaplan's *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family, and Identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) each describes the privatization of Judaism and, in Kaplan's study in particular, the role of women in this privatization.
- 50 Levinas's indebtedness to Rosenzweig has been remarked upon at length by both Robert Gibbs and Richard Cohen. See Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), and Richard Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- 51 Kohlberg himself privatizes the care orientation, claiming that it is a lower, if not immature, stage of moral reasoning ("Synopsis and Detailed Replies to Critics," with Charles Levine and Alexandra Hewer, in L. Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. II: *The Psychology of Moral Development* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984], 360).

- 52 "The Generalized and The Concrete Other," 162–63.
- 53 *Der Stern der Erlösung* (The Hague and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976). Trans. William W. Hallo as *The Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 156.
- 54 *Star*, 169.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 331.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 299.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 306–307.
- 59 *Otherwise than Being*, 77–78.
- 60 *Star*, 397.
- 61 "Feminine and African Moralities," in *Women and Moral Theory*, particularly 299.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 307.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 304.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 305.
- 65 *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).
- 66 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 32, as cited in Marilyn Chapin Massey, *The Feminine Soul* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 181.
- 67 *The Feminine Soul*, 181–83.
- 68 For example, while engaged in an effort to rethink the primacy of unchosen obligations for moral theory, Annette Baier nonetheless concludes "an obligation to love, in the strong sense needed, would be an embarrassment to the theorist, given most accepted versions of 'ought implies can.'" (*Moral Prejudices*, 5). From a Jewish philosophical perspective, however, this is not the case and in fact reflects a deep Christian, if not Pauline, prejudice in the history of philosophy, which has consequences for modern conceptions of law (religious and secular alike). See, for example, Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willen in Werke* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1984), 267–68.
- 69 Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 3.
- 70 *Ibid.*, 170–72.
- 71 *Ibid.*, 180.
- 72 See *ibid.*; Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking*; Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).
- 73 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).
- 74 "Mahnung des Alters," in Hermann Cohen, *Jüdische Schriften* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), bd. II, 177–80. This essay was originally published in December 1917.

THE ETHICS OF SUSPICION

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Ethics is often defined, as Kant defined it, by the question "*Was soll ich tun?*" The ethical question is to be answered by a moral imperative, a prescription, an "ought," that may be freely chosen or refused. The moral imperative is supposed to direct us toward the right thing, whatever it is, and there is a widespread assumption that there must be a single proper course of action to follow, even in the case of a moral dilemma where there are conflicting duties. Furthermore it is generally believed that ethics can only demand of us what it is in our power to perform. It would appear, for example, that Kant was persuaded that one can derive "can" from "ought": "we *ought* to conform to it; consequently we must *be able* to do so."¹ Just as one can be held responsible only for what is an effect of one's free choice (RV 694; RR 40), duty can only require what is possible (RV 720; RR 60). But what ought we to do? Legislative conscience is introduced as the final court of appeal. It dictates what should be done in any given case. The demand that one should follow one's conscience tends therefore to be regarded as the ultimate obligation. It provides at the concrete level an answer to the question of what I should do. But the appeal to conscience has been governed by the idea of a conscience at peace with itself. Casuistry provides many examples of the extremes to which reason is led in an effort to ease the pangs of a disturbed conscience.

Levinas shares few if any of these assumptions. Nevertheless, the precise manner in which he departs from what stereotypically passes as ethics is seldom specified. This, it seems, is because he rarely engages directly with ethics as it has ordinarily come to be conceived, still less with the rationalizations of ethics that have been produced by moral philosophers working within the Western philosophical tradition. There are occasional passing references to the ethical writings of Kant and even fewer to those of Aristotle, but these do nothing to address the many questions which a philosophically schooled reader of Levinas would want answered. Furthermore,

Levinas's relation to ethics as it has been conceived in the West is complicated by his profound debt to Judaism. Judaism sometimes provides Levinas with an alternative vocabulary to that of mainstream philosophical ethics, but it is not always clear that the conceptual framework is radically different. So long as philosophy is conceived of as essentially Greek, Judaism is philosophy's other, but it is an other already mediated by the same. The Judaic component of so-called Western philosophy, which is nowhere more apparent than in ethics, may have been minimized within accounts of the history of philosophy, but this only means that Judaism has often been left out of account by philosophy (most notably by Heidegger), not that it is absent from philosophy. Hence alongside Levinas's relative silence about the tradition of philosophical ethics is his equally puzzling silence about the critiques of Jewish morality to be found in Hegel and Nietzsche.

Levinas's relative silence about the Western ethical tradition has had serious consequences for the reception of his work. His debt to Heidegger particularly has meant that the audience best prepared to understand him is already deeply imbued with a suspicion of ethics that derives from the "Letter on Humanism" and from Nietzsche. Not only does Levinas frequently fail to address the concerns such an audience would bring to any discourse that describes itself as concerned with ethics. He seems to delight in provoking its condemnation, not only by his appeal to goodness, peace, guilt, and latterly love, but also by his use of hyperbole, as when in *Otherwise than Being*, on at least nine occasions, he uses as his image of giving the taking bread from out of one's mouth to give to the other.² Levinas occasionally shows himself to be aware of the suspicion his rhetoric might arouse (e.g., AQ 118; OB 393), but this suspicion is not assuaged by his acknowledgment that "rhetoric is absent from no discourse."³ Levinas appears to many to be engaged in an ill-conceived, perhaps even dangerous, attempt to reopen questions which have already been decided or dismissed. Ethics has fallen under suspicion and any attempt to resuscitate it might seem to betray a lack of radicality, a failure of nerve.

However, there is a possible philosophical explanation for Levinas's tendency to direct his attention away from the philosophical tradition of ethics. If Levinas tends not to address the history of ethical thought directly, this is perhaps because he understands the history of philosophy as governed by the priority of ontology. Although the translation of Judaic wisdom into the Greek language is not conceived by Levinas as distorting its message, that wisdom is in his eyes wholly subverted so long as ontology retains its dominance. This would indeed make it appropriate for Levinas to focus less on Western ethics and its critique than on the ontological claims and the very conception of reason that have sustained the whole discussion of ethics. In other words, the Western ethical tradition is addressed radically only when it is approached in terms of the ontology that sustains it. One text which appears to adopt this approach is "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity." This essay

was published in 1957, four years before *Totality and Infinity*, and it employs much of the vocabulary of that work, albeit within a framework which was still undergoing revision. Levinas begins the essay by identifying two directions the philosophical spirit takes in its search for truth.⁴ The dominant tradition of Western philosophy (DEHH 175; CP 57) is characterized by freedom, autonomy and "the reduction of the other to the same" (DEHH 166; CP 48). Within this tradition the other, as "a term foreign to the philosophical life," is construed as an obstacle "to be surmounted and integrated into this life" (DEHH 167; CP 49). This is contrasted with another tendency of the philosophical tradition in which truth is designated "a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar . . . and goes toward the stranger, toward a *beyond* as Plato puts it" (DEHH 165; CP 47). It is noteworthy that Levinas does not here attempt to draw his resources from outside the philosophical tradition or even from its margins. Nor does he rely on an appeal to Judaism. The texts of Plato on which he draws, as well as Descartes' appeal to the idea of infinity in the *Third Meditation*, are among the most frequently read pages of the philosophical corpus. But Levinas gives them an unusual signification, one which he adopts not on the basis of an appeal to the standard techniques of scholarship, but from elsewhere.⁵

In "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" Levinas concedes that a philosophy based on the freedom of the I appears to be confirmed by the relation of "appropriation and power" that reason has with things (DEHH 168; CP 50). Nevertheless, this freedom can be put into question by another human being. Levinas does not simply have in mind the case when my free will may fail when it encounters the force of an alien resistance, as for example in war. In this analysis freedom is put into question when it discovers itself to be not only arbitrary, but without justification, unjust. This is not an additional piece of knowledge which consciousness discovers about itself. Rather, a new situation is created in which consciousness in its presence to itself "acquires a different modality" (DEHH 169; CP 51). The resistance I encounter does not arise from some obstacle that frustrates my purposes. In the face of the Other, in those defenseless eyes that also mark an exteriority that I can neither assimilate nor possess, I meet an ethical resistance that rids my will of its imperialism (DEHH 173; CP 55). This ethical resistance consists in a "consciousness of the privilege the other has relative to me" (DEHH 174; CP 56), a description which indicates the asymmetrical character of the relation. This asymmetry in favor of the Other is always threatened by an ethics of reason based on a neutral and symmetrical universality that would dialectically modify the evidence of this experience. Even this brief account gives some idea of how Levinas finds in the face of the Other an evidence which, by putting into question the spontaneity of freedom, challenges the dominant tradition of Western philosophy (DEHH 175; CP 57). However, it is not just the arbitrariness of the will which is in question, but my good conscience.

Levinas understands the task of ethics to be that of disturbing my good conscience, not re-establishing it. This opens the way to an ethics based not on autonomy, but on heteronomy. Such an ethics would not be based in a legislative conscience which issues demands that it is in our power to meet and which thus invites the subject to aim for the satisfaction which would ensue from fulfilling all its responsibilities. A conscience formed by the face of the Other does not address the question of what I ought to do. Nor does it leave open the possibility of complacency because, as Levinas will continue to insist, responsibility is defined by the always more of desire, a desire which cannot be separated from shame: "The Other . . . is desired in my shame" (TeI 56; TI 70). Turning his back on what he calls "the modern denunciations of the inefficiency and the easiness of 'bad conscience,'" ⁶ Levinas suggests that in the face of the Other my freedom feels itself to be arbitrary and violent (TeI 55–56; TI 83–84). This bad conscience is not a judicial conscience, not even as a judgment issued by the Other.⁷ It is not that certain failings are identified under scrutiny, so that I find myself guilty on some account. I have not been caught in the act. Nor do I adopt as my own the judgment that arises from my meeting with the Other which would simply be another way in which autonomy reabsorbs heteronomy (DEHH 176; CP 58). This guilt arises rather from the way that I am already from the outset indebted to the Other, responsible to him or her, and am in no position to wash my hands or withdraw.⁸ Above all, it is a questioning of my self-assurance, a disorientation of the self which amounts to an "absolute orientation" in favor of the Other. As Levinas wrote in "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," "The life of freedom discovering itself to be unjust, the life of freedom in heteronomy, consists in an infinite movement of freedom putting itself ever more into question" (DEHH 176; CP 58).

"Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" can be understood as already moving away from the assumptions that I earlier identified as characteristic of the ethics of autonomous freedom. Levinas does not place limits on my responsibility. Indeed, he suggests in *Otherwise than Being* that I am responsible for the persecution I suffer at the hands of my persecutor (AQ 141; OB 111). I can never do enough. Furthermore, the ethical relation does not instruct me as to what I ought to do; still less does it specify actions within my range which would fulfill my obligations. Responsibility for institutional injustice is responsibility for what took place before I was born. There is a sense in which the ethical relation imposes restrictions or rather limitations on my actions, but these take the form of necessities rather than directives. This, I suggest, is how one should understand Levinas's notion of "ethical resistance" which he associates with the phrase "You shall not kill" (DEHH 173; CP 55). It is not that the Other possesses a great power, so much as that before the Other I lose my power. That is why Levinas usually seems to prefer the language of impossibility to the standard modes of ethical discourse. It is impossible to kill the other, because I can never succeed in my

project of eradicating him or her. The ghost of the other would linger on. Levinas cites with approval the statement of the Rabbi Yochanan that "To leave men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here" (TeI 175; TI 201). In a sense this obligation is not addressed to the will and so could be said to displace the notion of the "ought."

According to *Totality and Infinity* the Other commands me through his or her needs. "The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal" (TeI 175; TI 200). Notice that Levinas does not employ the language of duty, still less the language of virtue, which would imply that there was some merit to be won in answering the appeal. He does not explain directly why he does not locate within interiority this obligation to feed the hungry, but the following passage suggests that it is because he is well aware of the lengths to which interiority can and will go, the complex strategies to which it will resort, in order to excuse itself. "Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only 'objectively'; it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no 'interiority' permits avoiding" (TeI 175; TI 201). In other words, responsibility belongs to a subjectivity "incapable of closing itself off" (HH 100; CP 151. My translation). It is a responsibility from which one is unable to withdraw (HH 76; CP 134), just as it is "antecedent to my freedom" (DVI 119; CP 168). It is "without choice" (DEHH 229; CP 120) and "without prior commitment" (AQ 148; OB 116).

Critics of Levinas might complain that only an ethics of autonomous freedom is worthy of the name. They would say that Levinas fails to address the problems of ethics. However, this would not only be to beg the question of whether Levinas does not attempt to displace the current concept of ethics, an issue to which I shall return later. It is also the case that many of the assumptions that mark so much of modern ethics were not shared by Greek ethics either. This is reflected in the fact that Greek ethics is often criticized today for failing to give unambiguous answers to questions it never posed. If it were not for the fact that Aristotle is read as if he were debating with Aquinas, Kant or Mill then the study his *Ethics* would be sufficient of itself to put in question the apparent self-evidence of the framework of modern ethics. For example, freedom of the will has been accorded within ethics a centrality which goes far beyond the need to establish legal responsibility; but this would have been literally inconceivable to the Greeks for the simple reason that they lacked a concept of will.⁹ The Greeks did have a word for conscience—*suneidesis*—but it played only a small role in philosophical ethics. And most strikingly, the concept of "duty" was given only a minor role until the Stoics, with Cicero probably the first to attempt a definition, although his definition is missing from the *De Officiis* and does

not survive. For the Greeks, insofar as there was an "ought," it was not located in the self, as it would be following the interiorisation of ethics. In Aristotle, it was the situation that would show itself to the *phronimos* as demanding a specific action. Indeed, the demand was experienced as so compelling that it was a philosophical problem to explain those cases where the action did not follow—the problem of *akrasia*. Ethics was not associated with interior struggle, but with ease. Hence, ethics was a matter of character, which could be bad or good. To be unethical in the Greek idiom meant simply to be unusual or unaccustomed. Both Plato and Aristotle make the Greek pun which associates *ēthos* with *ēthos*, character with habit. Ethics was not something to be generated or deduced; it was, almost by definition, already in place, defining the community which embraced it. All these characteristics of the Greek conception of ethics strike at the heart of what most philosophers, let alone non-philosophers, think of as essential to ethics. Insofar as Levinas demands that the very notion of ethics should be rethought, a discussion of Greek ethics might have prepared his readers by freeing them from some of their preconceptions. But Levinas's discussion of ethics leads in a direction as different from that of Greek ethics, as Greek ethics is from modern ethics.

That the Other is understood as a challenge to my self-assurance suggests that ethics in Levinas's sense is more concerned with questioning than with providing answers. One should not suppose that this questioning takes the form of a scrupulous self-examination, still less that it constitutes a way of life or could amount to a discipline that one might impose on oneself. It is rather located at the level of sensibility, although not as the cultivation of certain feelings. It is more like a pain, the pain of love for example, which asserts itself uninvited, interrupting a moment of concentration or absorption. To this extent Levinas has more in common with the contemporary suspicion of ethics than with the ethical tradition itself. Indeed Levinas's response to the hermeneutics of suspicion is to insist that its suspicion of morality has an ethical source. There is a meaning behind both ideology and the suspicion which identifies ideology as such, that throws the work of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and their followers into a new light. Without committing himself to Althusser's critique of ideology, Levinas finds in it evidence of a certain dislocation of the subject, an interruption of essence which is reflected in rebellion against the injustice of society and in the idealism of still uncompromised youth.¹⁰ Similarly, Levinas hears in the rebellion of Marx and some of the Marxists who go beyond Marxist science, a prophetic cry which denounces the scandals to which reason has grown insensitive (DVI 19; LR 237–38). Levinas is not unaware of the paradox that he is giving an ethical meaning to an iconoclastic movement whose first victim was ethics, but ethics was subjected to suspicion because its normative aspects appeared repressive and ran counter to the historical relativism of the age. It was not ethics as Levinas conceives it that was exposed.

This is not always clear and not only because Levinas does not address directly the questions posed by the hermeneutics of suspicion. At times Levinas does indeed seem to be dedicated to restoring more than might reasonably be supposed to survive this critique. Thus, in "Meaning and Sense," Levinas calls for a "return to Platonism," albeit in a new way. He insists that morality be in a position to judge a culture, and for this to be possible there must be "norms of the absolute, . . . norms of morality [which] are not embarked in history and culture."¹¹ Such passages suggest that Levinas sets himself firmly against the genealogy of morals and what Ricoeur calls the era of suspicion, but they should not be allowed to distract attention from those places where Levinas gives a meaning to ethics which is very different from the one which the genealogists have exposed.¹² Such an ethics would neither generate nor justify moral norms. It would rather submit to scrutiny the operation of such moral norms as might already define each individual and community in its relation to the world.

Levinas's thinking appears in a new light as soon as one recognizes that his goal is not to generate an ethics. As he explained in *Ethics and Infinity*, his task is to find the sense of ethics and not to construct an ethics.¹³ The world is not suffering from a lack of ethical systems. To exist in society is to find an ethics already in place. What then does Levinas mean when he appears to qualify his claim that his task is not to construct an ethics by acknowledging that it would be possible to construct one on the basis of this thinking? Is he inviting some willing researcher to take up this task as if it were an appropriate application of his thought? Or is he not perhaps referring to the possibility of making explicit the ethics implicit in his works? That there is such an ethics in place in his works is as inevitable as the fact that there is an ethics in place in society. It would be reflected in Levinas's language and choice of examples. To make it thematic would therefore be not a supplementary task, as this might suggest, but an essential moment of the thought itself, part of its very attempt at self-questioning. From this perspective Levinas would be obliged to share the suspicion his critics direct against his rhetoric and his apparently naive appeal to the "guilty feeling of indebtedness" (*das Schuldgefühl*) that Nietzsche already described so well.¹⁴

One could always argue that our society is marked less by guilt than by an extreme selfishness that only an extravagant language could break through. But that would still leave Levinas vulnerable to the criticism that he generates a guilt quite different from that needed for his notion of responsibility by positing unattainable ideals. Indeed to adopt the impossible demands he describes would be to condemn oneself to a form of madness. Levinas virtually acknowledges as much. He employs the very language of sickness that his detractors would wish to use against him (AQ 180-81; OB 140). Responsibility is a traumatism (HH 74; CP 133). To be in relation with the Other is vulnerability, "obsession by the other," and "to be consumed" (HH 93; CP 146). The ideals themselves are couched in such exorbitant

terms, that one wonders how they could possibly be meant. In particular, a whole family of models of ethical purity appear to be established by exclusionary phrases like

- “desire without satisfaction” (DEHH 175; CP 56)
- “eschatology without hope for oneself” (HH 42; CP 92)
- “love without eros” (AN 37; TO 137)
- “gratuitously without worrying about reciprocity” (DR 90; TO 106)
- “sovereignty without violence” (DVI 175)
- “a discourse without any last word” (HH 68; CP 128)
- “saying without the said” (AQ 58; OB 45)
- “prayer without demand.”¹⁵

How do such phrases function in Levinas’s writings? How could he employ them unless he was untouched by the hermeneutics of suspicion? Does Levinas mean to set up an ideal against which each of us inevitably falls short, thereby condemning us to unproductive frustration and self-destructive guilt? But then why would Levinas construct on the same model the phrase “responsibility without guilt” (EP 49; LR 83), thereby apparently breaking with the direction such a reading gives to them?

I shall approach these phrases through what is probably the most familiar of them: “saying without the said.” What is at issue in this phrase is more than simply a discourse which signifies otherwise than thematically. The “said” corresponds not just to the content of an utterance, but to all those features which the philosophy of language identifies when I say something (about something) to somebody. The “saying” is the addressing of the Other which does not so much accompany this said, but as Levinas insists, precedes it. “Saying opens me to the other before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other. This saying without a said is thus like silence. It is without words, but not with hands empty” (DVI 121–22; CP 170). Levinas’s insistence that the saying precedes the said is not the result of a temporal analysis. They are non-synchronizable. They do not both belong to the same order. The suggestion is rather that the saying cannot be reduced to the said and that it has a sense which is independent of the said. Very occasionally Levinas indicates that there is no saying without a said: “That the saying must bear a said is a necessity of the same order as that which imposes a society with laws, institutions and social relations. But the saying is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it.”¹⁶ Levinas is not therefore suggesting that in our conversation we should attempt to approximate as closely as possible to such a saying without a said. It is true that he celebrates such phrases as the simple *Après vous, monsieur* (AQ 150; OB 117), the even simpler *Bonjour* (AQ 183; OB 143) or *Shalom* (HS 186), and, most frequently appealed to, the *me voici* said to a neighbor, which

Levinas prefers as religious discourse to the thematization "I believe in God" (DVI 123; CP 170). But in so doing he is not advocating a way of speaking, but finding in everyday speech a meaning which the philosophers did not suspect when they ignored or even vilified such speech in favor of grander forms.

Saying goes far beyond what in linguistics is called the phatic function of language. Phatic language arises as a response to the terrifying silence of being in the presence of strangers. It is a form of speech which establishes ties of union by a mere exchange of words that have no function other than the establishing of those ties. Saying also goes far beyond the recognition that infants are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative messages.¹⁷ Saying is an excess to which Levinas gives an ethical meaning. Although he calls saying "sincerity" and even "veracity" (DVI 121; CP 169), this threatens to return it to the logic of the true and the false to which it does not belong. What he calls sincerity is rather the vulnerability which accompanies exposure. It is not a revealing of the self so much as its destruction, which occurs in the form of an interruption of the historical order. In "Phenomenon and Enigma," an essay dating from 1965, Levinas offers the following account: "The enigma extends as far as the phenomenon that bears the trace of the *saying* which has already withdrawn from the *said*" (DEHH 211; CP 69). Saying emerges if at all, only as a kind of disturbance which is easily covered over, explained away or otherwise annulled or reabsorbed by the system. But if I allow it to haunt me, then it summons me to moral responsibility, that is, to an extravagant response, where the only "norm" is that of self-sacrifice "without calculation" (DEHH 215; CP 72). A norm without norms.

The other phrases cited above operate similarly. It is a question of learning how to read them. Levinas is not positing norms to be followed. Nor is he describing ideals which should be aimed at. Just as there is no saying which is not the saying of a said, so a desire without satisfaction cannot be entirely free of need. To be sure, need and desire, as Levinas understands them, belong to different orders. Or, said better, they are non-synchronizable. Hence Levinas can say that "desire is unquenchable, not because it answers to an infinite hunger, but because it does not call for food" (DEHH 174-75; CP 56). And yet at the same time he can acknowledge that even though desire transcends the realm of need, it does not lose sight of that realm.

Because the Other approaches me "without resources" (DVI 118; CP 167), he or she is not to be approached empty-handed. Recalling the original Greek sense of economy Levinas writes "No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home" (TeI 147; TI 172). The relation with the Other is therefore not confined to fine sentiments or the gift of one's heart. It is located at the level of sensibility or corporeality (AQ 181; OB 142) where the needs of the Other solicit gifts in the realm of things. Nevertheless,

I do not yet approach the Other as Other when I am simply responding to the needs of the Other at the level of need. Someone's needs can be addressed by a project, a plan, an operation to alleviate shortage as it might be run by a welfare agency. Although the Other approaches me in need, the Other commands my desire as well as a response at the level of need. Without desire the relation would be based solely in justice—what the Other has a right to demand of anyone—rather than ethics, as what the Other demands of me uniquely. And yet my desire for the Other appears to be radically distinct from any need I might have for another, including any relation of reliance or dependence that I might develop. The following sentence from "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" marks the separation: "Outside of the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches and the senses one allays, exists the other, absolutely other, desired beyond these satisfactions, when the body knows no gesture to slake the desire, where it is not possible to invent any new caress" (DEHH 174; CP 56). This desire beyond the realm of needs is enacted as giving. When Levinas writes that "To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give" (Tel 48; TI 75), the second sentence displaces the first. What is it to give? Can one give without establishing an indebtedness to the donor on the part of the recipient?

The logic of the gift displaces the logic of hunger, which is a logic of satisfaction or adequation. Levinas develops the logic of the gift in "Meaning and Sense" (1963) and in an almost identical discussion in "The Trace of the Other" (1964). Radical generosity requires an ingratitude of the other. "Gratitude would in fact be the *return* of the movement to its origin."¹⁸ Only where the gift is unacknowledged so that it is as if it never reached its destination does it avoid becoming absorbed in the reciprocity of exchange. The underlying direction of this logic is apparent. It is reflected, for example, in the teaching of Jesus: "Let not the left hand know what the right hand is doing" (Matt. 6:3). It is not enough to conceal one's almsgiving from others. One must conceal it from oneself. Or, as Levinas says, "The departure without return, which does not go forth into the void, would also lose its absolute goodness if the work sought for its recompense in the immediacy of its triumph, if it impatiently awaited the triumph of its cause" (DEHH 191; T 349). Such actions are quite unlike those of the Greeks, where deeds were seen as reflecting back on the agent in the form of the honor they solicited. Giving, as conceived by Levinas, is a "one-way action" which "pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome" (DEHH 191; T 349). Levinas elsewhere gives an example which helps explain the meaning of this phrase. The burial of a human corpse to which nobody is attending is considered by the Talmud to be of such importance that it takes precedence over the celebration of Yom Kippur, even for the High Priest. Levinas's explanation is that to show respect for a corpse is to act without expectation of reward. Hence to act

without expectation of reward is to approach the other "as if he were dead" (DVI 29n; LR 248 n7). To be wholly gratuitous giving must be without any thought of reward. It is "the putting out of funds at a loss" (HH 43; CP 93). It is to hollow out a space in oneself which will never be filled (cf. DEHH 175; CP 97).

Nevertheless, as Aristotle recognized, giving develops a need for the Other to the point of establishing a dependence. Benefactors, he observes, seem to love the beneficiaries of their generosity more than the beneficiaries love the benefactors in return.¹⁹ This illustrates the impossibility of giving without becoming involved in an economy of satisfaction, be it through hope for immediate return or through believing that goodness eventually receives its reward, if not happiness in this life then in another. When answering the needs of the Other, desire establishes a need for the Other. This does not so much compromise desire, as if it could ever have existed in a form of purity, so much as it appears to bind it to a world which can make no sense of it. In such a world it is assumed from the outset that morality addresses the self, that good deeds are done for a purpose, and that they give one an identity. There is no acknowledgment that at the point where desire intersects with need, there is a trace of that disorientation that the self suffers when it is taken beyond itself without knowing why. Desire is "an absolute orientation" not in the sense that it provides or conforms to absolute standards, but because it absolves itself from the horizons of the world as given, often to the point that it appears deranged.

An ethics without the promise of happiness is, like a theology without a theodicy, obliged to present itself in a different modality. It is "impossible to propose to the Other, . . . impossible to preach" (DR 98; TO 120). This is because I cannot demand of the Other the same commitment, the same responsibility, that I demand of myself: "in me alone innocence can be accused without absurdity. To accuse the innocence of the Other, to ask of the Other more than he owes, is criminal" (AQ 144n; OB 195n 18). It is a point not always understood by Levinas's critics who tend to neglect the peculiar logic of his asymmetrical discourse and assimilate it to the ethics of universal obligations. But is not this renunciation of preaching itself suspect of preaching? Levinas wastes no time admitting it (DR 98; TO 120). Not preaching is still preaching—within the order of thematization, of the said. Once again it looks as if Levinas has set a trap for himself and that he finds himself obliged to avoid what is presented as inevitable. But that would be to forget the enigmatic meaning of this exclusion as it functions in Levinas's writing. An ethics without preaching is no more possible than a discourse without rhetoric.

What then is the meaning of the exclusion marked by the "without"? One could read the phrases cited above as Levinas's attempt to posit an ideal pure state that we should strive to attain. This is how they are usually read. I have read them here as Levinas's attempt to mark the moments which

interrupt or disturb the dominant order, though not by opposing it directly. The saying is not opposed to the said; desire is not opposed to need; love is not opposed to eros; giving is not opposed to expectation of return and so on with the other phrases. A saying without a said, a desire without need, a love without eros, a gift without expectation do not represent extreme cases, exceptions in a world dominated by the said, by need, or by eros. The logic of Levinas's "without" seems to suggest rather that there is no saying without a said, no desire without need, no love without eros (DVI 112; CP 164), no gift without thought of some reciprocity because, as embodied, we live in a world dominated by the said, need, eros, economics and so on. The saying without a said, the desire without need, the love without eros, the gift without some return are enigmatic in terms of the system, never free of that order which they interrupt but irreducible to it. For that reason they are challenging, haunting, but at the same time easily dismissed.

Because Levinas tends to identify ethics with this saying, this desire and this love, one is readily tempted to describe it with the formula "ethics without an ethics." This would not be to deny that there is always *an* ethics in place in every concrete situation such that the situation presents one with demands. These demands might not only be different at different times, they might take different forms, as with the differences between Greek ethics and modern forms of ethics. Such an ethics, given in the sense of already in place, corresponds to what Levinas more usually calls justice, not least because it is free from the asymmetry which for him is characteristic of what he, unwisely according to some, still calls ethics.²⁰ Ethics in his sense interrupts the complacency of any specific ethics. Everything which passes for justice is under the suspicion of producing injustice. The ethics without an ethics might also be described, to use a formula I have introduced elsewhere, as "an ethics against ethics."²¹ This means that ethics is suspicious of every specific ethics, every conception of justice where the right thing to do in any instance is set out in advance, as if all one had to do was follow the rules in an appropriate frame of mind. This does not mean Levinas is opposed to such ethics. From one direction, the ethics without an ethics also leads to justice, demands it, makes it possible. From another direction, it is only by interrupting the realm of being in which justice arises that ethics makes its enigmatic appearance.

This is why one could say that Levinas, in spite of the criticisms often directed against him, is not so much the thinker of ethics in distinction from politics, as the thinker of the space between the ethics of suspicion and politics, ethics and justice. That is to say, he is the thinker of ethics without politics, the thinker of their point of intersection. This is the significance of the fact that the face to face contains already a reference to the third (TeI 188; TI 213). To encounter another who excluded reference to the others, would not be to encounter the Other, even though Levinas's face to face is often characterized in such terms, sometimes even by him. Such a

meeting would establish a dual solitude, dual egoism, the society of the couple, eros—the very definition of complacency (TeI 242; TI 265–66).

At his best Levinas is relatively free of complacency, as can be shown by an examination of “The Pact,” one of Levinas’s Talmudic commentaries. Levinas is concerned with the distinction between knowledge of the Law as a whole and knowledge of the particular laws, many of which have apparently lost their relevance. Levinas clearly believes that the former has been pursued at the expense of the latter. Understanding of the spirit of the Law is pursued by a process of generalization to which philosophy may contribute.²² By contrast, the particular represents “a principle which is independent of the universality that every particular law reflects” (AV 98; LR 220). Levinas considers attention to the particular laws to be a corrective to the system of casuistry which arises from concrete application of the general principles embodied in the Law. Levinas’s point is that we need to be on our guard against the way general principles can be perverted in the course of their application. “All generous thought is threatened by its own Stalinism.” Levinas’s claim is that the strength of the Talmud’s casuistry, what safeguards it from becoming ideology, is that it surveys the general from the standpoint of the particular (AV 99; LR 220). It studies the particular case in order to identify the moment when the general principle is in danger of turning into its opposite. What is important here is not Levinas’s judgement about the Talmud, although it needs to be examined further, but his recognition of the danger of general principles, which is so often the language in which ethics is couched. That is to say, if one focuses less on his defense of the letter of the law, which arises from the Talmudic context of the discussion, and more on the strong sense in which even the Talmudic Law can in all innocence be subverted in the course of its application, one recognizes one source of what I have characterized as Levinas’s suspicion. But it is not always a naive suspicion of the kind he exhibits when he tries to separate truth from ideology (AQ 58; OB 45). Levinas also recognizes that a world free of all ideology would be a world without human traces (HH 68; CP 128).

The point is to recognize not just the responsibility of the innocent, which tends to be what Levinas focuses on, but also the extreme complexity of the way every so-called ethical situation is given, such that “answers” are impossible and complacency excluded. Levinas likes to quote from Psalm 119 a verse which runs, “I am a stranger on earth: do not conceal your commandments from me.” Levinas’s emphasis is on the first phrase, which he appeals to as an echo of the Bible’s “permanent *saying*: the condition (or the uncondition) of being strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man close to his neighbor” (HH 97; CP 149). But could one perhaps not also find in the prayer that follows not a demand for laws to follow so much as an implicit recognition of the uncertainty that surrounds ethical questions, an uncertainty which is not resolved by the possession of commandments which

still have to be applied appropriately? The ethics of suspicion deprives one of one's identity, challenges one's complacency and subverts what passes as rationality. But what could be more characteristic of the ethical moment, the moment of suspicion, than that it would from time to time become suspicious of its own suspicion as a form of self-preoccupation which has forgotten the Other? And who would presume to demand this degree of suspicion of anyone other than him—or herself?

Notes

- 1 I. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, Werke in zwölf Bänden (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1956), 12: 76; trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 55. Henceforth RV and RR respectively.
- 2 E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), 72, 81, 85, 91, 93, 97, 99; trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 56, 64, 67, 72, 74, 77, 79, 138, 142. Henceforth AQ and OB respectively.
- 3 E. Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 42; trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 70. Henceforth TeI and TI.
- 4 E. Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 165; trans. A. Lingis, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 47. Henceforth DEHH and CP respectively.
- 5 By the same token, a great deal of what I have written here contradicts the standard interpretation of Levinas, and so, insofar as that reading is justified, this essay is as much against Levinas as it is with him. In a certain sense I am here using Levinas against Levinas, more than I am attempting to offer an interpretation which takes account of all the nuances of his thought and the differences of emphasis he has to offer. To do so is, however, perhaps a way of being more Levinasian, more faithful to the direction of his thought, than an interpretation which stuck to the letter of his texts would be.
- 6 E. Levinas, "Diachronie et représentation," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* 55(4) (1985): 93; trans. R. Cohen, "Diachrony and Representation" in *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1987), 100. Henceforth DR and TO respectively.
- 7 I have borrowed the distinction between legislative conscience and judicial conscience from Eric D'Arcy, *Conscience and Its Right to Freedom* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961).
- 8 "A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before *being*." "Éthique comme philosophie première" *Justifications de l'éthique* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984), 49; trans. Sean Hand and Michael Temple, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 83. Henceforth EP and LR respectively. It seems that only a responsibility as far-reaching as this, the responsibility of the innocent, of those who have done nothing, would be sufficient to break through the all pervasive individualism of modernity to the point that institutional injustice, whether based on race, caste, class or the division of the world into rich and poor countries, might cease to appear as simply given. Only the recognition of such a

responsibility enables me to acknowledge—but for how long and to what effect?—that I am responsible for the suffering created by a system of which I am also the beneficiary. I am all too ready to assume as my own the advantages this system has given me. Should I not also assume as my own the suffering it perpetuates? It would seem therefore that there is a call for this conception of responsibility not just within ethics, where it tends to relapse into preaching and *Schuldgefühl*, but at the point where ethics intersects with politics, where it might lead to protest against the complacency and indifference that surrounds institutions.

- 9 See, for example, Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and Charles H. Kahn, "Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine," in *The Question of "Eclecticism,"* ed. J. M. Dillon and A. A. Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 234–59.
- 10 E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'Idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 19–21; trans. Sanford Ames and Arthur Lesley, "Ideology and Idealism," in LR 238–39. Henceforth DVI.
- 11 E. Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), 54–56; trans. CP 100–101. Henceforth HH.
- 12 Cf. E. Levinas, "L'ancien et le nouveau," *L'ancien et le nouveau* (Paris: Cerf, 1982), 27; trans. R. Cohen, "The Old and the New," in TO 126. Henceforth AN.
- 13 E. Levinas, *Éthique et Infini* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), 95–96; trans. Richard Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 90. Henceforth EeI and EI.
- 14 F. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Kritische Studienausgabe 5 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), Book II, sec. 20, p. 329; trans. W. Kaufmann, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 90.
- 15 "De la prière sans demande. Note sur une modalité du judaïsme," *Les études philosophiques* 38 (1984): 157–63; trans. S. Richmond, "Prayer without Demand," LR 227–34.
- 16 EeI 92–93; EI 88. See also Levinas, *Hors Sujet* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987), 210. Henceforth HS.
- 17 For a recognition of phatic discourse, see for example, B. Malinowski, "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages," in C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1923), 313–16; and Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971), 355–56.
- 18 E. Levinas, "La Trace de l'Autre," DEHH 191; trans. A. Lingis, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 349. Henceforth T.
- 19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* IX, vii, 1167b 17–1168a 27.
- 20 For example, Jacques Derrida in *Altérités* (Paris: Osiris, 1986), 70–71.
- 21 See my essay "Levinas and the Ethics of Conscience," forthcoming in *Krisis*.
- 22 E. Levinas, "Le pacte," *L'au-delà du verset* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), 97; trans. Sarah Richmond, "The Pact," in LR 219. Henceforth AV.

THE MESSIANIC UTOPIA

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Does it make sense to think of the Messiah after the *Shoah*? Do we dare stammer the name of the Messiah when around us the blood has not ceased to flow and the distress of living with the countless innocent hearts wrenches open the way to remembering an ancient hope, when in spite of the afflictions [*malheurs*] of this somber time, we remain incapable of accepting the resignation of those who, desiring lucidity, affirm the inanity of those things? And what weight has this recourse in the face of a history dominated, more than any other time perhaps, by the merciless ravages of violence that men enact against each other and by so many deadly words [*verbes meurtriers*]?

Without doubt, we must renounce peaceful assurances, passed down generation after generation which, in a religious or secular form, plead the case of an inevitably happy end to history. For theodicies are no longer appropriate since the gaping abyss, which opened with the *Shoah* and henceforth serves as grounds for thought, tolerates no compensation and awaits no consolation. Indeed, no one can forget the unredeemed dead in some audacious and perverse wager to make of them the means toward an ulterior good to come, without immediately confessing his or her profound indifference toward the irreplaceable unicity of their lost and silent screams. To challenge the idea that history, in spite of its tragic vicissitudes, tends towards a joyous and peaceful end, to consent to carry in his or her soul the weight of all the sufferings vowed to dereliction, and to know that to breathe the pure air of Jerusalem is an unjustified privilege in the face of the memory of lives torn from their hopes, particularly those of Zion, does not signify for all that an abandoning of messianism, but commits us to think of its coming in the mode of a truth more persecuted than triumphant. Such a truth demands, moreover, that we meditate anew upon the fragile link between the interiority of the human and the course of history; as if, before

any concretization of historical events in time, messianism had to produce itself as that interior happening that bores into the space of transcendence in the person, such that profane history might be enlightened thereby and rise to holiness.

1. The postponement of messianism

Written by the victors, meditations on victories, our Western history and our philosophy of history announce the realization of a humanist ideal all the while ignoring the vanquished, the victims, the persecuted, as if they had no significance.

—E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*

When philosophy deduces the eschatology of peace from the movement of history, from the wars that punctuate it, and from the obstinate failures of justice, philosophy attempts, despite the evidence of the evil [*mal*] that still gnaws at human temporality, to think of a reign of ends that gives meaning to suffering on earth. Philosophy thus tries to found morality on politics since its divination of the future and of the final peace is affixed to the contemplation of wars which logically must lead to peace, and also affixed to a reflection upon the Good posited as immanent to Being and as destined to triumph. The promise of this glory of the Good would not correspond to the glory of prophetic eschatology; it would not be received as the precious token of some revelation, but, more ordinarily, as the ultimate signification which an attentive reading of the events of history would allow us to set forth.

In this perspective, “the time of universal history remains as the ontological ground in which particular existences are lost, are computed, and in which at least their essences are recapitulated” (TeI 26; TI 55). For, as concerns the common time of history, as concerns the anonymity of the tragically violent deeds that animate it, singular persons are called to dissolve themselves in a totality and in a becoming wherein the end alone will be just. The judgment of history—always pronounced when there is no more time for those whose unique lives were lost in the course of cruel trials, and demanded, it is said, by the future victory of the Good—remains necessarily unjust in relation to the singularity of each person, and indifferent to his or her fate. For individuality as such, its hopes and sufferings, can in no case find a place in history conceived as a process, even if this process were to come to an end. To be sure, the belief in a happy finality offers the advantage of giving meaning to the evil that persists in wanting to annotate without reserve the pages of history and to put off to a later date the moment when it will give way before the Good. This evil [*mal*], even if it indeed destroys lives hardly begun, or if it extinguishes every flame and all

trust, is thought, in this perspective, as an indispensable stage in the laborious process of the parturition of the Good. Thus it is no longer evil in its merciless and irreducible bitterness; it is no longer the scandal that leaves us voiceless or that, as Job cried out, demands an explanation that cannot come, since the ruins it causes remain "without motive" (Job 2:3). If history is, in fact, traversed by a secret but certain design, if, as Hegel wanted, Reason guides history despite all its tragic vicissitudes, then evil does not have the true reality that humans give it by measuring it against their personal distresses, but it is rather that moment of negativity that permits and promotes the Good. Thus the dialectic, thanks to its power to assume the contradictions of reality and to subordinate these to the rationality of a project that integrates and surpasses them, justifies the necessity of evil as a way of realizing this reign of ends wherein Spirit and reality will finally be reconciled.

At the time of the somber episodes of the history of their people, the Jewish prophets had already attempted to explain the increase of afflictions [*malheur*] that affected the men and women persecuted in the Promised Land, and then chased from there, by the idea that God was using the kingdoms of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt to chastise Israel and bring it back to the way of justice. Assyria—even if it was unaware of this and believed it was acting according to its own powers—was nothing else than the instrument of divine anger and God's vengeful rod (Isaiah 10:5–7). Jewish thinkers have not stopped wanting to give meaning to the ills [*mal*] suffered by their people, including the agony which often befell the most faithful among them. Thus Maimonides, in challenging the idea of a finality of things measured by the exclusive and interested desires and hopes of the individual,¹ admitted the existence of a long historical process raising all of humanity toward monotheism, even if this occurred in the negligence of the consolations awaited by the vanquished, the victims, and the persecuted. He appealed to the idea of a ruse and a wisdom of God to explain the episodes that resisted incorporation into theodicy, either because of their violence or because of their apparent contradiction with the happy and peaceful end promised by the prophets. According to him, God made use of human passions and frailty, rather than miraculously transforming them, to hasten the fulfillment of His design, in order to drive history little by little to its end—that of an era in which each one would recognize the One God. This messianic goal of history would thus demand patience of everyone and would not promise that tears—shed in the distress of singular lives too soon torn from the earth or martyred by the implacable battles that unfold there—would find a consolation on earth. Maimonides's messianism, as a stable historical epoch, guaranteed by the existence of an excellent legislation permitting the most wise to dedicate themselves without reserve to studies and letting the nations live in peace with Israel, leaves aside the question of private afflictions. It is as if in the general economy of the historical process

such afflictions had no significance, or as if it were entirely an error to bewail one's anguish, like Job, when an irreparable bereavment darkened life, instead of understanding that true felicities do not reside in the possession of imaginary goods, but in a just knowledge of God and of His ways.

The prophetic eschatology to which Maimonides refers differs, however, from that of the philosophers in the sense that it is put in relation with what is beyond the historical totality, even if this beyond is reflected within the historical process in giving meaning to each of its moments. For the constant judgment of the passing instant, of the anguish that inhabits it or the joy that makes it vibrate, by the Infinite which transcends it, "restores to each instant its full significance in that very instant: all the causes are ready to be heard" (TeI xi; TI 23). Consequently, it is not necessary to await the end of time to perceive how the lineaments of significance arrange themselves to constitute the meaning of history as postulated by philosophers. Nor is it necessary to hasten to turn the pages of the books written by historians, that is, by survivors, to know how the enigma is resolved. This does not imply that those who refer to such an eschatology carry the secret of some absolute knowledge but, more humbly, that they remain attentive to a Promise with a perseverance that afflictions do not frustrate. For only the Word given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, only its gift—absolute like every gift—renewed in the time of Moses, enlightens and orients the steps of men towards that which it commands, not by helping them on their way, but by teaching them never to stumble into vanity, for each instant and each life counts. The Promise, of which Bonhoeffer said that the non-Biblical notion of "meaning" was a translation,² manifests in effect the care of the Infinite for creation; above all the Promise affirms man as capable of hearing it as addressed to him- or herself, and of knowing him- or herself responsible for it—forever.

Consequently, if meaning is encountered in the orientation through the Infinite, in its obscure moments as in its clearest hours, if meaning is experienced in a dedication to His holiness which transcends the profane duration of history, then one can understand that the eschatological idea of judgment might be something wholly other than the idea of the judgment of history. "It is not the last judgment that is decisive, but the judgment of all the instants in time, when the living are judged" (TeI xi; TI 23). That is, decisive is the judgment coming to pass in the time in which human interiority knows itself apt to listen to the Promise that still resounds, as though the ardent minute on Mount Horeb had found an eternal refuge in the human heart. In the name of that minute by which it knows itself elected, the conscience thus has the right to judge the world, from now on, without awaiting the end of history. In the name of the Promise which then made itself heard and which escapes the spirit of the world and world history, the conscience must refuse to resign itself without pronouncing a verdict on the facts and on their indifference to singular persons.

One can, consequently, only note with dread the abyss that separates this judgment emanating from human interiority inhabited by transcendence, from the effective unfolding of history, and of the triumph of the most disastrous causes which it allows. For how can we continue to think that history should have to lead to the messianic era promised by the prophets; how can we keep alive the memory upon the vault of that long night where so many men, women, and children were swallowed up without a whisper of consolation, without pity for the leaden sadness that weighed them down? It is as if history had willed that each one, even the frailest of children, to carry alone that sadness, up to the threshold of his or her death. As if history decreed that those lives had a right only to "a tomb in the hollow of the clouds,"³ and that they should consequently leave the survivors in the terrible anguish of having to shelter within themselves these dead forbidden their own tombs.

Must the *Shoah* then lead us to dissociate the messianic hope from the course of history? Must the renunciation of every theodicy, which the *Shoah* implies by its diabolical horror,⁴ lead the survivors to close definitively the Book [*Livre*] that speaks of a Holy History? And can those whom these events condemned to hold in their hearts the so trying yoke of the sepulchre of the disappeared—can they find in themselves the way of the Infinite?

Throughout the centuries, despite the torments of history, the Jews have affirmed their belief in the coming of the Messiah. "I believe . . . in the coming of the Messiah and, though he tarry, in spite of all this I will await him daily that he should come,"⁵ prayed the faithful. To persist in this belief today, after the Catastrophe, evidently implies that one refuses to make of the visible and objective course of history the ultimate measure of that hope. For it is appropriate to reconcile messianic thinking with the defense of a subjectivity forgotten by the historical totality where it "cannot find a place" and where it is taken for a "pure nothing," a "pure thought" (TeI 221, 26; TI 243, 53) by those who describe the thread of history while following its chronology and attempting to order it according to the imperatives of some superior principle.

To defend subjectivity is certainly not equivalent to making an apology for the egoism that is held in check by the totality, nor is it equivalent to a cry of human anguish before the death that only ever befalls a unique and irreplaceable being. It is a question, in a more difficult sense, of showing how this subjectivity—as inhabited by what is higher than itself, as placed under the yoke of Infinity which assigns it to goodness—must assume the responsibility of these irredeemed times wherein humans struggle and die while choking down tears which no one perceives. Is it not, in Hasidism, the role of *Tsaddik*, of the Just, to take upon himself the sufferings of a people still in the throes of an exile more profound than that of geographic wanderings? Is it not for him to accept the heavy burden of the non-coming of the Messiah to the point of becoming the pure source of reparation for this world?⁶ And is this not itself the vocation of subjectivity?

2. The messianic rupture

Salvation . . . remains possible at every moment.

—E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*

"Do not slash your flesh because of a death," commands the Book of Leviticus (19:28), thereby enjoining those whose mourning engulfs them not to give themselves over to their distress to the point of putting their own lives in danger, for the death of a loved one ought not lead inevitably to their own. Commenting on this verse, S. R. Hirsch writes, "the loss of someone who represents much to us must, on the contrary, incite us to redouble our energy to attempt to fill in the trench that his or her death hollows out in the service of God."⁷ Yet what to do when a man not only mourns one who is dear to him, but knows that he is the survivor among the innumerable who have disappeared, who could not be accompanied to their final resting place because they had none? What to do when these dead haunt the life of him who came after them, and who senses that he may not even have the right to this life? Can the teaching of Leviticus, itself founded upon the ancient precept of the choice between life and the good (Deut. 30:15), still be understood?

The certainty that the just person must convert this pain into additional demands upon himself, rather than giving in to the inextinguishable desire to lament and despair, animates the entire *oeuvre* of Levinas. It is this certainty that gives meaning to his conception of messianism and to his affirmation of the imminent possibility of salvation, despite history's murderous scansion and despite the often pitiless decrees of politics.

Suffering is not *by itself* redemptive; it is certainly not sufficient to save humanity. That so many toil and decry their misery, that others are condemned to the violent or mute despair of an unavoidable pain and that others, as Nietzsche would have it,⁸ attempt to draw from it the strength of a discipline that leads them to the highest points of their being, does not permit us to defend the cause of a secret meaning and a salvific value to suffering. Job revolts before the incommensurable evil that he suffered rather than resigning himself to it; he judges it absurd when his friends insinuate that he must be guilty to suffer such disgrace; but in God's eyes, Job is right (Job 42:7). However, because the evil of suffering is precisely the unassumable, the unbearable, it also carries "the possibility of an opening and, more precisely, of that opening through which passes a complaint, a cry, a groan or a sigh; the primordial call for help, for the curative assistance, for the assistance of the other I whose alterity and whose exteriority promise *salvation*."⁹

Now, according to certain rabbis, the name of the Messiah is Menahem, son of Hezekiah, for it is said, "far from me is the consoler (in Hebrew:

Menahem) who might revive me" (Lam. 1:16). But does this name designate a singular person awaited by humans such that he may take their sufferings upon himself, and stop the so often dramatic movement of history? Is it not advisable to understand memory and hope otherwise?

According to Levinas—faithful to Rabbi Nachman who, in the tractate *Sanhedrin* (98b, 99a), identified the Messiah with the I—the Messiah signifies the fulfillment of the very humanity of the I, as its ultimate vocation. The Messiah is the just person who suffers, because he has heard the call coming from the suffering of the other and has taken upon himself the immense burden which emanated from it. "The fact of not evading the burden imposed by the suffering of the others defines ipseity itself. All persons are the Messiah" (DL 120; DF 89). This amounts to thinking of messianism above all as an interior event, an event that is not dependent on the happy or baleful mishaps of history. Messianism, Levinas insists,

is not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility.

(DL 120; DF 90)

The messianic rupture is identified, therefore, with the advent of the human I in worldly violence. It is indeed a question of a rupture since this I, which opens itself without limits to human distress in order to console it and carry it, this I, knowing itself the obligee of that suffering, creates space in itself, in its most profound intimacy, for the other than itself and must immediately interrupt the interested movement of its perseverance in being. And if it consents to this infinite availability to the other, if it situates this availability as a judge of that which, spontaneously or after full reflection, it accords great importance, this is not through a free decision but because it knows itself to be the carrier of an election to which it may not take exception, an election that dedicates it to messianism. This election, moreover, is not indifferent to history, but neither is it reducible to the meaning in which it appears unconditioned by the objectivity of the facts. However, it can no longer remain impassive in front of history, for it is necessary that the I be sensitive to what occurs and that it feel within itself "the absurdities that history realizes" (DL 128; DF 98)¹⁰ in order to know itself called upon, absolutely, without evasion envisionable, by those who suffer and even die from those absurdities.

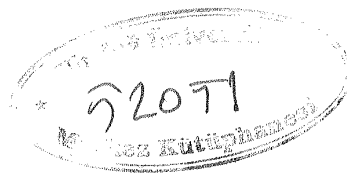
The messianic sensibility, inseparable from election and from thinking justly about the human I as being for the other, does not therefore imply the claim of a theory of history. Neither is it dependent upon a precise conception of the times called "ultimate": it neither awaits them nor anticipates them. It lives in the here and now of the world despite and indeed because of its sound and fury. This does not signify that it is imperative to give up

action in history, to give up political engagement and the hope for better times when man finally recognizes man, but rather this invites meditation on the present instant and on the possibilities of salvation it harbors within it.

In the extremely painful conditions of the history of Jewish communities in eighteenth century Central Europe, Hasidism already stressed the idea of a redemption which might arrive at any instant. Thus, when a person, with an absolutely disinterested heart, attempts to elevate himself toward the source of all life and to take with him the rest of creation, and mostly the wicked, he works for redemption in the present world. This is particularly the role of *Tsaddik*, of the Just One, who (according to Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Lyady), having sublimated all the evil of humanity due to the fact of its interestedness in being, becomes capable of opening himself at the same time to the Infinite that inhabits him, and to the suffering of those who are enclosed within the narrow limits of an I which does not let the light of Infinity shine through it.¹¹ The meditation on the Biblical verse, "Assuredly, the Eternal is present in this place and I am unaware of it" (Gen. 28:16), drives Rabbi Ephraim of Sedylkov to identify exile with the sleep of the soul cramped in its interests which only reinforce the pretentious and blind narrowness of the I; it leads him to think of redemption as the awakening of that soul, what Levinas would call its sobering up, which realizes that the Infinite is revealed to the soul in the light of the Torah.¹² Guided by the light, each person, and therefore not only the *Tsaddik*, has the possibility and the obligation to be the redeemer of the world, at least of the part entrusted to him and which he alone can save.

Is it necessary to deduce, as Scholem argues, that Hasidism has thus effected a "neutralization of messianism,"¹³ since, while giving special privileges to the dimension of the salvation of individual souls, it neglected that of the salvation of the collectivity in history? Is it imperative to admit that, for having conquered the domain of interiority, Hasidism lost the domain of political messianism?

This questioning and its pertinence *vis-à-vis* Hasidic thought will only be treated briefly as Hasidism is not the object of this essay; but it seems legitimate to consider it to appreciate its soundness in the wake of the Levinasian conception of messianism. To be sure, Levinas does not appeal to Hasidism as his authority—he is, rather, situated in the line of Gaon of Vilna and of Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner who opposed Hasidism—but both his teaching relative to the messianic vocation of the human I, and his certainty that ethics (wherein that vocation is accomplished) is measured neither according to politics nor to the objective course of history, encounter certain of the most inexhaustible intuitions of Hasidism. And in these two cases, by according primacy to messianism as an *interior event*—even if this must also transfigure the disastrous state of the world—these lines of thought lead to the necessity of interrogating their forgetting, their refusal, or their neutralization of the collective dimension, both historical and political, of messianism.



In fact the concepts of exile and redemption received an essentially spiritual signification in Hasidism: the deliverance from exile therefore implies the opening of the I to the Infinite that inhabits all things and especially the human I which, for all that, fails to recognize the Infinite when, concerned with itself and the narrowness of its private cares and the egoism of its interests, it erects the fences of its identity in a rampart which does not let the light of the Infinite filter through in one direction or another, neither from itself toward the other, nor from the other to itself. In this perspective, the much awaited Messiah does not therefore play the role of a national savior but rather, in perhaps a more urgent fashion, that of a redeemer of individual souls, of a spiritual guide toward this light of the Infinite within oneself and outside oneself. Historical exile and the difficult tribulations it inflicts on a people consequently cannot prevent the encounter between the Holy One, blessed be He, and the individual, for God accompanies Israel on the paths of its long patience before the persecutions of the nations; redemption, as the opening of the I to the Infinite which gives life to the totality of creation, thus remains possible at each instant. In the end, it does not seem that Hasidism really concerned itself with collective and historical redemption and with the institution of the messianic City.¹⁴

Is the Levinasian idea of messianism sparing in its reflection on the historical inscription of redemption and on its double polarity, collective and national? Does it cause, as Scholem said of Hasidism, a neutralization of messianism? Does it neglect to think of the gathering of exiles in Zion, of the hope for the reconstruction of the Temple, and of the institution of that political peace which, according to Maimonides, will signal to Israel and to the nations the actual coming of the messianic era, of that blessed epoch when the sages will dedicate themselves wholly to study?

The exclusivity of political and historical conceptuality for meditating on the meaning of messianism is not actually retained by Levinas. Moreover, he relies on the teaching of the sages who, in the Talmud, posit the finite duration of the messianic era to show that "the highest hope" of all humans, that which still keeps them awake even as everything around them sinks, is "separated forever from political structures" (ADV 218; BV 185)¹⁵ and from the investment of history by religious categories. This does not mean that the Jewish people could do without a State in the age of States under the pretext of going beyond it, for "nothing proves that elevation could bypass its intermediaries" (ADV 218). The return to Zion, after two thousand years of history during which the political innocence of Jews went together with their exclusion, is consistent with their internal history and with the memory that the Torah issues from Zion (Micah 4:2), as it is also a response to history *tout court*, to that history which so tragically refuses to be judged by what is higher than itself. Meanwhile, even if this return to the land of Israel—and the end to the yoke of the nations for which it allows one to hope—are eminently desirable, they are not the ultimate destiny of Judaism, and they

leave the doors open to what Levinas does not hesitate to call a "surpassing of messianism" (ADV 218; BV 185).

It is this surpassing that the sages thought of when they asserted that it was necessary to distinguish between the future world, which the eye hath not seen, as Isaiah says (Isaiah 64:3), and the messianic times about which alone the prophets prophesied. And it is really of this utopia—a utopia which, like all utopias, "has rights over a thought worthy of this name" (ADV 219; BV 186)—that Levinas thinks while he affirms that Israel must be ready to incarnate the prophetic morality and the idea of its peace which, "overflows purely political thought" (ADV 219; BV 186), and leads us to meditate on the meaning of the original movement of spiritual life.

Hezekiah, the wise King of Israel, was not judged worthy of being the Messiah, for according to the sages, he emphasized his own merits and—which amounts to the same thing—did not know how to sing.¹⁶ What to make of this? The human I, even if it were generous and just, even if it were able to establish a kingdom of equality and peace, would still lack the condition necessary to the messianic vocation: humility. And consequently the peace that it would work unceasingly to construct and the justice it would strive to establish would fail to reach the messianic shore.

Messianic peace, in effect, is not reducible to political peace, to the acceptance of the cessation of violence for the reciprocal good. It has nothing to do with past pacts between two egoisms, nothing to do with the limitation of their claims because a reasonable calculation teaches them that they both have a stake therein. For, however welcome it might be, this peace still does not manage to raise itself to the ethical law that flows from the life dedicated to the other person. Messianic peace does not rely on reason understood as knowledge of the interests of each one, but as a watching out for [*veillée*] the other; consequently, it closely resembles the inscription of the ethical utopia in reality, of that moment wherein the being of the one cannot bring offense, jealousy, hatred, or death to the being of the other, since he answers for the other, for his good, before caring for himself and thinking of his own merits. Such is "the peace of the love of the neighbor, wherein it is not a matter, as in the peace of pure rest, of confirming oneself in one's identity, but of always putting into question this same identity, its unlimited freedom and its power."¹⁷ And this is precisely the spiritual vocation of the human I, its election to messianity [*messianité*] which demands that it overcome the temptation to see in history and in politics the most extreme possibilities [*les plus extrêmes possibilités*] of the human.

How shall we respond, then, to Scholem's question? Does Levinas also neutralize messianism? Doubtlessly not, but he teaches us the radical insufficiency of a messianism thought within the exclusivity of the political and historical categories of a national redemption and a peace pact enacted between the nations and Israel. For if in this redemption and this peace, themselves certainly desirable, there is lacking the thought of the human I

directed in its life and works by the care for the other *qua* judge of his own interests, then they cannot attain the true messianic peace which is that of the disinterested love of one human being for another, a love carried and inhabited by the idea of the Infinite in us, a love dedicated to that Infinity which the defenseless face of the neighbor already reveals.

Was it necessary, then, that a man be haunted by the memory beyond measure of the dead who remained without consolation or tomb, that he be marked by the suffering of having to offer them, in his own heart, a burial place of love and anguish—a burial place and not a cenotaph—to perceive in that sadness, coiled up within the most secret part of oneself, the face of the Infinite itself, the face of a God who is with humans in their suffering? Was this necessary in order for him to be able to think the spiritual vocation of men beyond the necessity of politics and history, and for him to call upon this vocation to judge politics and history at each moment in time?

The convocation of interiority is not, then, a way of escaping messianism, or of neutralizing it; it is a way, rather, of deepening its demands beyond the facticity of politics and history. And it is necessary also to see that messianism's utopia, which must transfigure human temporality, at every instant therefore, is tied to a reading of the Scriptures guided by the messianic hope.

3. Utopia and restoration

To belong to a book as one belongs to history.

—E. Levinas, *Outside the Subject*

The untiring anticipation of the messianic era has united the Jewish people over the course of its history; however, many tensions have caused the pulse of its interpretation to beat. The Jewish tradition has indeed sheltered very different conceptions of messianism: certain sages thought of it as a radical renewal, as the emergence of new heavens and of a new earth; others considered, to the contrary, that it would be a question of the restoration of an ancient state, that each thing would occupy in the end its original place in the general scheme of creation. Thus, in the account of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the messianic era is announced by the coming of him who understands that things and beings were displaced and who puts them back into place, all the way to the lowest of the animals—which finally allows us to hear the marvelous melody of creation, a melody that the troubled history of men had silenced.¹⁸

Is the restorative aspect of messianism encountered in a thinker who never ceases to insist upon the utopic dimension of that hope? Is there sense in wanting to envisage restoration and utopia within the same horizon of signification?

To respond to these questions demands that we confront the very specific relationship maintained by the Jews with the Book, with their interpretation of the revealed texts, and with their desire to transmit it. If, as Levinas expresses it, this Book is "stretched over a tradition like the strings over the wood of a violin" (HS 192; OS 127), then we must certainly wonder what music it contains, and inquire into the excellence of the interpreting musicians. We should keep in mind the lesson of Hezekiah, the king who was not worthy to be the Messiah because he could not sing, too inclined as he was to boast of his own merits. Will not the musician of messianic times, in effect, be the one who with an absolutely disinterested heart transforms himself into a *Sefer Torah*, into a scroll of the Torah, like the crystal vase that, according to Hasidism, lets the light of transcendence pass through it?

To his disciple, who was amazed at the strange numbering of the pages in the Talmud (the first page carrying already the number 2), Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev responded that in this way each one knew that he had not yet reached the first page.¹⁹ The primary meaning of the texts would, therefore, only be reached ultimately, and it would be necessary to move through the interpretations of the wise and less wise [*des sages et moins sages*] to work toward its unveiling. Without the attentive and fervent gaze of each reader, without his patience and diligence, the meaning will not be said, the spirit will continue to inhabit the letter without being able to make itself heard. For man is "he *to whom* the word is spoken, but also he *through whom* there is Revelation" (ADV 175; BV 145), and to contribute to removing the seals of the text, he shall have to stand before it as before that which requires him in order to exist.

Levinas thinks of the mode of reception of the Book and of the availability that keeps one awakened before the enigma of the other in the same ethical breath: it is a question, in both cases, of answering for a vulnerability that calls into question the peace of a subject sure of itself and of its merits. The verse cries, "interpret me"; the neighbor requires a compassion that he does not always succeed in formulating. Now, if the messianity of the I consists in opening itself to the suffering of the other to the point of taking charge of this suffering before considering its own interestedness in being, this same messianity also commands that the I respond to the infinite solicitation of the verses in making itself into a site for them. Hearing its messianic vocation amounts, for the human I, to losing all innocence of being, in the face of human pain and in the face of the not yet spoken meaning of the verses, and to fearing for the frailty of the neighbor as also for that of the Book, before being concerned with oneself. This signifies, then, that the tenuous golden thread of messianism passes through the irreplaceable singularity of each human I dedicated to a double burden [*charge*]: a burden imposed by the suffering of the neighbor whose still open wounds or whose mute despair keeps one from withdrawing into the distance of a haven of serenity, since their call resounds in the most secret places of the

I to demand assistance from it without the I even knowing what to do; a burden, finally, that dictates the idea of a God whose infinite breath itself is molded in the precariousness of the letters and verses that await a reader to consent to give them life and to say the meaning they still preserve and which he alone, perhaps, could awaken.

To tie up this thread again—despite the abyss of the *Shoah*—commands that we “open a new access toward the Jewish texts and give a new privilege to interior life” (NP 180). As if, following the disaster, humans had to understand both the necessity of not entrusting the realization of messianism, of that era of peace and justice evoked by the prophets, solely to the objective course of history, and also the urgency of finding anew the meaning of an interiority inhabited by something higher than itself and thereby elected to carry the weight of the world. Now, if, in order to hear the so exigent murmur that springs from the most intimate place in the self, it is also necessary to return to the Book [*Livre*], to carry it with oneself as one’s entire support, and to read its Word in faithfulness to the people whose lives punctuated it over the course of their generations, it is because this Book—and only it, when the world is in ruins—reveals to man his kinship with the Good from beyond being. For the Book tells man that he was created in the image of the Infinite and for the Infinite, and that this is the messianic vocation of the human I.

The ultimate meaning of the verses—the one that needs, in order to express itself, the singularity of persons who, in their interpretation, bring to it an irreplaceable share—will be, as Levinas reckons, the first meaning [*le sens premier*]. This meaning, as the revelation of the Infinite, could not deliver itself in a flash that would disdain the human interrogation and its trembling before the mystery of the square letters. But cannot one think, consequently, that in evoking the ultimate interpretation of the verses as the very hope of unveiling the first meaning, that of the One, Levinas confers a restorative dimension to the ethical utopia wherein messianism lives?

This restoration would be identified with the fully accepted kinship between man and the good, a kinship most often forgotten because covered over by the sediments of the evil of egoism and of its terrifying, daily violence. The messianic vocation of the human I would evoke nothing other than the memory of the archaism of an election for and by the Good, which the Book does not cease to teach those who open it. And this is so despite the evil that has too often grown up in human hearts to the point of smothering the most elementary meaning of the other, despite a history in which the morgue of the powerful has no equal save the indifference of events called objective to human pain.

To hold fast, anew, to the precious thread of this memory would be the messianic utopia, beyond the darkness in which so very many humans still struggle.

In order to hold fast to this thread, will it not be necessary, meanwhile, that humans awaken to the consciousness that the world has need of a reparation? And does this reparation of the world, this *Tikkun shel ha-olam*, not start when the messianic sensibility defines the very humanity of man?

Notes

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- 1 Maimonides, *Le Guide des égarés*, trans. S. Munk (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1979), p. 436. [English translation with notes and introduction by Shlomo Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969).—Trans.] See Amos Funkenstein, *Maimonide*, trans. C. Chaliel (Paris: Le Cerf, 1988), principally chapters 6, 9, and 10.
- 2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Résistance et soumission*, trans. L. Jeanneret (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1973), p. 401. [English translation by Reginald Fuller, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Macmillan, 1972).—Trans.]
- 3 Paul Celan, *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 41–2. French translation by V. Briet, *Pavot et mémoire* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1987), p. 87.
- 4 See Levinas, "La Souffrance Inutile," *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée*. 3:E Levinas, (1984), p. 335. English translation by Richard A. Cohen, "Useless Suffering," *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 156–67. Hereafter cited with both French and English page numbers.
- 5 [This is the twelfth of Maimonides's "Thirteen Principles of Faith."—Trans.]
- 6 This idea is already found in the *Zohar*. See *Le Zohar*, Vol. I, trans. C. Mopsik (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1981), p. 332. "The just, then, are the *Kappara* of the world, they are a sacrifice in the world." *Kappara* is the complete expiation of faults. [English translation by Gershom Scholem, *The Zohar: The Book of Splendor* (New York: Schocken, 1963).—Trans.]
- 7 *The Pentateuch*, commentary by S. R. Hirsch, trans. G. Hirschler (New York: The Judaica Press, 1986), p. 459.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Par-delà le bien et le mal*, trans. G. Bianquis (Paris: Editions 10–18, 1958), p. 163. [English translation by Walter Kaufmann, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York: Vintage, 1989).—Trans.]
- 9 Levinas, "La Souffrance," p. 331; English p. 158.
- 10 On the link between messianism and the notion of substitution in Levinas's philosophy, see my article, "Singularité juive et philosophie," *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, no. 3 (1984), pp. 78–98.
- 11 Schneur Zalman of Lyady, *Likute Amarim*, *Sefer Tanya*, N. Mangel, trans. (New York: Lubavitch House, 1981), principally pp. 122–4 (Hebrew-English edition).
- 12 See Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *ha-Hasidut ke-mistikah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1968), p. 169 (in Hebrew). [In English: *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).—Trans.]

- 13 Gershom Scholem, *Le Messianisme juif*, trans. B. Dupuy (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1974), pp. 267–301. [In English: G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971).—Trans.]
- 14 See Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *ha-Hasidut ke-mistikah*, pp. 170–6 (in Hebrew). It is absolutely imperative to see the nuances within the different currents of Hasidism, especially that of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, but that is not the point of this essay.
- 15 See *Sanhedrin* 99a, b. [*L’Au-delà du Verset* was translated into English by Gary D. Mole, as *Beyond the Verse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 185. Hereafter abbreviated as BV and cited in the text.—Trans.]
- 16 *Tractate Berakoth* 10b.
- 17 Emmanuel Levinas, “Paix et Proximité,” *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée*, no. 3 (1984), p. 344.
- 18 See Martin Buber, *Les contes de Rabbi Nahman*, trans. F. Lévy and L. Marcou (Paris: Stock, 1981), p. 106. [English translation by Maurice Friedman, *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* (New York: Horizon, 1956).—Trans.]
- 19 See Shemuel Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak mi-Berdits'ev* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1987) p. 163 (in Hebrew). [In English: Samuel Dresner, *Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev: A Portrait of a Hasidic Master*, 2nd ed. (New York: Shapolsky, 1986).—Trans.]

LEVINAS AND THE PARADOX OF MONOTHEISM

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Abstract

The ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas is a major contribution to philosophy while at the same time remaining fully consistent with the normative Talmudic Jewish tradition. This means that Levinas's thought is monotheistic. All monotheism is built on a paradox: the perfect God creates an imperfect universe that is nonetheless perfect because perfection can only produce perfection. While rationalism considers this paradox irrational, monotheism is based on making sense – an irreducible sense – of this paradox. Classical theology attempted to reduce the world to non-being and ignorance in the name of intellectual perfection, based on God's omniscience. Modern thought since the Renaissance, in contrast, is the effort to take the world, in its multiplicity, seriously. The great contribution of Levinas is to grasp the sense of the world as radically ethical, hence to understand the sense of monotheist religion – in line with God's benevolence – in terms of the inter-human imperatives of morality and justice.

To every judge who judges truly, even for an hour, the Scripture reckons it as if he had been a partner with God in the work of creation.

Tractate Shabbat, 10a.

What is the essence of *monotheism*? How does *modernity*, the shift from the standards of intellect, permanence and eternity, to those of will, change and

time, mark a difference for monotheist religions? How is the ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas to be thought in relation to monotheism in general, to the ethical monotheism of Judaism in particular, and to the intellectual and spiritual shift from a classical to a modern sensibility? These are the questions that guide this essay.

If the world, in all its variety, is not simply an illusion, then what is it? While classical thought was all too willing to reduce the world to its rational intelligibility, and classical theology was no less willing to reduce it to a predetermined function of God's omniscient mind, modern thought is the effort to take the world seriously. Nature or creation, after all, is in some sense *there*; multiplicity and temporality are not simply a provisional game, vanishing act, dream of a dream, or a snake swallowing its own tail. Admittedly, science's "nature" has no immanent beginning, and religion's "creation" has no immanent origin, but would not both these *ruptures* indicate not failure but *surplus*, not *less* but something *more*, the *positivity* rather than the *negativity* of the *infinite*? What is the irreducible *sense* of this *surplus*? – this is the modern question par excellence.

A complex typology is required. To understand Levinas, one must first understand monotheism. Levinas's thought is at once philosophical and Jewish, and Judaism is a monotheist religion. "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" – the God of the Jewish people – is a monotheistic God. Nevertheless, to comprehend monotheism is impossible because monotheism *exceeds* human understanding. What is important, however, is not simply a bald statement of the incomprehension at the root of monotheism, but to grasp as specifically as possible the precise *manner* in which *monotheism* exceeds human understanding. One must begin, then, with the essential and specific "paradox of monotheism".

The paradox unravels in three steps. All three are necessary components of every form of monotheism. First, God is *perfect* – by definition. No attributes, qualities or adjectives can be applied to God's perfection insofar as all attributes, qualities and adjectives are taken from *our* finite world and can only be applied to God by analogy or negation. God's absolute perfection, what Levinas, citing Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn, refers to as "*God on his own side*"¹, is perfection without duality, multiplicity or contrast. Here the "oneness" (*echud*) of God is not numerical but unique: that which has no other, no outside. Levinas invokes the phrase in *Deuteronomy* 4: 39: "there is nothing outside him"². Here is God prior to or without creation, as it were. It is what kabbalists have called *ayin*, "nothingness" or "pure spirituality", in contrast to *yesh*, "existence" or "palpable reality".

Second, the perfect God of monotheism – in contrast to the "Godhead" of monism³ – creates an *imperfect* universe, a universe *somehow less* than the original unalloyed perfection of God-in-Himself. It is evident that the created universe is imperfect because it includes, *in some sense*, ignorance as well as knowledge, evil as well as good, ignoble feelings as well as noble feelings,

the profane as well as the holy. Here, then, instead of a unique One, with no other, there is *hierarchy*, the above and the below, the better and the worse. In contrast to absolute perfection, here one has "God *on our side*", to again invoke the language Levinas takes from Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn. Indeed, in Judaism the term "holy" (*kadosh*), according to the classic interpretation given by Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), means "separation": separation of the holy from the profane, the pure from the impure, the noble from the vulgar. Separation refers both to the fundamental difference between creation and Creator, and to the differences within creation that serve as concrete evidence of its diminution from the Creator. "Before you could feast your eyes" directly on God, the rabbis teach, "you fell to earth"⁴. Determining in what specific sense creation is a diminution, an imperfection of God's original perfection, and hence delineating the appropriate countermeasures (wisdom, faith, prayer, charity, repentance, righteousness, etc.) of which creation is capable, is the central bone of contention whose various answers individuate the monotheistic religions, both within each and between themselves.

Third, however, because God is perfect, everything that follows from God – including the created universe – is also perfect, completely perfect like its source. Only the perfect follows from perfection, otherwise perfection would not be perfection. Because all is perfect, nothing is required. Even gratitude is essentially ungrateful. Here, then, latent in this third element, *taken by itself*, lies the very possibility of *nihilism*, a *holy nihilism*, the temptation of excess rather than surplus. "The spiritualism beyond all difference that would come from the creature", Levinas has written of this excess originating in creation, "means, for man, the indifference of nihilism. All is equal in the omnipresence of God. All is divine. All is permitted."⁵

But the genuine paradox of monotheism includes all three elements simultaneously: God is perfect, and creation is at once both imperfect and completely perfect⁶. It is precisely *the surplus of this paradox that necessarily lies at the root of all monotheism*. For it is upon this paradox *and because of this paradox* that actual monotheist religions – not "religion in general" but Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are built, and which they reflect in all their concrete singularities from liturgy to theology. It is precisely this paradox, too, that cannot be understood, comprehended, grasped or known, for it exceeds human understanding. Loyal to its surplus, monotheism is forever distinct from philosophy. But for better or worse?

Like all paradox, the paradox of monotheism is fundamentally *non-rational*. It oversteps the two constitutional principles of rational logic, namely, the principles of non-contradiction and excluded middle. According to the strictures of such logic, nothing can be, and no coherent statement can affirm, both "A" and "not-A" at the same time. Everything, in order to be, and in order to be coherently stated, must be either "A" or "not-A." In the case of monotheism, however, as we have just seen, these constitutive principles of logic *must* be broken. Hence monotheism "is" *beyond* the logic

of being and the "sense" it makes is *beyond* the logic of rationality. The very language of *being*, as understood by the philosophers, is inadequate to the paradox of monotheism. Being adheres to itself, subsists in itself, develops out of itself, while the God of monotheism is both being and beyond being at once – "otherwise than being" is Levinas's formula. One cannot "think," "feel," or "obey" the God of monotheism without invoking an absolute *transcendence* whose "content" overflows its "container", whether the latter is constituted as thought, emotion or action, or some combination of the three, or something else entirely. It is not by accident, then, but by necessity that paradox, and hence surplus, is the ground zero of monotheist religions.

This does not mean, however, and this point must be underlined, that monotheism is *irrational*. Indeed, the key to the *sense* of monotheism – whether in thought, feeling or action – depends on seeing as precisely as possible how the monotheist religions concretely *express* the paradox of the extra-logical "relation" between God and creation. While it may well be, as a genuinely atheist nihilism would have it, that "if there is no God, everything is permitted", it is nevertheless not the case that for monotheistic religion everything is permitted. Everything is not permitted *precisely* because there is God. The entire effort of the monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – is to contain – to make sense of, to highlight the significance of, to point to – without utterly confining what cannot be contained, to reveal without reducing that which ruptures manifestation. Revelation is thus never only a "content", the specific texts, rituals, declarations, services, saints and sages revered and exalted by the three monotheisms, which as a matter of fact differ in all their particularity; it is also a *more* in the *less* – the *surplus* of the paradox. To determine, specify and make concrete the explosive *sense* of this surplus, whether primarily as love, compassion, intellection, command, grace, or something else – this is the task of religion, of the concrete religions, in contrast to philosophy.

There have been two broad and fundamentally opposed responses to the paradox of religion. For those persons like Spinoza and Western philosophers generally, those who adhere consistently to the logic of rationality, the paradox indicates that monotheistic religious mentality is *beneath* rationality, *less* than rational, *sub-rational*. *Sense* is either rational or irrational. The real, as Parmenides first insisted and as Hegel later elaborated, conforms to the rational: "The real is rational and the rational is real". The actuality of Jewish, Christian and Muslim monotheistic beliefs and practices would be explained away as the psychological-sociological products of ignorance, primitivism, pathology, herd instinct, grand politics, mass delusion, class consciousness and the like. The litany of radical rationalist critiques of religion is a long and varied one, even if in the end they all reduce to the simple and reductive claim that whatever is not rational is illusory, superstitious, mere appearance. For some rationalists, perhaps the most obdurate, religion would be entirely negative, an obstacle to genuine human enlightenment.

It must be eradicated. For others, more temperate or condescending perhaps, monotheism would be a step, however inadequate ultimately, on the long road to human enlightenment. It must be superseded. While for still others, more cynical or prudential perhaps, it would be an ideology, useful politically and socially to placate and subdue the masses driven by their passions and incapable of enlightenment. It must be administered. Whatever routes taken, and no doubt there are others, for all forms of rationalism the non-rationality of monotheism is merely sub-rational.

For those persons who adhere to monotheism, in contrast, the non-rationality of the paradox indicates that religious mentality is *above* rationality, *more* than rational, *supra-rational*. All that is not rational is not therefore illusory, superstitious, mere appearance. Unlike the "either/or" dualism of the rationalist, the monotheist makes a tri-part distinction: irrationality, which he opposes; rationality, which he exceeds; and religion, to which he adheres. *Religion makes sense of paradox*. The monotheistic religions account for their superior significance neither by the standards of rationality nor as simple irrationality, but as the gifts of divine revelation, spiritual vision, prophetic inspiration, celestial grace and the like. The critical objections of the rationalists are explained away by characterizing rationality, despite its own self-serving claims, as narrow, confining, limited, blind to the transcendence of the divine. The basic effort of monotheist religions is to point towards and approach a "dimension" (what is the proper way to speak of this? – *that* is the question) of the *holy* unknown to and unattainable by rationality alone. Pascal perceptively recognized this triadic distinction when he noted that the interests of scientists, who aim for knowledge, are unknown to businesspersons, who aim at worldly goods, *and* that the interests of the pious, who aim at holiness, are unknown to the scientists! Religion negotiates the non-negotiable – the surplus of the paradox – and it does so concretely, attached to both God and creation.

Some examples will suffice at this point to make clear, with a broad stroke, the manner in which monotheistic religion expresses the paradox. In Judaism the most celebrated instance is the *Sabbath*, which joins time and eternity. The time of creation, namely, *days*, the world "under the sun", as Proverbs puts it, are set in a six to one alternating ratio of *work* (*melachah*), where the world is that upon which one must labor, change and improve, and *rest* (*minouka*), where the world is appreciated in its perfection. In this way time is taken seriously, *sanctified*, neither reduced away for the sake of an escapist eternity nor denigrated to a meaningless repetition. In Christianity the most celebrated instance of the paradox is of course the Incarnation, the figure of Jesus who is at once God and man, perfect and imperfect, Jesus and Christ – the deepest most unfathomable mystery and at the same time the very presence of God on earth. Early theological efforts to interpret Jesus to be entirely creature (Arianism) or entirely divine (Manicheism) failed and were rejected as heresies because mainstream Christianity perforce remained

grounded in the paradox. So, too, in Islam, in its oft-repeated confession of faith (*Shahadah*) – “There is no God but *Allah*; Mohammed is the messenger of *Allah*” –, the absolute perfection of God is conjoined with the earthbound prophecy of Mohammed. The same can be said of the Jewish declaration of faith (*Shema*) which joins “our God” with the “One God.” Not only can examples be easily multiplied, they in fact permeate the entire gambit of actual monotheism: every single thought, action, feeling, text, narrative, institution or what have you, that is sanctioned by the monotheist religions, is – through exegetical interpretation – an expression of the paradox⁷. And *exegesis*, as Levinas makes clear in several articles⁸, is itself a reflection of the paradox, joining spirit to letter and letter to spirit.

It has often been said that between science and religion there can be no middle term because they are mutually exclusive. One side exalts the paradox at the expense of rationality, while the other exalts rationality at the expense of the paradox⁹. Leo Strauss has shown that when posed in such an opposition neither side can convince the other of its errors because each is based on different grounds entirely¹⁰. But science and religion are not mirror images of one another: neither accepts the other’s contextualization. Strauss, for his part, while regally defending the rights of each, nevertheless presents only a dyad: rationality or religion, reason or revelation, Athens or Jerusalem. Monotheism, for its part, distinguishes the religious from the rational, to be sure, but it also distinguishes the religious from the irrational. “This human impossibility of conceiving the Infinite”, Levinas writes, “is also a new possibility of signifying”¹¹.

We know how rationality rejects religion, as *sub-rational*. The specifically religious intelligibility would be rejected for being merely stupid, stubborn, infantile, duped, deluded and the like. But our question is neither how rationality rejects religion nor how religion rejects rationality. Rather, our question is how monotheism admits its fundamental paradox without producing the chaos of irrationality. The real may not be rational, but for all that it is not irrational. The answer of religion, most generally, is that the *sense* of the paradox finds expression in the symbol – not the symbol as a corruption of thought, an inadequate or stammering thought, nor the *symbol* as a mystification of matter, an unfortunate concession to matter, but the symbol as the unstable unity – “singularity” – of proximate and distant, the here and there, being and the otherwise than being, the visible and the invisible: a pointing, a disruption, a challenge. The great originality of Levinas is to argue that the *symbol* – the *sense* of monotheism as a surplus – is at bottom neither an ontological-epistemological structure nor an aesthetic structure, but an ethical one. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) he had already written: “God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men”¹²; and: “Everything that cannot be reduced to an [ethical] inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.”¹³

The issue, then, is one of establishing a level of sense independent of the rationalist's dyadic worldview, and yet generative of it. It is a question broader than the paradox of religion, one that has determined most of modern thought from Hegel's historical dialectic, Shelling's philosophy of myth, Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's cosmic will, Bergson's *elan vital*, to Heidegger's ontological difference, Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, Merleau-Ponty's flesh of the world and Ricoeur's symbol that "gives rise to thought". It has many precursors, too, from Plato's Eros, the thought of many Renaissance thinkers, especially Nicholas of Cusanas, to Vico's philosophy of rhetoric. In general, however, all these various escape routes and "middle term" alternatives to science have relied on an *aesthetic ontology* – attentiveness to the manifestation of manifestation in its own right – taken as a new form of epistemology. Until Levinas no one has thought this new sense radically in terms of ethics. Furthermore, as we know, Levinas thinks ethics *ethically*, that is to say, as the "metaphysics" of the paradox of monotheism, where non-coincidence, "diachrony", "bad conscience", the one-for-the-other of responsibility – rather than self-positing, self-consciousness or aesthetic upsurge – constitute the ultimate and irreducible sense of transcendence in immanence.

Levinas's careful study of signification led him to discover a dimension of meaning whose true significance was overlooked by the "intentional" or "noetic-noematic" analyses of meaning laid out by his teacher Husserl. We must remember, first of all, that Husserl's great discovery was a turn to consciousness as the source of meaning – as the source of meaning for science, the "hard" objective sciences. Hitherto, natural *science*, in contrast to philosophical idealism, had wrested truth out of meaning by correlating signs to their referents. This was its realism. What Husserl saw was that a complete understanding of meaning would also require an elucidation of the production of signs by consciousness, a turn to "meaning-bestowing" or constitutive acts. Thus Husserl supplemented the realist sign-referent structure with its "origin" in the signifying acts of consciousness. What Levinas saw, however, was that in his legitimate concern to provide a broader ground for signification by turning to consciousness, Husserl still favored a representational model of meaning that unwittingly he had taken from the objective sciences he aimed to supplement. What struck Levinas's attention, beyond Husserl's broader signifying-sign-signified structure ("intentional" consciousness), was the *communicative* dimension of meaning. Not only is realist meaning, the sign-signified correlation, intended or meant through an act of consciousness, meaning is also that which is said *by* someone *to* someone – it has an *accusative* dimension.

What Levinas saw was that the *accusative* dimension of meaning could not be recuperated within the signifying-sign-signified structure of intentional signification. But unlike the later structuralists, for whom this excess indicated the impact of a larger web of historical-cultural signs, and unlike

the later deconstructionists, for whom this excess indicated the impact of a semiotic slippage, again at the level of signs deferring to signs, for Levinas the irrecoverable *accusative* dimension of signification would have to be understood beyond signs, the *said* (*dit*), as the impact of an inter-subjective or inter-human dimension, a *saying* (*dire*). The impact of society, and even more specifically, the impact of the communicative situation of a self brought into proximity with another self across discourse would be the non-thematizable exterior and "ground" of signification. Discourse, language, speaking, expression would not indicate some failure of signifying to be sufficiently precise, then, nor the intrusion of larger cultural or semiotic determinations (which would undermine the subject's freedom) relative to the sign. Rather the impingement of language, as it were, would point to an irreducible *priority* deriving from the inter-subjective relation, a priority that would overcharge the entire signifying-sign-signified structure without undermining its validity. And this priority of the inter-subjective dimension – and here is Levinas's great teaching – could only be accounted for in *ethical* rather than epistemological terms. The alterity of the other person to whom one speaks and, even more importantly, the alterity of the other person who speaks and to whom I respond, even in listening, would have the *moral significance* of an *obligation*. *Responsibility*, then, the responsibility to respond to the other as other, would be the non-intentional root of the intentional construction of signification. This was a great insight indeed. The entirety of Levinas's intellectual career would be the effort to lay out the precise character of this *over-riding social and moral surplus* of meaning and its consequences and ramifications for all the dimensions of human life.

Before we go too far afield, however, let us remember that our own interest in this essay is to see how this discovery of a *sense* beyond or above the rational and its partner, the irrational, plays out in Levinas's reflections on monotheism. This is not so hard to see. Monotheism – the paradox of monotheism – is itself precisely the irruption of transcendence within immanence, without that transcendence either absorbing immanence into itself or itself being absorbed by immanence. The paradox, in other words, mimics the structure of *saying-said* that for Levinas is the root structure of ethics. Furthermore, monotheism characterizes transcendence as perfection and immanence as imperfection, neither divorcing the two nor identifying them. What Levinas grasped, then, is that the paradox of monotheism could be neither an ontological nor an aesthetic structure, for both of these dimensions of sense are essentially incapable of maintaining the extra-ordinary "relation without relation"¹⁴, the "posteriority of the anterior"¹⁵ – the transcendence in immanence – characteristic of the monotheistic paradox. *Monotheism is an ethical structure*. Not the omniscience of God, but his *benevolence* would be the key to the sense of creation. Creation in its relation to God, in the paradoxical conjunction of imperfection and perfection, would be constituted by the work of *sanctification as the responsibility of*

morality and redemption as the striving for justice¹⁶. One could cite many supporting and elucidating texts by Levinas, and I invite the reader to examine the whole of the subsection entitled “The Metaphysical and the Human”, of Section One of *Totality and Infinity*, from which the following philosophically oriented citations are taken.

The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. . . . God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. . . . The work of justice – the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced. . . .

*The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching and justice –, a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest (and in particular all those which, in an original way, seem to put us in contact with an impersonal sublime, aesthetic or ontological), is one of the objectives of the present work [*Totality and Infinity*].¹⁷*

Nor are we permitted to think that Levinas interprets monotheism *ethically* in his philosophical works alone, as if this manner of speaking were merely the public and acceptable face of what otherwise and more authentically would derive from a strictly private, “faith based”, or, in the case of Judaism, an allegedly exclusionary tribal field of significance. There is nothing exclusionary (except its struggle against evil and injustice) about Judaism, and nothing supra-ethical (in the manner of Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith”) about Levinas’s conception of Judaism. For Levinas the “highest moment” in Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac, to take the apparently most difficult “religious” counter-instance, is not any rejection of morality, but the imperative of the Angel of God who will not allow murder¹⁸.

While it is true that Levinas focuses a great deal of attention on the ethical height of the “trace” in language and signification in his philosophical writings, providing deep analyses of the “non-intentional” underlying intentional consciousness¹⁹, in his most Jewish or “confessional” writings too – without in the least reverting to the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment reformation, hence remaining faithful to the normative Talmudic tradition –, Levinas will no less articulate the “breach” of the absolute in the relative, the disruption of the *said* by *saying*, in terms of morality and justice. The primacy of ethics is defended throughout Levinas’s writings, both philosophical and Jewish²⁰, for this, after all, is the central work of all of Levinas’s work. Insofar as the aim of philosophy is *wisdom* rather than *knowledge*, there is no need and there can be no justification for separating philosophical from confessional writings. The most explicitly

monotheist articulation of this same primacy is found, nevertheless, in Levinas's "Jewish" writings. Most particularly I refer to the concluding pages of two essays published in 1977 (six years after the publication of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, hence in the fullest maturity of thought): "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" and "*In the Image of God*, according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner"²¹.

In "*In the Image of God*, according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner", for instance, Levinas recognizes that when Rabbi Hayyim finds the paradox of monotheism in the very syntax of Jewish blessings – "Blessed are you Lord, Lord, who . . ." – where a shift from the second to the third person brings into coordination "God *on our side*", the immanent God who acts in history, and "God *on his own side*", the transcendent God in his pure perfection, it is *also and no less* a reference to the *moral* imperative placed upon the I facing a You *and* to the demand for a "dis-interested-ness" that, striving for perfection, aims at *justice* for all²². "In this radical contradiction ["between God *on our side* and God *on his own side*], neither of the two notions could efface itself before the other. . . . And yet this *modality* of the divine is also the perfection of the moral intention that animates religious life as it is lived from the world and its differences, from the top and the bottom, from the pure and the impure"²³. The imperfection-hierarchy of creation is precisely a moral imperative, from and to perfection. When, continuing, Levinas writes of this as "[a] spiritualization that dismisses the forms whose elevation it perfects, but which it transcends as being incompatible with the Absolute", he means precisely religious life as ethical self-overcoming. Religion, in this holy ethical sense, would no longer be a miraculous or predetermined escape from nothingness, the utter worthlessness of creation, but the perfecting of a creation whose highest sense would be precisely this movement – not necessary or impossible, but *best* – toward perfection. Ethics as the ground of the real, Levinas writes, is "a new possibility: the possibility of thinking of the Infinite and the Law together, the very possibility of their conjunction. Man would not simply be the admission of an antinomy of reason. Beyond the antinomy, he would signify a new image of the Absolute"²⁴. Man in the "image and likeness of God" would be ethical man. "*His compassion*", says the Psalmist, "*is upon all His creations*"²⁵.

The concluding pages of "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" are even more explicit regarding the height of ethics as the ultimate and irreducible *sense* of the paradox of monotheism. Levinas writes:

The path I would be inclined to take in order to solve the paradox of the Revelation is one which claims that this relation, at first glance a paradoxical one, may find a model in the non-indifference toward the other, in a responsibility toward him, and that it is precisely within this relation that man becomes his self: designated without any possibility of escape, chosen, unique, non-interchangeable and, in this sense, free.

Ethics is the model worthy of transcendence, and it is as an ethical kerygma that the Bible is Revelation.²⁶

In this way the hollowing out of selfhood as *sacrifice*, as *circumcision of the heart*, as infinite obligation to the other, as "hostage" – "the opposite of repose – anxiety, questioning, seeking, Desire"²⁷ – upon which are built the *rectifying structures of justice*, would be the concrete sense that the paradox at the heart of monotheism takes on. Such would be a selfhood "more awake than the psyche of intentionality and the knowledge adequate to its object" – "a relation with an Other which would be *better* than self-possession" – "where the ethical relation with the other is a modality of the relation with God"²⁸. Continuing: "Rather than being seen in terms of received knowledge, should not the Revelation be thought of as this awakening?"²⁹. Levinas is not merely glossing an ontological or aesthetic structure: the real is itself determined by the ideality of morality and justice. It is this that monotheism "understands" better than philosophy.

The *sense* of Judaism, as of all genuine humanism (the two are in no way in conflict), would be to preserve the surplus of the more in the less, the perfect in the imperfect, via the demands of an imperative voice from beyond: the voice of the other, commanding the self to "its unfulfilable obligation"³⁰ to one and all. The perfection of a personal God would be the perfecting of the earth. And the perfecting of the earth would be to care for the other before oneself, for "the orphan, the widow, the stranger". Not sentimentality but morality, morality requiring justice. "And with justice, judge in your gates" (*Zechariah* 8:16) – upon which Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel comments: "where justice is wrought, peace and truth are wrought also."³¹

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, "'In the Image of God' According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner", in: Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 162 *et passim*.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 3 Monism, expressed by both Hinduism and Buddhism, is spirituality fundamentally distinct from monotheism. For monism the Godhead is the real in its totality, for Hinduism this ultimate reality is Brahman, for Buddhism it is the absolute Void. For monotheism, in contrast, one must distinguish God from His creation.
- 4 *Sifre Deuteronomy*, Berachah, no. 355, 17.
- 5 E. Levinas, "In the Image of God", *Beyond the Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 166.
- 6 I am deliberately using the dyad "perfect/imperfect", rather than such alternatives as "infinite/finite", "unconditioned/conditioned", or "absolute/relative", because the former *begins* with God while the latter begins with *creation*.
- 7 The subtle analyses found in the marvelous book by Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, trans. Llewellyn Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), especially those directly indebted to Levinas, such as Ouaknin's extended commentary to *Yoma* 54a (pp. 187–255), show to what extent an attentive exegesis

can discover the paradox of monotheism embedded in every detail of monotheistic religion.

- 8 Most notably: "On the Jewish Reading of Scriptures" and "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition", in: *Beyond the Verse*; "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry" and "From Ethics to Exegesis", in: *In the Time of the Nations*; and "The Strings and the Wood: On the Jewish Reading of the Bible", in: *Outside the Subject*; among the many other articles that could be mentioned in this regard, see, also, chapter seven, "Humanism and the Rights of Exegesis", in my book, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), pp. 216–265.
- 9 Nonetheless, there is a third alternative: to affirm a non-religious irrationality, a sub-rationality that denies rationality, but at the same time also denies the perfection, that is to say, the existence of God. This is the position of sophism, skepticism or what Levinas calls a "pure humanism" (in contrast to "biblical humanism") that deny truth in the name of *extra-rational* power relations such as habit, good manners, force, equanimity, will, libido, the "nomadic" and the like. Influential and destructive though this third posture has been, and continues to be, it is essentially *pagan* and – except for a few allusions to Heidegger – is not the concern of the present paper on monotheism.
- 10 See, e.g., Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997).
- 11 E. Levinas, "In the Image of God," *Beyond the Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 78.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 16 In a chapter entitled "Monotheism and Ethics" (pp. 74–119), from his book *Monotheism: A Philosophic Inquiry into the Foundations of Theology and Ethics* (Totawa, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1981), Professor Lenn Goodman writes (p. 86): "The emulation called for by the very contemplation of the concept of divine perfection – expressed Biblically as the human pursuit of holiness (Leviticus 19) and in Plato as the striving to become as like to God as lies in human capacity (Theaetetus 176) – means simply the pursuit of the highest conceivable moral standards". See also a later revised version of this chapter in Lenn Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 79–114.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 78–79 (with some minor revisions of the Lingis translation).
- 18 Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 74.
- 19 See, e.g., his close analyses of Husserlian phenomenology in Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Indiana University Press, 1998).
- 20 The unity of Levinas's philosophical and confessional writings can hardly be better recognized than on the pages of his extraordinary essay of 1973, "God and Philosophy" (trans. Richard A. Cohen), found in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 153–186; as well as in a second English translation in Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 55–78.
- 21 These two essays were both reprinted in the 1982 collection entitled *Beyond the Verse*.

- 22 E. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 166–167. For a more extended discussion of Levinas's appropriation of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn, see chapter eleven, "The Face of Truth and Jewish Mysticism", in my book, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 241–273 (especially pp. 261–273).
- 25 Psalm 145.
- 26 E. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 28 *Ibid.*
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 150.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Pesikta Kahana*, 140a.

BRIS MILA, DESIRE AND LEVINAS¹

Richard A. Cohen

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Abstract

Bris mila, like all Jewish spirituality, signifies as a sanctification/humanization of vital energies, in this case of the male gendered body, on the model of Talmudic hermeneutics, exegesis, commentary, i.e., respecting the transcendence and integral unity of future and past, public and private, spirit and letter, holy and mundane.

One year ago, on the eighth day of Chanukah, 5756 (December 25, 1995), Emmanuel Levinas—the philosopher of ethical transcendence—was taken from this world. That his passing occurred during Chanukah, which recalls and celebrates the superiority of the light of Jerusalem over the light of Athens, is certainly fitting. That it occurred on the eighth day is particularly striking for a number of reasons. For Judaism eight represents a transcendence even beyond, if one can say this, the transcendence of the Shabbat, the seventh day, whose perfection is relative to the imperfection of the six workdays with which it alternates. And for our purposes, eight is of course the day of *bris mila*.

Immediately we sense the peculiar temporality of *bris mila*: it has a future beyond Abraham's will. It binds every Jew thereafter. Furthermore, performed upon an eight-day-old infant, there is can be no question of the child's consent, however passive, as at Sinai, or even of recognition. It is done before one knows it, and in some sense (because the baby's nervous system is not fully developed) even before one feels it. When a Jewish male comes to feel and know his body, it is always already circumcised. Furthermore, *bris mila* also links descendants to a long-dead relative, to a distant

always personally unknown and unknowable progenitor, a beginning before one's origin. Here consciousness and will, and hence freedom, are quint-essentially "too late," exceeded but marked by an "immemorial past." But a nagging question keeps returning: aren't these temporal distortions, a future and a past beyond choice, beyond but impinging upon consciousness, aren't they evidences of the *primitive* status of *bris mila*, its unbridgeable distance from morality and from the individual autonomy and social justice demanded by morality?

To add to this question, there is unavoidably also the complex and perplexing question of gender: *bris mila* is for males only. No parallel or equivalent gender ritual exists for Jewish females. Thus *bris mila* heightens and underscores the gender difference. What has gender difference to do with ethics? Or more generally, as we are prone to ask today, what has gender difference to do with anything? And there is another consideration: *bris mila* is a mutilation of the male body, a refusal to accept it in its natural state. It is not merely a cut with a knife, but an excision of flesh. And not just any flesh: the removal of the foreskin of the penis, male organ of urination and generation. Furthermore, *bris mila* is a refusal by the parents to allow the child to decide, basing its decision on the natural body which it will never have, and which the father never had. For thousands of years, forming a long tradition, circumcised males have been circumcising other males. From Abraham on there is no longer any room for radical decision. Rather, decision is now carved physically within the space of circumcised bodies. Here, I think, we sense an echo of Levinas's notion of "difficult freedom," a specifically "religious" conception of freedom: freedom already committed within the space of its free choices, and hence a freedom different from the unruly freedom for so long touted by philosophers.

Each of these dimensions of *bris mila*—Jews only, males only, babies, body, penis—seems more troublesome for a universal ethics than the next. They are without doubt troublesome for a clear consciousness. But consciousness is naturally curious, fascinated by all things, already in Homer's day fascinated by the spectacle of dead bodies, and in our day of global media coverage, fascinated by far more gruesome sensationalism. More bothersome, then, these dimensions which trouble consciousness, all of these so particularist dimensions, seem even more troublesome for an ethics whose exigencies command universally. Perhaps there is no link. But the ethics whose exigencies command universally, for Levinas, is an ethics that commands in the particular face that faces. Ethics arises not in the law behind that face, nor in the proletarian condition which produced it, nor in the psychic apparatus alleged to undergird it, nor in any of the other synthetic structures that unite self and other, but rather through the irreducible alterity of the face, pure alterity, whose purity is not in the least diminished by the particular face that faces but is rather and precisely presented and enhanced by it. We cannot help recalling Levinas's insistence at every point, and

against so many alternative views—one thinks of Christianity very broadly, or of Descartes and Kant, and also of Levinas's contemporaries Martin Buber and Leo Strauss—that there is *no* hiatus between reason and revelation, no rupture between a properly Jewish thought and the thought of humanity, a link Levinas calls “the significance of Israel in the spirituality of the Human.”² Nor is there an identity—“The struggle against Rome is the preservation of Israel.”³ What, then, permits the conjunction, if not separation or identity, plurality or unity, between revelation and reason? It is the unsurpassable concreteness of singularity—moral singularity, election. And it is here, again, that we hear the echo of ethics in *bris mila*.

Levinas is in agreement here with Hirsch's commentary to Genesis 17:10, that in the difference between *mila* as *bris*, that is, as actual covenant, and *mila* as *ose*, that is, as *sign* of the covenant, Judaism teaches the unity of spiritual meaning and physical act, or what is commonly known, and as Levinas knows it, as the unity of the spirit and letter. Here lies the solution to our problem, the link between *bris mila* and Levinas's ethical metaphysics: the inextricable link between letter and spirit. “There is constantly within us a struggle between our adherence to the spirit and adherence to what is called the letter . . . adherence to the principle is not sufficient.”⁴ *Bris mila*, then, like ethics, would be a form of exegesis, a symbol calling for meaning, a meaning attached to body, *bris* and *ose*—covenant and sign—at once.

Like Shabbat, which is also an eternal sign, but one of and for all of *creation*, and the rainbow, which is an eternal sign of and for the *human*, Jewish tradition designates *bris mila* as a sign of God's *covenant* with His chosen people.⁵ What seems so primitive, so recidivist, is that like tattoos or ear loops on aborigines, it is carved on the body, like an insufficiently repressed oedipal complex. Ethics seems so far away from this. What have high sentiments and noble responsibilities to do with knife cuts to the foreskin, scars on a penis, male exclusivity, one nation rather than a united humanity? But perhaps it is precisely the sentimentality of such high sentiments, the spiritualization of the hard task of morality, that the Jewish conception of ethics resists, and that *bris mila* unmistakably marks. Surely Levinas teaches that morality and materiality are bound up with one another. Levinas is fond of quoting Rabbi Israel Salanter: “The material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs.”⁶ The answer to our inquiry, it seems to me, lies in the distinctions Levinas makes between need (*besoin*) and desire (*désir*), between will (*volonté*) and reason (*raison*), and finally between desire and the most Desirable.

“Corporeity,” Levinas writes already in *Totality and Infinity*, “describes the ontological regime of a primary self-alienation.”⁷ The body is at once my body and a thing in the world for others. “The body in its very activity inverts into a thing to be treated as a thing.”⁸ Thus even when one refuses the other with all one's might, with all one's will, the self is still alienated from itself, exposed, delivered over to others through its body and through

its work. The alienation of one's work—which can be bought and sold, stolen or copied—is more obvious than the alienation of one's body, but both are equally exposed to others, equally beyond the will, or, as Levinas writes, "willing escapes willing."⁹

To be embodied is thus to be at once a poetic being, productive, outside oneself, and an historical being, subject to alien judgement, threatened by others, "exposed to violence."¹⁰ No refusal, not even suicide, can overcome this exposure, since "Absolute dissention with a foreign will does not preclude the carrying out of his designs,"¹¹ "does not preclude serving him by one's death."¹² To be embodied is thus to be fated with an essentially ambiguous existence, ambiguous even in one's most voluntary power, in one's will: at once for oneself and for others. Already, then, even when just considering the body and will, the mark of *bris mila* comes to make sense: the body is precisely one's inescapable insertion into the public sphere. Already, from the first, one is exposed to others, without one's permission, vulnerable regardless of one's permission, will, agreement, contract. Such is embodied existence. One is already bound to others, bound to all the divisions that make up the human as opposed to a purely natural dimension of being. Hence there are moral consequences to embodiment—and not merely consequences. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas will write: "Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted."¹³ Does not *bris mila* mark precisely a taking of sides in the body's fundamental ambivalence? To be human, even in one's most animal parts. That is to say, moral, even in one's most private parts—and there especially. Think of the rules of *kashrut* for eating. Or of the "laws of family purity" surrounding sexuality which, years later, include the female along with the male in the sanctification of sexual intimacy.¹⁴ So called *natural* being for humans is *human* being, as we know from the testimony of those unfortunate children left to raise themselves in the forests, far from civilization. *Bris mila* would be the admission, then, of a truth embodied deeper than one's animality, deeper than truth and consciousness, more than a truth. Rather *bris mila* would be the mark of solidarity, interconnection, the human, insertion in a field of moral forces, of obligations and responsibilities, preceding and exceeding one's animal powers. It would be, as it is, the mark of a *covenant*, where the excessive futurity of a promise of eternity, and the excessive passivity of an unbreakable commitment by and with God,¹⁵ combine to capture this sense of being bound by an alterity deeper than a contract which can be kept or broken. Levinas writes: "But one can also understand by life precisely this limitation of the savage vitality of life—something that circumcision would symbolize, the limitation through which life awakens from its sleepwalking spontaneity . . . to open itself to otherness and the other."¹⁶ And elsewhere: "This is

a concept essential to Judaism: that the consent to a corporeal wound to be undergone—or to have one's newborn son undergo—places us beyond all pious rhetoric and outside the pure 'inner realm' in which ambiguity, amidst unverifiable 'mysteries,' always finds a convenient shelter."¹⁷

But it is not only because an embodied being is one body among others, one living organism in a complex and varied biosphere, that the will is ambiguous: it is ambiguous in its very being, "in its mortality,"¹⁸ Levinas writes. To will one's own will and one's own will alone is still, contrary to Max Stirner's defiant dream, to be subject to the will of others. Willing contains within itself the possibility of its own betrayal. This is not only a matter of choosing slavery, submission, abject being. Even as I strive to will only my own will, I may will an alien will. More deeply, I cannot control the meaning of my willing for others, or at least I cannot guarantee the success of my willing the meaning of my willing for others. And death finally gives the meaning of all my willing, however careful, over to others, survivors, forever beyond the reach of my will. Hence my willing, because embodied, hence exposed, contains its own betrayal.

This does not mean, however, and contrary to certain religious traditions outside of Judaism, that the body or the will are evil. Rather, they are exposed, vulnerable, ambiguous, not wholly subject to the subject nor, for that matter, wholly subject to the object either. Embodiment is not simply need, not simply natural being, a dog that eats when it is hungry and sleeps when it is tired, a leaf bent to the sun, a rock inert in its inertia. Rather, the human body is desire, needs converted to wants, hunger become taste, cold not only warmed by but enjoying the sun's warmth, exposure and territoriality become comfort and home. The human, in other words, cannot escape human signification, cannot escape what we call civilization, inter-humanity. And inter-humanity is not given as natural being, rather the reverse. It unravels between will and betrayal of will, recognition and betrayal of recognition, inside turned inside out, and outside penetrating inward. "The self is a *sub-jectum*; it is under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything."¹⁹ The deepest most hidden precincts of the self are the erotic, the outside inside the inside, male inside female, inside outside the outside, female encompassing male. Is it any surprise, then, that Judaism marks this greatest depth of humanity in animality, the very privacy of the private, the intimacy of the intimate, as the holy of holies—that it marks this encounter of flesh with flesh, soul with soul, with the sign of God's covenant?

We know the Jewish response to this situation of ambiguity: sanctification, the project of redemption, the task of saving the world, drawing it up into God's path. And this task, as Levinas understands it, is to wipe out mythology and mythological thinking (or what Rosenzweig called the "pagan"). To sanctify—this is the meaning of Jewish existence. This is the category of being Levinas calls Israel. A world divided between integrity

and betrayal, reality and appearance, truth and lie, morality and mythology, is transformed in Judaism into a world struggling between the holy and the profane, or, as Buber taught, between the holy and "the not yet holy." It is a world not built on an *arche*, and hence not unmasked through *archeology*, but rather a world built upon *hierarchy* and the *hieratic*, calling for elevation. To elevate the not yet holy to the holy, concretely enacted as the struggle for morality and justice, that is the Jewish task, a task in the service not of Jews or Judaism alone, but in the service of humanity. "[E]*thics* is not determined in its elevation by the pure height of the starry sky; . . . all height takes on its transcendent meaning only through ethics."²⁰

Responding to this service, the Talmud calls *bris mila* the *makah tam*, the "wound of perfection" (*Sotah* 10b). It is an expression neither more nor less paradoxical than Levinas's expression "difficult freedom." It relates to God's words to Abraham, in Genesis 17:1: "Walk before Me and perfect." *Bris mila* is a "wound of perfection" in the sense that it is a call, a cry, as is any wound, to rectification. Humans, created in God's image, must, like God, love perfection. This means that they must strive to perfect creation, to make it more perfect, to bring it back to God. *Bris mila*, then, far from being a violation of the flesh, or a mutilation, a wound pure and simple, is an uplifting, a perfecting of the flesh itself. This is no doubt why R. Elijah Benamozegh, whose thought is no less universal than Levinas's, will think of it in kabalistic terms, as a retrieval of sparks, of the heights found in the depths, and the depths that must be brought to their proper height. In his great work *Israel and Humanity* he relates the following midrash from *Genesis Rabbah* (11:6): When a Roman official, some say a philosopher, asked Rabbi Oshaya why God had not made man circumcised as He wanted him, Rabbi Oshaya replied that "All that was created during the six days requires perfecting, and man too needs to be perfected."²¹

In Judaism, Levinas teaches again and again, the task of perfection is not treated as an abstraction. The *tsitsis*, also a reminder of God's commandments, surround a man's loins because it is there, apart from any falsely angelic picture of human virtue, that much moral trouble originates;²² the *bris mila*, even more so, prints the sign of God's covenant on the penis itself. "Adherence to principle," Levinas writes, "is not sufficient."²³ It is precisely a *mitzvah*, a commandment (or, as some prefer, a "good deed"), such as circumcision that "places us beyond all pious rhetoric and outside the pure 'inner realm' in which ambiguity . . . always find a convenient shelter."

Bris mila, then, would not be a primitive rite, but rather a primitive protection, a basic sanctification. It would be appropriate for an ethics whose "ought" remains tied to the "is" of an ambiguous human condition. Commenting on the rabbis' commentary on the meaning of calling the Sanhedrin, the ancient Jewish court of law, the "navel of the universe," referring to its significance as a universal vision of justice, Levinas will again indicate the link between justice, passion, and the concreteness of *mitzvot*.

Perhaps justice is founded on the mastery of passion. The justice through which the world subsists is founded on the most equivocal order, but on the domination exerted at every moment over this order, or this disorder. This order, the equivocal *par excellence*, is precisely the order of the erotic, the realm of the sexual.

How does one close the gap between the public and the private sphere? How does one produce a just humanity, that is to say, how does one sanctify and redeem the world? And what is Israel's role in this most noble enterprise? Levinas writes:

How do such men become reality? By means of *mitzvot*. The originality of Judaism consists in confining itself to the manner of being where . . . in the least practical endeavor, there is a pause between us and nature through the fulfilment of a *mitzvah*, a commandment. The privilege of Israel resides not in its race but in the *mitzvot* which educate it. . . . Nothing is more foreign to me than the other; nothing is more intimate to me than myself. Israel would teach that the greatest intimacy of me to myself consists in being at every moment responsible for the other, the hostage of others.²⁴

Hence the event and sign of *bris mila* serves to direct the passions of men and women, via *mitzvah*, to remind us that the most private privacy, the most intimate intimacy, is also a place of holiness, indeed, the holy of holies.

Notes

- 1 This paper was first delivered at the Association for Jewish Studies meeting in Boston, December 16, 1996. Copyright © 1997 Richard A. Cohen.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, transl. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 93.
- 3 *In the Time*, p. 104.
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, transl. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 78.
- 5 Two other "signs" associated with Jewishness: *tefillin*, again worn only by males, and *Shabbat*. Two signs for men, one for all Jews.
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, transl. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 99.
- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 226.
- 8 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 229.
- 9 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 228.
- 10 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 229.
- 11 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 230.
- 12 *Totality and Infinity*, p. 230.
- 13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 114.

- 14 For an extended exposition and discussion of the role of gender—male and female—in Levinas's thought, see chapter nine, "The Metaphysics of Gender," in my *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 195–219.
- 15 For an extended exposition and discussion of the original theory of time which underlies Levinas's thought, see chapter four, "Rosenzweig contra Buber: Personal Pronouns," pp. 90–111, and chapter six, "On Temporality and Time," pp. 133–161, in *Elevations*.
- 16 Emmanuel Levinas, "Leçon talmudique: Sur la justice," in *L'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Cahiers de l'herne, 1991), p. 125.
- 17 Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, p. 63.
- 18 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 232.
- 19 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 116.
- 20 Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. 111.
- 21 Cf. Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity*, ed. Aimé Pallière and Émile Touati, transl. Maxwell Luria (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 162.
- 22 *In the Time*, p. 79: "The sight of the *tsitsit* should remind (again a reminder!) the Jew of his obligations. A sight that awakens obligation. A privileged sight, protecting the faithful from the temptations and seductions of sight itself, and from the supposed innocence of his uninformed heart."
- 23 Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. 78.
- 24 *Beyond the Verse*, pp. 83, 84, 85.

PHILOSOPHIES OF RELIGION

Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas

William Desmond

Source: R. Kearney (ed.), *Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. VIII: *Twentieth-century Continental Philosophy*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 131–74.

Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–) seem like a mere aggregate of thinkers. Jaspers, a German thinker who coined the phrase *Existenz Philosophie*, was influential in making known Kierkegaard's importance. Marcel was a French dramatist with a love of music who came to philosophy from a background in idealism, against which he struggled. Yet the influence, for instance, of Royce, the first person on whom he wrote, was strong. Bergson, now a too neglected thinker, was always in the background. Marcel's Catholicism was extremely significant, yet he bridled at the label 'Christian Existentialist'. He was a philosopher who happened to be a Catholic. Levinas was instrumental in introducing phenomenology to France. In 1930 he published a book on Husserl's theory of intuition that was to excite Sartre to say: That is the way I want to philosophize! Yet Levinas always thought in tension with this phenomenological heritage, and most especially its transformation in Heidegger's fundamental ontology.

These three thinkers have received mixed attention. Jaspers laboured in Heidegger's shadow, as he himself seemed to recognize. Heidegger and he were once friends and Heidegger alone he recognized as being on a par with him. Still Heidegger's enormous influence has tended to eclipse a proper appreciation of Jaspers' achievement. Jaspers was opposed to Nazism, as Heidegger was not. This did not prevent him from acknowledging Heidegger's stature. Indeed Jaspers was more concerned with Heidegger than Heidegger was with Jaspers. Also Jaspers respected the tradition of philosophy, as well as the achievements of science. He did not set himself in contestation with the millennia to hoist himself to unprecedented originality. This, coupled with his restorative efforts *vis-à-vis* perennial philosophy, meant that no cult

formed around his thought. This is not to deny that he was and is deeply admired.

Marcel is an insightful existential thinker, but existentialism has been identified widely with its atheistic brands, especially that of Sartre. Because of Marcel's unashamed refusal to silence his own search for God, there has been a failure to listen properly to him by professional philosophers who too easily become embarrassed with the religious. They fail to listen attentively enough to his sometimes elusive themes – the body, the family, the sense of mystery as eluding all objectifications, meditations on what I would call the intimacy of being.

Marcel is difficult to package, though there are recurrent themes which have been packaged as identifiably Marcellian: being and having, problem and mystery, intersubjectivity and embodiment. His style of philosophizing, out of respect for the subject matter itself, refuses to be packaged, even systematically stated in any simple survey. Though he sometimes has a diffuse style of writing, in the very peregrinations of his thinking he *hits* on some absolutely essential insights. Thus the intimacy of being is always other to technical thinking, eludes complete systematic ordering, is on the edge of completely transparent conceptualization. Philosophy tends to home in on themes that are manageable in a more neutral, public, generalized language. We need that language, but it must be counteracted and complemented with modes of thinking that learn from art, and indeed that allow themselves to be shaped by a certain music of being.

Levinas was not widely known in English-speaking philosophy until recently. His work presupposes familiarity with phenomenology, both Husserlian and Heideggerian, and also the currents of intellectual debates that have swept France from the 1930s onwards, over which the shadow of Hegel has hovered in various interpretations and appropriations. Levinas himself distinguishes his own more strictly philosophical writings from his religious studies, but there is little doubt that religion and philosophy cannot be finally insulated from each other. Many of the themes of his major work, *Totality and Infinity*, are incomprehensible without the sense of the presence/absence of God. Levinas's stature is now being more widely recognized outside France, partly owing to the impact of deconstruction, and its high priest Derrida, who learned a thing or two from Levinas. The service to Levinas is ambiguous. Levinas has always exhibited a spiritual seriousness that is ill repaid by the postmodern frivolity to which deconstruction is frequently prone.

Each thinker is deserving of an entire study. Each has been prolific, Levinas less so, but Marcel and Jaspers have been voluminous. To bring some manageable order to the matter, I will concentrate on three major themes, and as the matter dictates I will mention related ideas, without dwelling on them in the detail they might deserve in another study. These three themes will be: the nature of philosophy; the question of the other; the question of transcendence or God.

Gabriel Marcel

Marcel's understanding of philosophical thought is determined by a reaction to the idealism of the late nineteenth century. He did some early work on Royce and Schelling. Their themes were to influence him throughout his writing. Thus the theme of loyalty in Royce is transformed into an ontology of intersubjectivity with distinctive emphasis on the notion of what Marcel calls creative fidelity. I mention the struggle of Schelling to break free of the logicism of his own early thought and Hegel's idealism. The struggle led to Schelling's positive philosophy that is the progenitor of all existential thought, including that of Kierkegaard. Schelling tried to think evil as radically other to reason. Marcel has later occasion to mention Schelling and Kant on this score, but the point is more generally relevant to the conception of philosophy at issue. Evil as a philosophical perplexity takes idealistic reason to its limit where the philosopher has to think otherwise of what lies on the other side of reason, as idealistically conceived.

The desideratum of philosophy as system was bequeathed through Kant, Fichte, Hegel to the whole subsequent history of idealistic and post-idealistic philosophizing. Marcel did intend at an early point to couch his thoughts in a systematic form. He discovered he could not bring it off without forcing his thoughts into a form that went against their grain. Eventually he published his *Metaphysical Journal* (1927), breaking ground here not only in terms of content but in terms of a different sense of literary form.

Marcel's commitment to what is other to system is forged in deep tension with the sense that thought ought to have some systematic character, certainly an appropriate order in its development and presentation. His Gifford lectures, published as *The Mystery of Being* (1950), are presented as his most systematic work, but there he disclaims anything like a system. Primarily philosophy is a matter of venture and exploration. System, such as it is, comes *after*; it ought not to dictate to the matter what it should be. Thinking is open to the matter at issue, even when the matter offers insurmountable resistance to the encroachments of our categories. The drift of his thinking is not forced into a form that betrays, so to say, its improvisatory nature. This sense of philosophy shares a lot with Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, though Marcel does not list these as early influences. One thinks too of the plurality of literary forms used by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, though one could also mention the non-systematic forms developed by Shestov and the later Wittgenstein.

Marcel's philosophy has a phenomenological as well as an existential side. In no sense was he a disciple of Husserl. But his philosophizing is phenomenological in holding that thinking ought to start by an act of attention to what appears to us. As best as possible we allow the matter to make its appearance, according to its own form and requirements. The first act of philosophical intelligence demands a kind of mindful attention to phenomena,

appearing, happenings, in all their nuance and surprise. This requirement is continuous with his rejection of idealism. The stress in idealism on purely autonomous thought tempts the philosopher to impose his categories on being as appearing, hence to see there only what thought has itself put there. Kant himself talked about the mind as only seeing in nature what it has itself put there. Kant was no absolute idealist but the equivocities of some of his pronouncements, like the one just cited, led to the more uncompromising, hence more coherent, idealism of his successors.

But the full coherence of idealism is also its undoing in that what is other to thought always gets finally reduced to the construction of a category. Marcel rejects this, for at a critical point the emptiness of the categorial construction makes itself felt. Hence Marcel's desire for phenomenological fidelity entails the reassertion of a realism which asks the thinker to let things take their own shape without interference from the dictating intellect. Marcel does not deny a critical dimension to philosophy. On the contrary, the appearing of things is shot through with ambiguities that have to be interpreted and evaluated. Letting ambiguity come to appearance is part of the phenomenological requirement of philosophy. Mindless surrender to ambiguity is not. The ambiguities of being have to be sifted.

This is especially relevant to the existential side of his thinking. Marcel is an existentialist to the extent that he lays a primary focus on human being and the perplexities that burden it about being and most especially its own being. He used the term 'existential' before it became fashionable through Sartre. As finding itself in the ambiguous middle of things, the human being is in quest of the truth of things and most especially its own truth. It is tempted by possibilities that veil or distort or destroy its own truth and the truth of things. Hence the existential philosopher is again involved in a quest or journey. Not surprisingly, Marcel lays great emphasis on *homo viator*, man the wayfarer, (the title of one of his books).

We are on the way, to where we do not exactly know, from where we know not, in a middle often clouded with uncertainty and sorrow. Marcel does not have quite the intense concentrated passion of Pascal, but they share a similar sense of the enigma of existential contingency. Nor can we stand outside the middle and survey our way of passage as a whole. The deficiency of systematic idealism is the false imputation that we have such an Archimedean point whence we can construct the system of categories to make all being transparently intelligible. Such a system is false to our participation in being, and not least to the singularity of the journeying philosopher. We need a different kind of thinking, which acknowledges our intimacy with being, even in our sense of metaphysical homelessness. The great struggle of philosophy is to get some reflective distance on our being thus in the middle, a distance that does not distort our intimacy with being in the middle. Thinking must be shown in its genesis and process, with all its falterings and flights, its matured fruits and undelivered suggestions.

Here Marcel makes a distinction between what he calls primary and secondary reflection. Primary reflection shows a tendency to objectify being and the human being. It tries to survey the object from outside, or penetrate it as if it were an alien thing to be mastered or overcome. Such a thinking has one of its major sources in Cartesian dualism where knower and known, mind and nature, self and other are posited as antithetical opposites. It is a mode of thinking that attenuates the thinker's participation in being. This kind of thinking corresponds to treating being as a problem.

Secondary reflection is such that the matter being thought unavoidably encroaches on the one doing the thinking. The thinker cannot escape involvement with the matter that is being thought. A thinking that objectifies and fosters the self-forgetfulness of the thinker will not do. It is not that the thinker now collapses into a mushy subjectivism, softly surrendering to the inarticulate, having given up the stiff precisions of articulate objectivism. Secondary reflection, Marcel says, is a recuperative thinking. Once having lived or been caught up or carried along by a process of living, one struggles to get a thoughtful distance on one's course, all the more to interiorize mindfully its possible significance.

In human existence secondary reflection in some form goes on always, but not necessarily in the accentuated form the existential philosopher cultivates. As Kierkegaard says: life has to be lived forward, but thought backward. Secondary reflection is thus recollective. As such it is not a nostalgic thinking; for to gain a mindful sense of one's present and past may open a truer orientation to what is to come. Secondary reflection is bound up with the possibility of hope. Hope is a major theme for Marcel. Indeed one can say that Marcel takes very seriously Kant's question: For what may we hope?

The difference of primary and secondary reflection is relevant to Marcel's treatment of the notions of problem and mystery, and these in turn influence his critique of the spiritual devastations wrought by the modern hegemony of unrestrained technicism, indeed the idolatry of technique. Like many other thinkers, Marcel recognizes the modern dominance of scientific method and its way of conceiving the world. He does not deny the benefits that come from this way, but is disturbed at the accompanying neglect of issues that fall outside its purview. Scientific method treats of all questions as problematic matters: difficulties that can be solved by means of techniques of objective experimentation and calculation. The hegemony of this approach can lead to the atrophy of human perplexity before the metaphysical enigmas of existence.

Consider questions of despair and salvation. These become a matter of psychological adaptation as the singular self becomes a case of maladjustment. The promise of our despair is betrayed, not even guessed. With issues like suffering, the pervasiveness of evil and the inevitability of death we deal with mysteries or meta-problematic themes. These are perplexities that

involve us and shake us and make us sleepless. We are threatened and challenged and put on trial. They never yield a univocal answer; indeed they cannot properly be formulated as univocal problems. A constitutive openness and ambiguity remains. We have to return to such perplexities again and again. We never conclusively master them.

Marcel does not advocate the abandonment of reason, as if these mysteries were absurdities. They do demand a thoughtfulness not reducible to scientific knowledge, moving the philosopher closer to the poet and the religious. The hegemony of the problem makes us take for granted the existence of things and our own. By contrast, the philosopher for Marcel is stunned into thought by just that fact of existence, astonished at the marvel that things are. That the world is at all is the wonder. This mystery is all around and within us, though to it we are heedless. We look but overlook; we hear but have not listened or heard.

The neglect of mystery and the hegemony of problem leads to a world wherein technique reigns with only sporadically disputed sway. There is an anonymity to technique that is antithetical to the singularity of existing. Technique involves a set of directives that can be used by all; the directives of a technique do not originate with the user but, if we desire success in the outcome, to these directives we must submit. Thus technique can breed a conformism, a certain standardization of the human being, an averaging. Uniqueness and recalcitrant singularity are levelled down.

This is a theme sounded loudly by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. We have heard it so often that perhaps we are jaded. But weariness with a question does not mean it is solved. Technique shows the calculative mind in action. But there is no technique of human wholeness or integrity; there is no technique of ethical responsibility; there is no technique of honesty and truthfulness. Technicism is in flight from the unexpected and the uncontrollable. The idolatry of technique is really a metaphysical hostility to our vulnerability before the incalculable chance of being. The tyranny of technique drowns the deeper human in a conspiracy of efficiency and a frenzy of industry. It may erect a house but cannot make us a home.

Marcel's philosophizing takes shape at the opposite extreme to this technicism. It is appropriate to mention that this philosophizing owes much to his twin loves: music and drama. He repeatedly resorts to musical images, and was a composer and performer of no little talent. The image of improvisation is important. As applied to philosophy and life it means: the score is not settled before playing; the players are invited to create freely. This is not incidental to the pervasive post-Hegelian concern with the limits of systematic philosophy. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the major figures in the nineteenth century who believed that music was the metaphysical art. There are others in the twentieth century, Adorno most notably, who give some privilege to music. Philosophy, particularly in its logicist forms, can run roughshod over the subtleties, intimacies of being. Music may sing these, as

it were, in a manner that forces philosophy to raise the question of the unsayable – the unsayable that yet is sung and so somehow said.

If music as metaphysically significant raises questions about the limits of philosophy, Marcel has no desire to yield to a dark romanticism. Nor does he thematically focus on the metaphysics of music, but uses musical images and metaphors again and again to illustrate some of his more elusive ideas. One has to conclude that there is an implicit community of meaning between his thought and music. Again consider the improvisatory style of some of his philosophizing: a theme is stated, developed, dropped; then resumed, restated; there come to be echoes back and forth; nor does Marcel offer any simple resolution, though there are moments of revelation. Does his thought then sing? Does his philosophy approach the condition of music? The analytical philosopher will squirm. But there is a rigour and discipline in this thinking that the analytical philosopher hardly suspects; there is a rigour and discipline in music too. Even Rudolph Carnap, one of the avatars of analytical philosophy, sensed a connection between metaphysics and music, though not surprisingly his judgment was topsy-turvy: metaphysics is just poor music.

The influence of drama is related to Marcel's preoccupation with the question of *the other*. Marcel was himself a successful playwright, with a lifelong interest in the theatre. Drama presents the concrete dilemmas of humans in their otherness and estrangements and solidarities. It imaginatively enacts the resistance and reciprocity of the self and the other. It returns us to a point of emergent significance that is prior to abstract thought. Marcel said that he had interest not in the solitary 'I am' but in the concrete 'We are'. To exist is to be shaped in this solidarity of selves. Drama, of course, is enacted in and through language where again we face the other. Seemingly inconspicuous words may offer the revelation of the significant world of the other, its wounds, its conceit, its hospitality. Words are pregnant with more than can be rendered in the languages of function. Philosophy, like drama, should awaken vigilance for this 'more'.

One senses sometimes that his own plays were more important to Marcel than his philosophy. His preoccupations emerged in pristine form in his plays which were not meant as mere illustration of philosophical theories. What drama brings to birth, philosophy later may take hold of in reflection. It is as if the dramas were closer to the phenomenological matrix of being, wherein the basic perplexities appeared *in statu nascendi*, in a form more concrete than later conceptualizations could capture.

Some readers may find it tedious for Marcel to quote his own plays. I see it as a strategy of saying. In philosophy we always have a problem of writing about matters closest to the personal, to the intimacy of being. We refuse to be confessional. And yet we have to find strategies of confession, of saying the 'I' with a kind of elemental honesty. In quoting his plays, Marcel can confess without embarrassment. The citation offers not only a

theme closer to the phenomenological matrix but also one with a space of possible distance. We do not have to collapse into the theme; it can become the basis for a secondary reflection. There is then a rhetorical complicity between his dramatic and philosophical writing.

In that sense Marcel might be called a plurivocal philosopher. He does not dramatize his philosophizing in the same way as Nietzsche does, who is poet and philosopher in one; or as Plato does in that great achievement of philosophical writing, the Platonic dialogue. Instead he creates a dialogue between his dramas and his philosophizing, in the philosophizing itself. There are times when he should have let the barrier between them break down, as do Plato and Nietzsche. Perhaps he did not, less for the sake of philosophy as out of respect for his dramatic art which one senses he wanted to preserve from the devitalizing encroachments of abstract philosophical categories.

To break down the barrier need not encourage this devitalization but rather promote a more radical vitalization of philosophical thinking. Admittedly the bureaucratic separation of philosophy and poetry is hard to get beyond. We should get beyond it, on Marcel's own terms, since the functionalizing mind, the bureaucratic mind, is an essentially technical mind. If Marcel too strongly insists on separating the function of drama and philosophy, he will show himself captive to the same narrow mind he denounces otherwise so rightly. He does not, to his credit. Beyond the functionalization of poetry and philosophy and religion, the one thing necessary is honesty nourished by spiritual seriousness. It does not matter whether we label it artistic, philosophic or religious. The dialogue of drama and philosophy points to modes of philosophizing outside system, entirely incomprehensible for an analytical philosopher in thrall to the plain prose of univocal writing.

The theme of the other is connected with Marcel's reflection on the body. His emphasis is on the incarnate person. The flesh is where we are in a primary contact with all otherness, both natural and human. The affirmation of being that arises there articulates a sense of the togetherness of the existing self and the rest of being in its otherness. It is as if the incarnate self is initially an inarticulate 'We are'. Marcel obviously sets himself against any form of Cartesianism and dualism here. There is some affinity with empiricism, stemming from his desire for phenomenological fidelity. The difference is in his interpretation of experience. Empiricist experience is an abstraction from the fullness of original fleshed incarnation. It is as alienated from concrete existence as is Cartesian dualism, from the side of the body in this case, rather than the reflective reason.

The subject is an incarnate self defined intersubjectively. The *inter*, the between of intersubjectivity, does not deny the flesh. The between is stressed by the concretization of spirit in the flesh of the human being. Again the intimacy of our involvement with the other matches the intimacy of our being our own bodies. Marcel is given to criticize the view that we have

bodies; the connection of self with flesh is not thus external. Marcel wants to say: we are our body.

Here arises his concern with being and having. Like Marx and many other modern thinkers Marcel was concerned with the question of property, of possession, the nature of having. He denies that a person is what a person has. My property is something over which I have power; I can dispose of it as I please; we cannot so dispose of our own bodies, nor of our fellow human beings without a fundamental violation of our own nature and theirs. It is not that we ought not to take care of things. Marcel is quite aware that our care for things can draw them into the orbit of human attachment in a manner which transforms them, releases in them their promise. Our belongings too can have a more intimate relation to our selfhood. But this more authentic belonging is not simply a relation of dominating power. This applies even more radically to our belonging together in human community.

The theme of possession of the other has also been a major concern in contemporary European philosophy, especially in the light of different interpretations of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave. Power and domination have been held to define the essence of human relations. This is currently a much debated issue, but Marcel has things to say that have not been surpassed. I mention here Marcel's fascination with Sartre's essentially degraded view of the other where the master/slave dialectic is concretized as a dialectic of sadist and masochist: either dominate or be dominated is the either/or that runs through all of Sartre. While fascinated with Sartre's view that hell is the other, Marcel is unrelentingly hostile to it. The Sartrean look is the look of the Gorgon that would reduce the other to stone. This look wants to have the other, wants to objectify the other and disarm by pre-emptive violence the suspected threat to the self's freedom.

Sartre's sense of the human body is tied to his understanding of our openness to the other. Sartre's body is the place of negativity, the nothingness that shapes our freedom in its power of refusal, like that of the child that asserts its own difference by repeating its 'No'. If the body incarnates a 'We are' and, in a manner that affirms a solidarity with what is other to self, then we are outside this Sartrean sense of the body, this sense of the other, and this apotheosis of negation as freedom. Against the Sartrean degradation, Marcel recommends the possibility of *disponabilité*. This availability to the other is not threatened by the other, nor concerned to threaten. It signals a reversal of the normal for-self of, say, the Spinozistic *conatus essendi*. It is the promise of an agape, rather than the drive of eros to possess the other.

In opposition to having, our relativity to the other is marked by the gift. The bestowal of a gift is never neutral, never just a transfer of a possession from one to the other. The gift given is the bearer of generosity towards the other and for the other. If human being were exhausted by will to power or *conatus* as self-insistence, giving would be a mere ruse to use the other for the

self again. There would be no true giving as a movement of self towards the other but not for the sake of the self, but simply for the other as beloved. Without this giving over of the giver, a gift is not a genuine gift.

Similarly the receiving of the gift is not an indifferent addition to the receiver's inventory of possessions. The communication of self on one side, of course, can be met by refusal on the other. One might distrust the bestower's goodness and turn away, or take and suspect and wait for the appearance of the ulterior motive. The Sartrean self lives this suspicion of the goodness of the other. A thing given is received as a genuine gift in being hospitably welcomed. What touches one in the gift is not the thing or the possession. It is the generous freedom of the other that has made itself available without care for itself. The thanks that then may be voiced has nothing to do with abjectness before an other who has one in his or her debt. Thanks is simple, elemental appreciation of the transcendence of self-insistence by the goodness of the giver.

Marcel offers some important meditations on the family and on paternity in *Homo Viator*. He calls attention to a community of spirit beyond all objectification. There are ontological issues at stake in the shaping of a singular destiny by relation to the family. One might here compare Marcel's respect for paternity and the family to Sartre's contempt of the father in *The Words*, and his juvenile baiting of the bourgeois family. Of course, it is not only Sartre who displays this puerile disdain. Marcel distances himself from the pervasive attitude in post-romantic modernity that the father is always the tyrannical lord. Levinas's remarks on the family also escape the closed dialectic of master and slave.

Generosity is a condition of being beyond having which testifies to the human power of sacrifice. Sacrifice literally means to make sacred (*sacer facere*). Here Marcel's concern with generosity relative to the human other shades into his meditations on *the divine other*. For instance, Marcel draws attention to the difference of the martyr and the suicide. Suicides claim that their bodies are their own property and that they can do with them what they will. They claim the freedom to visit the ultimate violence on it. Martyrs look like suicides but are entirely different. They give up their bodies, their lives because neither belong to them. They belong to something higher than themselves and to this their death witnesses. Suicides attest to nothing but their own despair. Martyrs are centred beyond themselves; suicides find a centre in nothing, not even in themselves. The death of a true martyr is living testimony to a higher order of being and worth. Our existence is not our property but a gift of this order. The sacrifice makes sacred; even in this death the martyr gives himself or herself over to this order, gives thanks for its gift.

Marcel as philosopher was not primarily or directly interested in the traditional issues of natural theology. He was concerned with an existential phenomenology of significant occasions in human experience where the sense

of the divine breaks through or is offered to us. While his conversion to Catholicism was profoundly influential, he tried to stay on the philosophical side of specifically theological reflections. He was reticent about making full-blown theological statements. He expressed some satisfaction when his reflections spoke to individuals outside Catholicism. His philosophical meditations were suggestive of theological possibilities, without determinately articulating anything even approaching a systematic idea of God.

Marcel's greatest fear, I suspect, and precisely out of religious reverence, was the reduction of God to our concepts. Yet clearly his religious faith provided a matrix that nurtured the characteristic ideas of his philosophical reflection. Reflections on the mystery of suffering and evil, and on the love that seeks to outlive death, take his thought again and again to the borders of religious faith.

He set himself against the traditional proofs of God as objectifying what ought never to be objectified. The very idea of proving God is a misconception, a misconception that might border on a kind of rationalistic sacrilege, if the living God is reduced to a mere toy in a parlour game of conceptual virtuosity. God is never an object, always a Thou that resists reification. Yet Marcel was profoundly disturbed at the godlessness of western modernity. There is in his writings a growing sense of the spiritual waste produced by godless modernity when coupled with the unbridled hubris of a Promethean technicism. He has much in common with Heidegger's later meditations on the absence of the holy in modernity.

Marcel does not fit a common view of existentialism as probing a world from which God has been barred. The atheistic existentialist, reduced to caricature by Sartre, sternly girds his or her loins before this Godforsaken world, and dismisses as a sentimental coward anyone seeking hope and ultimate sense. The stratagem began by being disturbing but ended in a different conformism. Its revolt against the old became its new dogma. To Marcel's credit he was not consoled by this comfort of negation. He willingly made love, fidelity, hope, transcendence his themes — against the grain of the times.

His suspicion of traditional philosophical concepts of God make him the heir of Pascal and his opting for the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not that he accepted a fideistic rejection of reason, a fideism sometimes imputed to Pascal and Kierkegaard, both of whom are more sophisticated as thinkers than can be captured by a dualism of faith/reason. Faith and the spirit of truth are bound together, and reason too is bound by the spirit of truth.

Marcel's reflections on human fidelity take us to the border of religious faith. Thus his discussions of death and immortality have little to do with proving the immortality of the soul. They are meditations on a fidelity between the living and the dead others, a fidelity that transcends the divide between the living and the dead. Nor is the issue of death simply a question of my death; it is much more a matter of the death of the other

arousing in the still living the promise of a fidelity beyond death. There is no objective certainty with respect to this fidelity. Nor is there with respect to faith in God. It is always on trial in its sojourn in the world. Fidelity is tied to hope, with the promise of being that cannot now be secured with complete certainty. Fidelity itself may flower into witnessing and testimony. Such existential realities – suffering, fidelity, hope, generosity, love, testimony – are the mysteries in which our sense of the sacred is shaped and on which the philosopher must reflect. The kinship with Kierkegaard is noticeable: the impossibility of objective certainty with respect to faith and fidelity. We are dealing with a trans-objective order, which for Marcel is not merely subjective.

Like Nietzsche he acknowledged the godless condition of modern man. But unlike Nietzsche, he did not see this condition as a gain for human freedom but as the sign of a catastrophic loss or refusal. Marcel admired Nietzsche's honest diagnosis about our godlessness but not his proposed solution in the Overman. Nietzsche offered a version of heroic sacrifice when he says: I love the man who creates beyond himself and thus perishes. But in the end there is no genuine beyond for Nietzsche, since all transcendence dissolves into human self-transcendence. Without transcendence beyond human self-transcendence, our sacrifice witnesses to nothing, except perhaps ourselves. The wasteland still grows.

Promethean humans may steal divine fire, but in absolutizing their own power they betray their community with the power of transcendence beyond them. The aspiration to transcendence is deformed. Its root is the divine ground; out of this ground, it grows; outside of it, the aspiration to transcendence withers. The howl of Nietzsche's Madman was heard by Marcel, but he also heard a different music. With neither Marcel nor Nietzsche had the horror of this howl been cheapened into the postmodern kitsch it has now become, with the chirpy nihilists who blithely claim to be at home in the wasteland.

Karl Jaspers

Karl Jaspers is often identified with German existentialism in that he speaks of one of the tasks of philosophy as the clarification of *Existenz*. He distinguished empirical being (*Dasein*) from *Existenz* which is peculiar to the human being. Some commentators have seen a desire to mark his own thought off from Heidegger's *Dasein*, used in the special Heideggerian sense to refer to human existence. The relationship between Jaspers and Heidegger would command a study in itself, yet both helped to mediate Kierkegaard's philosophy of existence in the twentieth century. Philosophy of existence emphasizes the singularity of the human being, and often in a manner that stresses the recalcitrance of that singularity to inclusion in any system of concepts. Jaspers shares this view but qualifies it with a different respect for

the systematic impulse, and indeed a less closed sense of system than had been dominant since German idealism. The tension of *Existenz* and system, the necessity and the limits of system, the relation of *Existenz* and transcendence at the limit of all systems, constitute some of his major concerns.

Jaspers suffered from ill health since his youth, which he turned to good use by husbanding his strengths for thinking. His sense of philosophy was never that of an academic discipline but that of a noble calling. He was under threat during the Nazi regime, but he re-emerged into public prominence after the war with widespread respect for his ethical integrity. He willingly undertook the public task of raising the question of German guilt, and was always concerned with the spiritual condition of the time, the state of the university, the issues of politics, national and international, especially in a nuclear age, the questions of world religions in an age of mass communication.

Jaspers did not publicly commit himself to philosophy until around the age of 40. His background prior to that was in medicine and psychology. His first published work was *General Psychopathology* (1913), followed by *Psychology of Weltanschauungen* (1919). He was later to say that these were really philosophy all along, though not as overtly so as his subsequent work. His reverence for philosophy made him reluctant to claim its mantle, especially when professional philosophers frequently fell short of the nobility of its calling. His first major work, *Philosophie*, was published in 1931 and established him as a major voice. The point has been made that the publication of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in 1927 stole his existential thunder and dimmed somewhat the lustre of his achievement.

Existenz is Jaspers's counterpart to Heidegger's *Dasein*. For both, only the human being exists in this unique sense: only the human being is questionable to itself. *Existenz* is marked by this relatedness to self that is unique to human being; we are a being for self which is the possibility of free self-determination. Though Kierkegaard's influence marks both Heidegger and Jaspers, in Jaspers we find a strong respect for science grounded in his early training. This respect never wavered. Jaspers departs from the standard picture of existentialism as virulently anti-scientific. He never tires of insisting that science is one of the great works of the human mind. Moreover, any serious contemporary philosophizing worth the name must take due cognizance of its pervasive role in the modern world.

That said, the philosopher's task is not simply to be a methodologist of science. In reflecting on the meaning of science one inevitably inquires as to the precise status of scientific truth and science's role within the full economy of human life. One might even call Jaspers a philosopher of science in this generous sense that up to quite recently was almost unknown in Anglo-American analyses of science: science understood as a human achievement, and hence placed within a larger historical and cultural, indeed spiritual, milieu. To reflect on science is then not to abstract its methodological

essence in a pseudo-ahistorical analysis; it is to meditate on the ideal of truth, and in Jaspers's case to open up a more fundamental sense of truth, which is constitutive of the milieu of scientific truth.

Jaspers's ideal of philosophy here is reminiscent of a certain reading and reconstruction of Kant's project. Many commentators have remarked on his debt to Kant, and Jaspers always acknowledged the depth of this debt. In Anglo-American philosophy Kant has been primarily read through the *Critique of Pure Reason*, interpreted as an anti-metaphysical tract, interspersed with some epistemological insights. Outside of Anglo-American analysis, Kant's more comprehensive ambitions are more willingly and widely recognized. Kant spoke of these ambitions in terms of the architectonic impulse. This means that reflection on science is certainly with a view to plotting the limits of valid cognition within a precisely delimited sphere. But – and this is where the more comprehensive sense of philosophy of science is relevant – to plot that limit is not necessarily to impute a merely negative judgment about other modes of meaning that may be other to science. One thinks the limits of science to know its strength but also its weakness in addressing no less pressing perplexities that transcend science. To assert that there are such perplexities that transcend science is not at all to depreciate science. It is to say that science is not the totality. The philosopher thinks what is other to science in thinking the greatness of science.

A careful reading of the Kantian enterprise will show that the heart of Kant's philosophy is not in the *First Critique* but in the *Second Critique*, and perhaps to an ambiguous extent (which has proved powerfully suggestive to Kant's German successors) in the *Third Critique*. German thinkers have this notable ability to hear voices in Kant's writing that to the outsider seem mere silences. In the scholastic twists and turns of the Kantian architectonic they sense that Kant was a tortured thinker. A tortured perplexity of thought is incessantly at work behind or beneath the scholastic encasing of concepts wherein Kant sheaths his explorations. Jaspers singles out many great thinkers for mention – Plato, Plotinus, Cusa, Spinoza, Hegel – but it is clear that his heart hears something in Kant that he hears nowhere else. Kant is often taken as a destroyer of Transcendence. Jaspers's reverence for Kant, I suspect, is as a thinker who tries to plot a winding way from finitude to Transcendence.

This sense of philosophy with a kind of Kantian architectonic is in tension with the singularity of human being as *Existenz*. Granting too the great power of science, there are questions that still exceed its proper competence. I underline the fact that the emphasis must first fall on *questioning*. We are here not talking about academic textbook puzzles. We are talking about the thinking human being as struck into questioning at the edge of all scientific rationalizing. There can be nothing anonymous or neutral about being struck into such questioning, and this is why the very unique selfhood of the philosopher is at stake in a way that is never quite the case in science.

The stakes of perplexity are different in philosophy, for the mode of questioning that erupts is not one that can be completely objectified.

In scientific questioning the point is to detach oneself from oneself in the idiosyncrasy of selfhood, and to pose as univocal and determinate a question as possible. The singular I of *Existenz* becomes the anonymous one of univocal mind, consciousness in general. One represents univocal mind, anonymously the same for every rational consciousness, in search of a univocal answer to a univocal curiosity. This is related to Marcel's notion of the problem. But in philosophy a transformation of selfhood is called for which is energized in a new mode of perplexity which cannot be terminated by information about this object or that object. This perplexity is not a univocal curiosity about this thing or that thing. It is a kind of indeterminate wondering that may extend to the whole of what is, and indeed to the possibility of nothing. The 'objects' of philosophical perplexity are not univocal, determinate objectifiable themes. Nor can the 'results' of philosophical thinking be treated thus, be packaged thus. To do this would be to distort the true energy of living philosophical thinking. This indeterminate perplexity is the very self-transcending energy of human thinking. It was the ceaselessness of this that tortured Kant, even when he thought he had finally laid it to rest in the system and its categories.

I am putting the matter in terms Jaspers does not use but that do not betray his intent. Thus this perplexity is called forth when philosophy deals with what Jaspers calls 'boundary situations' (*Grenzsituationen*). Questions at the boundary are not just questions about the limits of science, though they are that too. They are questions on the limit, on the edge, *simpliciter*. The most obvious boundary situation is death. There is no answer to the meaning of death, because there is no determinate univocal concept that would put this event within an objective rational whole. Rather this event puts all objective rational wholes into question, and yet the genuine philosopher has to continue to think despite the severe strain put on the ideal of rational completeness. These are the boundary situations Jaspers considers in *Philosophie*: that I must die, that I cannot live without conflict and suffering, that I cannot escape guilt.

Boundary situations are not unrelated to Marcel's notion of the meta-problematic or mystery. They burst out of the system of scientific rationality. Yet philosophy does not end at this bursting. A more authentic philosophizing can then begin. Put in terms of Kant: Kant was obsessed with the desire to make metaphysics into a secure science, and to put behind him all the 'random gropings' of the past. Did Kant secure metaphysics as a science? The answer must be no. It will always be no. Metaphysics is not exhausted by the rationalistic scholasticism of the Wolffian school. Jaspers is critical of metaphysics in a vein reminiscent of Kant's attack on rationalistic science of being. But metaphysical thinking feeds on the indeterminate perplexity that takes us to the boundary and that is more radically energized in

encounter with the boundary. There is a sense in which metaphysics really only begins at the limits of science. Despite his Kantian critique of 'metaphysics', I think Jaspers also hears this in Kant: the old rationalistic metaphysics may perhaps be put in its place; but at the limit, the old and ever fresh wonder is recalled into new life. A different kind of thinking has to take place at the boundary. This thinking Jaspers performs under the rubric of what he calls 'periechontology' as distinct from the old 'ontology'.

Consider here Jaspers's claim that truth cannot be reduced to correctness. Scientific truth does operate with some notion of correctness, Jaspers implies. Putting aside the complex disagreements in current philosophy of science, the ideal of correctness is based upon the presupposition that the ideal of determinate intelligibility is fundamental. A scientific proposition or theory or hypothesis is correct if it somehow 'corresponds' to the determinate state of affairs that it purports to report. The scientific proposition or theory or hypothesis must be stated with as much determinate precision as possible. The limit of this precision would be a mathematical univocity, a completely determinate formulation of a matter without any shade of equivocity or ambiguity or indefiniteness. Moreover, the reality thus propositionally determined is itself taken to be a more or less determinate manifestation of being. To be scientifically objective is thus to epitomize an objective mode of thinking relative to a reality that is objectified in just that sense of being appropriated as completely determinate. Scientific correctness objectively dispels the ambiguities of being. There is no objective *mathesis* of ambiguity, only a *mathesis* that dissolves ambiguity.

Within its sphere this is to the point, as Jaspers acknowledges. But philosophical thinking is already outside this sphere as reflecting upon this ideal of truth as correctness and the will to objective knowing inherent in it. Philosophy is thus already a non-objectifying thought. Jaspers pursues the question relative to truth as correctness by suggesting that determinate objects could not appear as determinable and hence as scientifically intelligible did they not appear out of or against a background that is not itself an object. This is the horizon of intelligibility that makes possible the appearance of determinate objects as determinate. The background horizon relative to which scientific truth determinately appears is not itself a determinate truth. There is no truth as correctness possible about this horizon. The horizon is truth in a sense that is not determinable or objectifiable.

Again one is hard put to forget Heidegger's analysis of the primordially of *alētheia* relative to truth as *orthotes* or *adaequatio*. We might say that this indeterminable truth is the non-objective other to the indeterminate perplexity that drives the self-transcending thinking of philosophy. One wonders if in his own way Kant was aware of this finally indeterminable sense of truth. One of his most suggestive phrases in the *Third Critique* was 'purposiveness without purpose', (*Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck*). Kant does not extend the meaning of this phrase beyond the aesthetic, yet it has

implications for the very self-transcending orientation of the human being towards truth as beyond every determinate truth. This is truth as the ultimate horizon of the truths of science and the determinate intelligibilities it discloses. There is, of course, a deep equivocality in Kant in tending to restrict truth to what is scientifically validated, and Jaspers shares in this equivocation, even while in practice extending the notion of truth well beyond scientific correctness. Jaspers's name for this horizon of truth is 'the Encompassing' (*Das Umgreifende*), one of the major ideas in his philosophy as a whole.

Das Umgreifende – the word carries the suggestion of being englobed by something that cannot be reduced to any definite object within the globe, the circle. Is this a variation of Parmenides' well-rounded truth? Yes. But any implication of a closed totality is something against which Jaspers will fight. The very language seems almost unavoidably to connote the closed circle. But if so, this is not something Jaspers intends. To close the circle would be to determine the indeterminable and so to objectify its non-objectifiable transcendence. Jaspers also claims that there is a plurality of modes of the Encompassing, and hence a Parmenidean monism will never do. This plurality of modes includes: Being in itself that surrounds us – this is further specified in terms of world and Transcendence; the Being that we are, further specified as empirical existence (*Dasein*), consciousness as such and spirit (*Geist*); finally the Encompassing as *Existenz* and reason (*Vernunft*).

Jaspers's philosophy is here a post-Kantian Kantianism of *finitude* in which the singularity of *Existenz* is thrust into the ambiguities of the Kantian architectonic. Jaspers's Kantianism appears again in that the ultimate indeterminability of the Encompassing makes it impossible to capture as a totality. Hegelian idealism makes what for Jaspers is the false claim to totality. To claim totality would be to imply a standpoint external to the Encompassing and this is impossible. Every determinate standpoint is relative to a determinate, objectified other, and hence is itself only possible on the basis of its englobement by the Encompassing.

We humans are not the encompassing of Encompassing. Still there is a sense in which for Jaspers we humans *are* the Encompassing; somehow our self-transcending thinking participates in the Encompassing; we are not determinate things but as *Existenz* participants in the truth in this more ultimate sense. We ourselves are a certain horizon of truth in a sense that cannot be reduced to objective correctness. The 'Kantianism' in this again brings us back to a certain finitude of thought, even in the indeterminate self-transcending of thought. The rejection of totality makes Jaspers join hands with Marcel in rejection of the speculative whole of Hegelian idealism. Marcel is very explicit in saying that the concept of totality is completely inappropriate to the idea of the spirit.

Jaspers, in my view, learned more from Hegel than he always explicitly acknowledged. His willingness to acknowledge the debt was spoken more

clearly in his later life, but at the time of his earlier writing Hegel was not seen as an interlocutor that one could be respectably associated with, except to try to thrash. Nevertheless, Jaspers is very much a post-Hegelian philosopher in his refusal of totality, something he shares also with Heidegger. We will see in Levinas a divergence of totality and infinity, where the infinite ruptures every totality, beyond recuperation in any higher totality.

Our failure to determine the indeterminability of the Encompassing does not mean a surrender to the merely indefinite. The other thinking at the boundary of objective thought must be complemented by the project of *Existenz* clarification. Jaspers has some very important reflections on what he calls 'foundering' (*Scheitern*) and 'shipwreck' (*Schiffbruch*). Philosophy too founders, but in its foundering the possibility of breaking through to something other cannot be closed off. I cannot dwell on foundering here, but we can appropriately situate Jaspers relative to two exceptional predecessors he singles out for special mention: Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. These two could be said to live a sense of philosophical foundering that is deeply significant for all subsequent philosophizing.

Jaspers's writing shows a clear awareness that these two figures signal the end of a epoch, the end of modernity. Without exaggeration one can say that, to the extent that he appropriated their significance, Jaspers himself was a postmodern philosopher. I use the phrase with hesitation, since now postmodernism wastes itself with an academic anti-academic frivolity, the hermeneutics of suspicion gone chic, a scholastic scepticism without spiritual substance. A postmodern philosopher in any genuine sense is one who recognizes the spiritual sickness of modernity. Of course, a sick being is not a dead being, and a sick being continues to live, hence it must be in some other respects healthy. Modernity is sick in this ambiguous sense. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche not only diagnosed this sickness, they lived this sickness within themselves. Both were experimental thinkers, both experienced the illness they tried to cure in themselves, the illness of nihilism.

Kierkegaard's Christian cure, Nietzsche's Dionysian *pharmakon*, diverge. Jaspers thinks that philosophy can never be the same after them. They represent the radical rupture with idealistic totality. They stand before our future as exceptional thinkers who have lived through the spiritual sickness of modernity. Both founder for Jaspers. But this living through and foundering is informed by its own spiritual greatness. This greatness makes one reluctant to ally them completely with 'postmodernism', where the desire for spiritual seriousness or greatness seems feeble, if not terminal. Nietzsche and Kierkegaard would shudder at what passes for their current postmodern appropriations. Nietzsche would see the last men mouthing his songs, and sounding cacophonous. Kierkegaard would be dismayed at the aestheticization of his work, as if he did not call us to God – God, God and nothing but God. Let readers ask themselves if my reiteration of the word 'God' has not sent a shudder of uneasy embarrassment up their spines. Understand

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard well. They are embarrassing thinkers; they shame us.

They call into question the traditional pretensions of reason. Jaspers is quite clear about this. Do they bring philosophy to an end? Perhaps philosophy of totality, but philosophy: no. Jaspers is himself a thinker of the end of philosophy, but he has a more nuanced historical sense than the fashionable proclaimers of the end of philosophy. There is an historical fairness. He does not totalize the tradition of philosophy in order to denounce it for totalizing thought – a blatant equivocation not avoided by anti-totalizing totalizers like Adorno, Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche himself. Though Jaspers is no Hegelian, there is much about him not entirely antipathetic to Hegel. He acknowledges that for a long time he got great sustenance for his own lectures from Hegel. Granting his greatness, eventually the totalizing Hegel became 'grotesque' for him. I mention his relation to Hegel again in that both have a much more generous attitude to the tradition of philosophy than almost all other post-Hegelian philosophers.

Hegel, Jaspers and Heidegger are perhaps the three greatest thinkers of the last 150 years who have tried to embrace, albeit very diversely, the heritage of millennia in their thinking. Jaspers's generosity to the tradition makes him finally distance himself from the exceptionality of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Their provocation of reason has to be balanced by the greatness of reason, as seen from a proper appropriation of the great thinkers of the past. Against the modern will to unprecedented originality – infecting Nietzsche and Heidegger – Jaspers wants to reaffirm the idea of *philosophia perennis*.

A major undertaking of Jaspers was to write a universal history of philosophy. This was never completed. Jaspers was interested not in a history of ideas but in a dialogue with the great thinkers by a genuine philosopher. The truth persists across time, though mediated through time. Nor is this truth identifiable with Heidegger's historicity of being, since Jaspers is not unwilling to invoke eternity, granting, of course, all the cautions and qualifications necessary in any such invocation. The tradition of philosophy is the privileged conversation of great thinkers. He includes himself in that conversation. Across the centuries a great thinker still calls to other thinkers. We later thinkers have to resurrect the greatness of the past thinker, not merely debunk them in the interests of spuriously elevating ourselves into a position of false originality. It is the spiritual truth of philosophical honesty that the great thinkers share. Each concretizes the self-surpassing transcendence of thinking, a personification of the extremity of honest perplexity before ultimacy.

Jaspers has not been as fashionable as Nietzsche and Heidegger precisely because of the generosity of his respect for tradition. In modernity we have been so infatuated with futurity that we have shortchanged the spiritual greatness of the past. In the future it will be great, it will be new, it will be

unprecedented. A rhetoric of originality masks a lot of intellectual conceit. Nietzsche and Heidegger were not immune from thus puffing themselves up. As if a philosopher must strut and preen and crow: How different I am, how new! Cockcrow: and no, not dawn, as Nietzsche said; but flourish, flourish of the postmodern cock.

Jaspers addresses the theme of *the other*, especially in that philosophy for him is inseparable from communication. The dialogue with the tradition is one instance of communication. Communicative reason opens beyond monadic thinking at both ends: towards the past, towards the future. Nor did Jaspers deny the responsibility of the communicative reason of philosophy to shape the spiritual present. Again the other has to be accorded a different place in thought from that allowed for in idealistic totality. Reason in *Existenz* is always marked by a boundless will to communication. One sees some harbingers of Habermas. The communicative relation to the other is constitutive of the activity of reason. Indeed *Existenz* is not itself at all apart from the relation of the self to the other. The demand of communication with the other must be met for *Existenz* to be itself. Likewise we must be awakened to ourselves as *Existenz* if we are to do justice to the demand of communication.

Jaspers confessed to loneliness and incapacity to communicate in his youth. This was exacerbated by the isolating effects of his illness. Just as *Existenz* cannot be objectified, so our relatedness to the other can never be reduced to an objective relation such as might hold between things. Jaspers' primary emphasis is on the mutual reciprocity of communication between humans. He is a severe critic of the substitution in modernity of mass society for genuine community. The flattening of human beings into averageness, and hence the impoverishment of singularity, diminish, if not deform, what is essential to real community. In the singularity of *Existenz* there is always an opening to what is other than closed subjectivity.

As with Kierkegaard and Marcel, Jaspers offers a critique of the functionalization of man and the massification of societies. The sacrifice of singularity as *Existenz* is the defect of totalitarianism. But this defect also marks the competitive individualism of capitalism, for here singularity is merely atomized, and between atoms there is no deep bond of community. He does not display Nietzsche's elitist disdain for the many. He was deeply and ineradicably influenced by Weber. In many respects he also shares the sense of community at work in Kierkegaard's neglected social critique: each of us is an absolute singularity; this singularity is preserved in community, but genuine community is ultimately a community of spirit under God. The will of *Existenz* to communicate with the other stands under Transcendence as the absolute other.

Nor does Jaspers deny conflict in a mushy communitarianism. As already indicated, guilt and conflict are discussed as boundary situations in *Philosophie*. His suffering through Nazism was itself exposure to the violence of

evil. He does underscore the possibility of a loving struggle. Love is not devoid of conflict, but the conflict is a creative war, *polemos*, as it were. Communication can be a contestation which is a mutual challenge to more authentic *Existenz*. His love for his wife, Gertrude, seem to have epitomized for him this creative contestation. This is close to Marcel's creative fidelity, and certainly beyond sadism and masochism, the degraded form of erotic struggle given so much attention by Sartre.

Communication is also central in Jaspers's ideas of reason and truth. Reason is an opening to the universal, but the true universal is not an anonymous generality in which singularity is submerged. So also for Jaspers truth is incomplete if it does not embody itself in a will to total communication. Truth is not closed on itself, timeless and unaffected by historicity. Jaspers even implies that truth actualizes itself in the movement of communication itself. Truth comes to completion in the process of communication.

One senses the shadow of Kant again. One is reminded of the Kantian *progressus*, the infinite task of the regulative ideal. When Jaspers indicates a call on self-transformation in communication, to my mind he is talking about *truthfulness*, both singular and communal. Obviously this is constituted in the coming to truthfulness by the self and the community. This is a *becoming truthful* which would not be possible in the solitude of the self-communing thought, self-thinking thought. What about a sense of truth that is not constituted by what comes to be in a process of communication, but that makes possible that process of coming to be of social truthfulness? This sense of truth makes possible the constitution of truthfulness but is not itself constituted by truthfulness. This is truth that a process of communication unfolds or reveals, rather than creates or constitutes.

Residues of the constitutive language of Kantian idealism are here evident in Jaspers. The otherness of truth as for itself is compromised by this constitutive language. Jaspers does not want to deny this otherness but his submission to Kantian ways of thinking conditions a certain emphasis in his efforts to speak of Transcendence. This is applicable with respect to metaphysical transcendence, but also with respect to the possibility of divine revelation. The movement of our transcending, even in the communication of truthfulness, mingles with Transcendence as communicating with us out of its own integral otherness, such that we do not really know if there is this other otherness. What we do, our becoming truthful, seems hard to distinguish from what is done to us, our patience to truth. Does what is done to us collapse into what we do? How then are we to avoid a wrong appropriation of the other?

There is a principle of tolerance in Jaspers's sense of communicative reason. He knows that *vis-à-vis Existenz* we cannot just say there is one univocal truth. The truth is refracted singularly in the specific truthfulness of every singular *Existenz*. Reason must be honestly vigilant to the particularities of just that singular refraction. Communication is this vigilance, and

this vigilance is respect for the other as other. I use the term 'refraction', which is not the language of constitutive idealism. And even though there is a quasi-constitutive language in Jaspers, his language of foundering must be seen to plot the limit of this, and indirectly to open a moment of radical receptivity in which we do not communicate but in which the other is communicating with us. Jaspers does not explicitly address the question of symmetrical and asymmetrical relativity in a manner that Levinas does.

Throughout I have referred to Transcendence. Here we approach the question of God. Transcendence for Jaspers is the ground of human *Existenz* and freedom. Jaspers treats of transcendence in volume III of *Philosophie* under the heading *Metaphysics*. The heading is not insignificant in the light of his critique of ontology from the standpoint of periechontology. The sense of metaphysical transcendence returns, proves unavoidable, even when all the Kantian strictures about metaphysics have been taken to heart. Transcendence is the absolute other. Again the Kantian modulation for Jaspers is that Transcendence is not to be known cognitively but to be reached existentially. There is no positive knowledge of Transcendence. Moreover, Transcendence grants itself gratuitously. Of course, if this is true the autonomy of reason is breached, and every trace of idealism, even Kantian idealism, will have to be reinspected.

Jaspers speaks of Transcendence as the absolute Encompassing, the Encompassing of all the encompassings. Transcendence is not the world, nor is it empty possibility, though Jaspers says that it shows itself only to *Existenz*. Transcendence is the absolute other in which *Existenz* is grounded. Wherever *Existenz* is authentically existing, it is not completely through itself. The human existent does not create itself. Relative to Transcendence I know that I have been given to myself. The more decisively *Existenz* is aware of its freedom the more it is aware of its relation to Transcendence.

I am tempted to think of both Augustine and Kierkegaard. Augustine speaks of being concerned with the soul and God and nothing more. This Augustinian theme is sounded in the correlation of *Existenz* and Transcendence. Moreover, Augustine speaks of God as *intimior intimo meo*: God is more intimate to me than I am to myself. The intimacy of this relation is beyond the world of objectivity; it happens in the deepest interiority of non-objectifiable *Existenz*, selfhood. Truth is subjectivity in Kierkegaard's sense: the truth of Transcendence will never be reduced to a set of general, public concepts. Perhaps this is why Jaspers insists, in Kantian manner, on our relation to Transcendence as non-cognitive. Why not speak of knowing in a different, non-objectifiable sense, a wisdom of idiocy, idiot wisdom of the intimacy of being? Why the obsessive insistence that validated cognition be confined to objective science?

Surely we can expand the notion of cognition without having to give ourselves over to full-blown Hegelian reason? For that matter, without this expansion does not Jaspers's way of talking fall foul of Hegel's critique

of Kant's unknowable: If it is unknowable, you can say nothing; you cannot even know that it is unknowable; but you are saying something, then it must not be unknowable. I am enjoining the Hegelian question, not endorsing Hegel's answer to Kant in terms of a dialectical knowing of Transcendence. Hegel's answer sins in the opposite direction of cognitively subordinating Transcendence to immanence. We need a knowing other than Hegelian knowing and a non-knowing other than Kantian agnosticism.

Transcendence is, but is never adequately manifest in appearance. It eludes all thinking if we mean to think it as a determinate object. It seems easier to name it negatively than to say what it is positively. There is a sense in which we can find no final firm place in trying to say it, whether positively or negatively. Jaspers allows that there are many names for it. We can call it Being, Actuality, Divinity, God. Relative to thinking, he says we can call it Being; relative to life, it can be called Authentic Actuality; as demanding and governing, it can be called Divinity; relative to our encounter with it in our singular personhood, it can be called God.

Again we find a denial of cognitive content in favour of the naming of an existential experience. Self-transformation can occur in encounter with Transcendence; it can become a source out of which I live and towards which I die. *Amor Dei* can lead to a transformation of how we love and hate the world. Jaspers mentions the magnificent love of the world in Chinese life and the hatred of life in gnostic thought. This latter is finally a nihilism and despair: the godless creation of the world is brought forth by Lucifer. This diabolical creation is counter to God. When the world is God's creation the world is loved and God is loved in God's creation; the promise of human existence is affirmed.

We are always within the world and hence our relation to Transcendence is marked by finitude and foundering. We need the symbol and the cipher to articulate what in the end is beyond all articulation. In his later life Jaspers undertook a major dialogue with religious faith. He himself claimed the standpoint of what he called philosophical faith. Philosophy is often in tension with religion but their quests of ultimacy are akin. Like Hegel, Jaspers insists on the autonomy of philosophy, sometimes to the point of showing traces of a residual Enlightenment hostility to the claims of revealed religion. The same question can be put to both Hegel and Jaspers: To what extent are philosophical ideas rational transformations of religious themes, and hence not autonomous but heteronomous? Is philosophical faith religious faith rationalized?

For Hegel, of course, there is no philosophical faith; philosophy is knowing. Jaspers again stands closer to Kant. His philosophical faith attempts, among other things, to render articulate the 'faith' in favour of which Kant is willing to deny knowledge. This philosophical faith cannot be assimilated to poetry or science or religion. If philosophy is other to religion, it is with respect to critical self-consciousness, not with respect to any Hegelian

speculative knowing wherein religion is dialectically *aufgehoben*. This critical self-awareness of limits nurtures a vigilance to the idolatry, whether fideistic or rationalistic, which mistakes the cipher of Transcendence for Transcendence itself. Religion and philosophy are different, not as opposites but as polar approaches to Transcendence. In this polarity they comprise a community of ultimates that are perennially a contestation and a challenge to each other.

Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania into an orthodox Jewish family but has spent most of his life in France. His experience of the Second World War was to shape his thought deeply. He has written Talmudic studies, though he claims that his philosophy belongs in another category. Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's fundamental ontology influenced his first philosophical studies, influenced in the double sense of supporting his thinking and yet provoking him into struggle against that very support. His mature thought is expressed in *Totality and Infinity* (1961). Subsequently he has published collections of essays leading to *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1973). He has also continued to write Talmudic studies of a more strictly religious character. Starting from phenomenology he has moved towards a recovery of metaphysical transcendence and an affirmation of what he calls 'ethics' as first philosophy.

Levinas became better known in English-speaking philosophy in the 1980s, partly mediated through the impact of deconstruction. English-speaking readers will find Levinas difficult without some sense of the context out of which he writes. Many consider *Totality and Infinity* to be his masterwork. It is a difficult book, for many philosophers as well as non-philosophers. Levinas's thinking is haunted by a whole host of philosophical ghosts. To get some sense of the peculiarities of his philosophizing, relative to his influences and claims, I name some of the ghosts.

There is the Cartesian heritage that seeks cognitive certainty in the foundation of the *cogito*, the 'I think'. Levinas evinces high respect for Descartes, surprising respect in that Descartes is often criticized as the originator of an understanding of mind that locks thought within itself, within its own immanence. Levinas wants to break out of that closed circle of immanence, without denying a certain inner integrity to the subject.

There is the phenomenological tradition, which can be interpreted as an ambiguous continuation of the Cartesian heritage. Levinas's first work was on the theory of intuition in Husserl, and his practice of phenomenology is not without debt to Husserl. He came to question the phenomenological doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness. He points to modes of consciousness where intentionality as a directedness on an object is not the final story. His discussion of enjoyment, for instance, reveals an engagement of

consciousness, which cannot be reduced to the intention of an object. The structure of intentionality seems to point to a certain mastery of the object; but if there are modes of the subject beyond intentionality, then objectifying, hence dominating, consciousness does not have the last word.

The presence of Heidegger shadowed Levinas. Heidegger's stature is not denied. Yet the accusation against him is that his Being is an anonymous power that ultimately leads to an account of history as impersonal destiny. The person in its singularity is sacrificed to an ontology of anonymous powers. Heidegger's thought epitomizes ontology as a philosophy of power. Levinas opposes this with a metaphysics of the good wherein a nameless universal Being does not have final sway. Heidegger produces an ontology of the neuter; there is no basis for an ethics.

Levinas speaks against the neutering of being which he tends to identify with the horror and anonymity of what he calls the element. A different view of the elemental is possible, but for Levinas it is the faceless indefinite of the *prima materia* (sometimes wrongly identified with *to apeiron*). His account of the impersonality of the 'There is', as he calls it, reminds one of Sartre's account of being-in-itself, for instance in his phenomenology of the *viscous*: always threatening the integrity of the personal, the self as an integrity of innerness for itself. Levinas rejected the view of human being as derelict, as well as Sartre's alienated vision of man as nothingness. Heideggerian thrownness is counteracted by a phenomenology of enjoyment. Happiness, a prior agreement with being, is a more primordial condition of elemental being.

The question as to why Heidegger was an ardent Nazi is as important to Levinas as it was to Jaspers. Levinas spent time in a prisoner-of-war camp. Nazi philosophy was articulated in terms of a world-historical destiny as expressed in the German people. The others do not finally count; will to power subordinates all ethical concern to the victory of the mighty.

This relates to the influence in French philosophy of Kojève's reading of Hegel through the eyes of the master/slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology*. Hegelianism here becomes reduced to an all-devouring logic of domination and servitude. Sartre takes up a related interpretation in his infamous identification: hell is the other. Against the violence of the Sartrean look, Levinas sees the defencelessness of the other in the unguarded eyes, a powerlessness that nevertheless commands in the ethical injunction: Thou shalt not kill. Levinas rejects the identification of death as the master in Kojève's Heideggerian-Marxist Hegelianism. Contrary to the dialectic of master and slave and its violence, there is a pacific relation to the other that Levinas stresses as underlying the entire economy of labour and dwelling. This relates to the feminine. The grace of the feminine founds the home and the dwelling, out of which the labouring self is articulated, and with this the entire realm of economical, political and historical being. Things are conceived differently at the origins. These origins are not identical with the

fullness of the ethical relation but they are consistent with it in a way that the dialectic of master and slave is not.

Kojève's Marxist Hegelianism also expresses a philosophy of history which culminates in the modern state as the earthly embodiment of the absolute. The world-historical universal sacrifices the intimate singularity of the self as person to the Moloch of the state. As world-historical universals, the state and history are ultimately idolatrous absolutes. Hegelian philosophy, like Heideggerian ontology, is seen by Levinas as an ontology of power which always is tempted to relate to the other by murder. The class struggle historically concretizes the master/slave dialectic. The course of history is war, the goal of history a homogeneous state in which otherness, the dissident other is suppressed in a universal sameness. Though this is abhorrent to Levinas, he is still concerned with labour, property, possession, reminding us of Marcel's concerns with being and having.

Levinas's repeated references to the philosophies of existence are guarded. He shares much with some existentialists, Kierkegaard for instance, in defending the singularity, the ipseity of the human self. Levinas's phenomenological background and its pretence that philosophy must be rigorous, indeed scientific, makes him uneasy with the so-called 'irrationalism' of the existentialists. He distances himself from a philosophy that is merely a protestation against the impersonal reason of the idealists and rationalists. He wants to defend a different sense of reason against individualistic irrationalism. This sense of reason will defend the ethical community of the same and the other. Though Levinas shuns the way of solitary genius, his sense of singularity aligns him with what is best in the philosophies of existence. This is an emphasis on what I called the intimacy of being with respect to Marcel. I find strong echoes of Marcel in some of the themes Levinas dwells on: the family, paternity, filiality, the home, enjoyment.

There is a groundswell of influence from Levinas's Jewishness. It is indicated very explicitly in his admiring reference to Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption*. Rosenzweig was initially a Hegelian who had written on Hegel's doctrine of the state. Then he had an astonishing quick conversion – reversion really – to Judaism, out of which *The Star of Redemption* sprung. This book is considered one of the landmarks of modern Jewish thought. Against the lure of Hegelian totality, a metaphysics of creation, as well as an affirmation of singularity as recalcitrant to inclusion in totality, is pursued. Though in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas says he is working in a purely philosophical vein, the distinctiveness of his philosophical voice owes much to the subterranean fermenting of the Jewish heritage.

In contrast to not a few poststructuralist thinkers, Levinas's philosophy has always exhibited a spiritual seriousness that refuses to playact with the matter itself. The return of sacred otherness in Levinas reminds us of Shestov's contrast of Athens and Jerusalem. Shestov is unjustly neglected today but he is a profound, radical thinker of the limits of philosophy in relation to

religion as an other, and with a sense of the tradition of speculative metaphysics in some ways more profound than Levinas's.

With Heidegger and many post-structuralists, Levinas tends to totalize the tradition of philosophy. *All* philosophy is said to be only an imperialism of identity or the same. Levinas speaks of philosophy as allergic to otherness, an allergy that reaches its culmination in Hegel. This is surely not true of the philosophical tradition as a whole. This fact is revealed by Levinas's retraction: there is some philosophical acknowledgement of the other, as in Plato's doctrine of the Good beyond being.

The strategy is: totalize the tradition as imperialism of the same; suggest a different thinking of the other that is without precedent; then smuggle back ideas that in some form are found in the tradition; finally, acknowledge instances of such ideas in the tradition. Of course, most readers will have forgotten the first step by the time they reach the last. In fact, the total claim made in the first step is now effectively abolished. Why not acknowledge the last step *at the start*? But one cannot if one wants to claim to 'overcome the tradition'. That claim would be dissolved; suspicion would be cast on the hermeneutics of suspicion. To take the last step first would require a hermeneutics of generosity and perhaps also a different interpretation of the philosophical tradition.

Levinas is not to be confused with Derrida and Heidegger. He is very critical of Heidegger, and his writings evidence a spiritual seriousness that is lacking in Derrida. He mixes suspicion and generosity towards the philosophical tradition in his distinction between what he calls 'ontology' and 'metaphysics'. Ontology marks a philosophy of being that always ends up reducing the other to the same. Ontology is a philosophy of the neuter which cannot do justice to the other, and especially the other as ethical. It is built upon the logic of a movement from the same to the other which is always for the same, and always returning to the same. One is reminded of that strand of the tradition that privileges the movement of thought thinking itself.

By metaphysics Levinas implies a movement of thought that exceeds totality, most especially in the surplus to thought of the idea of infinity and the face-to-face relation of the ethical. Metaphysical thought goes from the same to the other, but not in order to return to the self. This metaphysical movement of mind has always been a philosophical possibility, evidenced in Levinas's own citation of Plato's Good. Beyond thought thinking itself, thought thinks what is other to thought.

Levinas shows a tendency to identify the assumptions and analyses of Cartesian and transcendental idealism with the essential possibilities of philosophy. Relative to the Cartesian heritage, the *cogito* is privileged as the origin of all rigorously grounded philosophizing. Even Sartre's Cartesianism shows this: the availability of consciousness to itself seems to augur for a mode of philosophizing that is rigorously in possession of its own procedures

and contents, for none of its thoughts escape its own immanence, and hence its own certainty and certification. Levinas differently underscores the Cartesian notion of infinitude to find a renewed pathway to the other beyond all mastering thought. Obviously phenomenology offers a more embracing sense of philosophizing than classical Cartesianism, but their basic presuppositions overlap significantly: immanence to consciousness is fundamental to phenomenology. This is just how the 'phenomenon' of phenomenology is defined: not as the *Sache* as given in itself, but as given to and for consciousness. Nevertheless, starting with many of phenomenology's presuppositions and methodical strategies, Levinas ends up with conclusions that produce the subversion of phenomenological immanence, as well as classical versions of idealism.

Consider an important example: the discussion of representation in *Totality and Infinity*. Long passages are expository of an essentially Husserlian version of representation: representation is representability to consciousness; the immanence of the other is objectified as a representation for the same. This notion of representation has also been attacked by Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault and others. But to take this as *the* analysis of representation is questionable. We are offered analyses of representation and intelligibility which seem to cover the whole field, but do not at all. An account could be given which does not coincide with Husserl's view. Levinas himself goes on to do this, by claiming that there is an uprooted quality to the Husserlian analysis which privileges the theoretical consciousness. Turning to the phenomenon of enjoyment, Levinas finds a more primordial stratum in the genesis of representation that undercuts the analysis of the uprooted version. The 'intentionality' of enjoyment does not privilege self-constituting, or the primacy of the same over the other, as representation allegedly does.

One need not quarrel with this second aim. But Levinas sets up his account as undercutting the philosophical primacy of representation and intelligibility. In fact he is essentially criticizing representation and intelligibility as defined by Husserl's transcendental method. One could give an account of representation in which the privilege of the other over the self is primarily stressed. Instead of representation simply being a commandeering of the other to appear before the self as the self would dictate for itself, it might be an openness to the other in which the truth of the representation is a submission to heterogeneity, a humility before the other which the representation tries to approximate and respect.

Consider: if you ask me to represent you at a meeting, and if I truly want to represent you, I must subordinate my views to you and yours; I as representative must speak for you, the other; I cannot make you, the other, speak for me and yet honestly claim that I am representing you, the other. I am for you, as your representative. Representing is hence being-for-the-other in which the self subordinates the for-self of its own egoism to the truth of the other as it is for the other. This is exactly the opposite of the 'essence' to

which Levinas reduces representation. Husserlian phenomenology is one philosophy; it is not philosophy, not the essence of philosophy. Nor is it the touchstone of all comparisons. Indeed its account is not true to the truth of representation as just indicated: a standing for the truth of the other as other.

I dwell on this example, for the standard moves of many post-structuralist thinkers, Derrida included, are already contained in Levinas's account of representation. But all philosophical discourse becomes skewed if Husserlian transcendentalism becomes *the* standard of philosophy against which other views are to be pitted. There is a certain historical, hermeneutical myopia here. When Marcel or Jaspers criticizes idealism, we do not find any tendency to hermeneutical special pleading. They do not totalize philosophy and its traditions. They are more judicious. Yet they too want to get beyond thought thinking itself to thought thinking what is other to thought.

It is impossible to separate Levinas's philosophy of the other from his sense of infinity and hence the idea of the divine other. Instead of conceiving the world as a fall or an emanation from the One, or a projection of constitutive subjectivity, Levinas's rethinking of the idea of infinity points towards a renewal of the metaphysics of creation. Metaphysics here again means a mode of thinking that is for the other as other, not simply for the same. Creation names the radically originaive act by which the singular creature comes into being for itself, and is given its finite being for itself. The Creator absolves His creation from the Creator to let be the other as finite in its given freedom. In that sense, God is the ultimate other that is the giver of all otherness, including the radical otherness that is let be for itself, and in no way coerced into a return that would subordinate a part to an engulfing whole.

The strategic ambiguity here is that Levinas describes the for-self as atheist. On initial reading one might be inclined to think that Levinas espouses atheism. As I understand him, he is saying that the being of finitude as given in creation is atheist; it is a-theist in the most literal sense that it is not-God. God does not create Himself in creating the world, as Hegel and Spinoza might claim. God's creation is the giving of what is radically other to God, radically not-God; and this 'not' is the measure of an incommensurability between the Creator and the created being. This incommensurability is not a merely negative or lamentable disproportion; the 'not' of a-theism is the very space of transcendence in which the freedom of the creature can be enacted and called forth. The atheism of the self is the promise of its possible being-for-itself, and in its being-for-self its possible free relation across an irreducible difference to the divine source itself. Atheist being is then the product of divine generosity; atheism is the precondition of a different relativity between the human and divine which absolves the relata of complicity in relations of domination and violation.

Is there a little disingenuousness here? *Totality and Infinity* was written at a time when atheistic existentialism and Marxism were in their heyday.

For well over a century and a half, the spiritual ethos of Europe has been dominated by a *de rigueur* atheism, as is nowhere more evident than in the popularizing of Sartrean existentialism. Levinas is a crafty writer in that he incorporates the truth of atheism within a project that aims to renew the metaphysical affirmation of God as transcendent. In the ambiguous creation, the human being as for-itself is atheist being; but atheist being can know its real otherness to ultimate transcendence and hence out of its atheist being turn towards the other, not as a part returns to its whole, not as an instance subordinates itself to its general, but as a free centre of ethical existence wills to enact the good of the Creator, the good of the creature and neighbour. This ethical affirmation stands sentinel against descent into the anonymous powers of demonic universality, the world-historical universal, whether idolized in Marxist or in Nazi form. In the latter we become agents, instruments of the anonymous universal, and all the more vile when we become judges and executioners of those who will not bow the knee before our murderously exacting idol. This is the malice of atheist being, which does not receive the expression or consideration in *Totality and Infinity* that it should.

Levinas's emphasis on infinity invokes a tale that spans the history of speculative metaphysics, from the pre-Socratics to our own time. Levinas exploits the Cartesian idea of infinity in a direction that I suspect would have astonished Descartes himself. Pascal was correct and saw right through Descartes when he said: 'I cannot forgive Descartes; in his whole philosophy he would like to do without God; but he could not help allowing him a flick of his fingers to set the world in motion; after that he had no more use for God.' Levinas, who often cites Pascal with approval, seems hardly to suspect the possible godlessness of Cartesianism.

There is also a strange approval of Cartesian doctrines of sensibility, praised because sensibility is held to be essentially other to thought and the concept. Kant is here praised on the same score for insisting on a heterogeneity between sensibility and understanding. One sees the point. The continuity of sensibility and thought, whether in Leibniz or in Hegel, is to be ruptured in defence of a heterogeneity not subsumable under the rational concept. But there is a sense in which such a thing as Cartesian sensibility hardly exists. There is a sensible body in Descartes but it is not the body of flesh; it is not the bodied self; it is the shape of the *res extensa* that in itself is lifeless. How can this lifeless *res extensa* enjoy life, since it is already a dead body? And from where could a Cartesian *res extensa* get a face? The *res extensa* has no face. The Cartesian body is like the featureless wax of Descartes' own example, entirely faceless, except for its automated mechanical movements. But human flesh has a face – just what Levinas wants to uphold.

In another place the Cartesian order is said to be prior to the Socratic order relative to teaching. But again what can the *res cogitans* teach to an

other, or be taught itself? What is it taught by the idea of infinity? That God exists. But this is about all that is taught. Descartes is entirely lacking in the passion of religious inwardness that we find, for instance, in Augustine, Pascal and Kierkegaard. In fact, for Descartes the self and God are the two things most easily known, and once Descartes has placed them as foundational concepts to certify rational knowing methodologically, he gets down to the real business at hand: mathematicized science of nature. This Cartesian order of objective *mathesis* proves all but oblivious of the inward otherness of the self and the superior otherness of the divine transcendence. These become methodological means to an end, not enigmatic, mysterious realities that tax all thinking to the utmost, indeed defeat all its claims to the conceptual mastery, such as Descartes ardently pursued.

How superior here is the Socratic dialogue wherein the promise of openness to the other is inscribed from the outset. Levinas has nothing to say about dialogue as already articulating a concept of the soul that in its being is essentially relational; thought is never *kath' auto* in a manner that excludes relativity; for such a *kath' auto* would exclude the possibility of the face-to-face. Socratic dialogue is philosophical speech face-to-face. There is an implied Socratic sense of bodied speech – speech in the sight and in the hearing, and indeed within the touch of the other. Speech in a Socratic dialogue is as much a self saying as a something said.

Levinas's theme of the face-to-face must be noted here. This is his distinctive contribution to the discussion of 'intersubjectivity'. German idealism and phenomenology bequeathed the problem of the other: starting with subjectivity how do we genuinely constitute relatedness to the other as other? Is the other merely the means by which I recognize myself and return to myself? Is the other, seen from the primacy of the subject, just the mirror in which the self sees essentially itself, hence no radical otherness can ever be defended? As an heir of phenomenology and not German idealism, Levinas confronts phenomenology's same starting point in the subject. Levinas too starts with the self, in that earlier parts of *Totality and Infinity* are predominantly devoted to showing us a sufficiently strong sense of the *separation* of the self for itself. The self for itself is an irreducible ipseity that cannot be subsumed into an impersonal reason, or made the instance of an abstract universal. And yet this for-self in its radical separateness is not a transcendental ego. It is invested with the concreteness of the existing I in its primordial enjoyment of being.

How then is the problem of the *inter*, the 'between', tackled? The self expresses itself and enters into discourse and language. Expression for Levinas is such that the speaking subject always attends his or her expression. He or she does not abandon expression but attends it as willing to justify it, or indeed justify himself or herself, that is to say, apologize. To apologize does not here mean to ask pardon simply; it implies one standing there for oneself and owning up in expression to what one is or does. An apology, like

Socrates', is a self-justification; the justice of the self in its personal particularity is at stake. But one apologizes always *before the other*. One attends one's expression in the sight of an other. Hence expression and the apologetic attending of expression by the self is an entry into social relatedness, is the social relation.

This entry of justification, justice, apology, attention of self before the sight of the other, comes to expression in the face-to-face. I encounter the face of the other and the other looks on me, not like Sartre's other that would petrify me and reduce the freedom of interiority to an objectified thing. The face of the other calls me to justification, to justice. The face presents itself with a nudity and destitution that is beyond all conceptualization. The face cannot be totalized, for the infinite comes to epiphany there. I cannot conceptually determine the face of the other; the eyes of the other look at me with an unguarded vulnerability, and call me to a response that is beyond power. This unguarded vulnerability of the eye of the other is radically opposite to Sartre's look. If looks could kill, Sartre's subject would be a mass murderer. In Levinas's case, the look offers itself as the other offering itself in unguarded frankness; in that look there appears the command 'Thou shalt not kill'.

The ethical is not an instrumental contract that the self of will to power, be it Nietzschean or Sartrean or Hobbesian, makes to defend itself against the other and to launch its self-aggrandizing onslaught on the freedom of the other. The unguarded face is beyond all instrumentality and beyond all finality in the sense that it does not constitute a determinate purpose or *telos* that could be conclusively comprehended and mastered or encompassed. Something overflows in the face of the other that is infinite, and this infinity is the command of goodness. The overflow of infinity into the between, the *inter*, calls the subject in its separateness to a relatedness with the other that does not compromise separateness, since the very between is an ethical respect of justice between the self and other.

Levinas finds the face absolutely irreducible, primordial. One cannot break it down into more basic constituents; it is elemental, though not in Levinas's sense. It cannot be contained within the economy of classical subjectivity, whether idealistic or transcendental/phenomenological. These latter finally give hegemony to the same over the other. While Levinas defends the separateness of the subject, the face-to-face and the overflowing of the other's infinitude reverse the hegemony of autonomy. There is a heteronomy more ultimate than autonomy. The self is for the other; and the other comes from a dimension of height, even when the other is the abject self, the poor, the widow, the orphan.

Levinas intends to transcend the master/slave dialectic, but there are occasions where the other is referred to as the master, and where the asymmetry between the same and the other seems to skirt dangerously another form of the master/slave relation. We find a peculiar mixture of elements: the radical

separateness of the subject, who is not really separate, since he or she puts himself or herself in the between by his or her expression; the subject who in the between encounters the face of the other who commands against murder in the nakedness of the vulnerable eye; the separate self whose ineluctable destiny seems social. How then is the other radically other and the self still irreducibly separate? For it is their co-implication and infinite responsibility that seem the most important things. Is this no more than a verbal problem? Levinas defends the irreducibility of the self in its personal singularity, and yet against Enlightenment modernity he reinstates a heteronomous ethics, where the justice of the other, assumed in infinite responsibility, is absolutely central.

Eros is important for Levinas in breaking out of monadism and the 'egocentric predicament'. This is linked with his stress on fecundity. One is reminded of the speech of Socrates/Diotima concerning *eros* as generating on the good/beautiful. *Eros* generates beyond itself on the beautiful/good. This is a somewhat strange saying. I take it to mean that the highest point of *eros* is not, in fact, erotic in the sense of yielding just a completion of a lack in the self, and hence a culminating self-satisfaction in a final self-relatedness. *Eros* seems to start in lack and in final satisfaction makes the erotic being self-sufficient again by overcoming the lack. But this is not enough. Rather, the self generates beyond itself on the good. There is a transcendence of self that goes beyond the most embracing self-sufficiency and self-relativity.

Fecundity is the self generating beyond itself. I would prefer to call it the promise of *agape* rather than *eros*, in that it does not fill a lack of satisfaction but goes beyond self in an overflowing of being that is already full, overfull. As already full in itself the self agapeically goes towards the other as other; in this case goes towards the child as an other who is not yet known as a this, and who is the promise of the future, a continuation and a rupture, a relativity and a radical separateness at once.

It is noticeable here that Levinas emphasizes the father/son relation, rather than the relation of father/daughter, or mother/son. Paternity and filiality become the means of expressing the fecundity, the infinitude of time in its generative power. The feminine reduces to a certain equivocal form of being. There is ambiguity in the relation of the father and son: I the father am the son; I the father am not at all the son.

Levinas makes much of the infinity of time against what he seems to see as the jealous self-enclosure of eternity. It seems as if the fecundity of infinite time will pardon all. I think this will not do relative to the singularity and sociality Levinas wants to emphasize. Time, even infinite time, will not radically pardon radical evil. Later generations cannot provide justification for the radical evils visited upon present generations. Levinas does not want to instrumentalize present evil. But is infinite time enough to prevent time from being swept up into the instrumental justification of world history? It can only be from an entirely different dimension that the pardon for radical

evil can come. This would be eternity in another sense to the one that Levinas plays with, namely, the catatonic absolute identity that knows no relativity to otherness. Levinas's reference to messianic time at the end of *Totality and Infinity* indicates that the work is a truncated book; its real import lies elsewhere.

For all the talk about the frankness of the face, and the person attending his expression, Levinas is perhaps a dissimulating writer. The entirety of *Totality and Infinity* points beyond itself to God, but God is foxily talked about throughout the entire book. One is reminded of the equivocation of discourse imputed to some Jewish thinkers, Spinoza for instance, or Derrida for that matter. In the present case, one speaks the language of atheism, while being a theist behind it all. Today the metaphysicians and theologians have to hide themselves from the inquisition of the atheist, while for the main part of recorded intellectual history it was the atheist who had to go in hiding in fear of the inquisition of the believer.

In Levinas's later work the sense of responsibility for the other is accentuated further. The claim that ethics is first philosophy is developed more fully. The central essay of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* is titled 'Substitution'. Here Levinas develops the idea of an anarchic subjectivity that is prior to all thematization. One is reminded of Sartre's non-positional consciousness, except that in Levinas's case the sense of being summoned by the other is to the fore; the self prior to the ego is marked by an obsession with the other. Levinas ties this with being a creature in which the trace of the absolute other is in passage.

'Substitution' is a bold and provocative meditation, brilliant and profound in many respects. I cannot do justice here either to its claims or to the questions it provokes. Levinas does claim that prior even to the absolute priority claimed for the transcendental ego, the call of the other in an infinite responsibility is at work. The concept of 'substitution' refers to the manner in which this anarchic self is a hostage for the other. It is in the place of the other; this power to be in the place of the other is the ground of all other acts of solidarity or sociality. The self is a subject in *being subject* to the other in infinite responsibility.

Levinas likes to quote Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov: 'We are all responsible for everyone else — but I am more responsible than all the others.' This is a claim of hyperbolic responsibility, and some would criticize it as such. It may even ironically suggest an ethical hubris in which I place myself in the role of the absolute, substitute myself for God. Only God could be responsible thus, no mortal creature could. Yet Levinas wants to insist, and insist is the word, that human creatures are disturbed by this call of infinite responsibility. There are ambiguities here too complex to unravel in the space allotted. For substitution is a divine responsibility, substitution even to the point of death and sacrifice. Levinas is often presented as without precedents, and his singular style helps to foster this

impression. But I cannot but remind the reader of the emphasis on testimony, witness and sacrifice in Marcel. Read in a certain way, Marcel's Catholicism and Levinas's Judaism generate some very deep affinities.

Levinas sets himself against transcendental phenomenology here and its regress to grounding in originary selfhood. He emphasizes the passivity, the patience to the other of the pre-synthetic self. Yet his mode of thinking, like transcendental philosophy generally, is regressive, a matter of what both call 'reduction'. Is there not after all a strange 'transcendentalism' in this? A transcendentalism of passivity rather than activity, or rather of patience to the other prior to both activity and passivity? This would be prior to the a priori of transcendental idealism. Substitution would be the condition of the possibility of all meaning, linguistic, cognitive, pragmatic as well as ethical. Ethics as first philosophy would then be a transcendental philosophy, though since it does not deal with the transcendental ego as the ultimate originary presence, it might be called an *atranscendental ethics* or a *negative transcendentalism*, on the analogy of negative theology.

Many of Levinas's ways of saying are strongly reminiscent of negative theology: It is not this, not that . . . ; it is as if it were, as though . . . it is neither this, nor that. . . . There is a sense in which we here have to make a *leap* beyond phenomenology. There are times when that leap could be made more intelligible for the reader if Levinas provided some phenomenological examples from human relations, for instance in the telling way Marcel appeals to the examples from his own dramatic works to suggest imaginatively the non-objectifiable.

There is generally a tendency to *dualistic* thinking in Levinas, for example, ontology versus metaphysics, being versus the good. This tendency can lead to significant equivocity. I will conclude with a relevant example and question. In 'Substitution' Levinas unrelentingly stresses the irreplaceability of the self that is summoned in ethical responsibility. But how can the irreplaceable be substituted? There cannot be a replacement for the non-substitutable, nor a substitute for the irreplaceable. The concept of hostage carried the idea of *equivalence*: one for the other, a tooth for a tooth. But the concept of equivalence is impossible without the idea of identity, and Levinas's whole discourse of the irreplaceable claims to be prior to the idea of identity and its cognate concepts like equivalence.

This is a logical problem with substitution, but it points to a tension that is not merely logical. If we privilege the irreplaceable, there must be a limit to human substitution; by contrast, if we privilege substitution, we compromise the absolute singularity of the irreplaceable. How then can we affirm substitution and the irreplaceable both together? Put this way: Job's second set of children seem to be replacements for the first dead children, they seem to be substitutes. But the whole thrust of Levinas's thought must be that there can be no replacement for the first irreplaceable children; there are no human substitutes.

Do we reach the limit of human substitution? And a limit of the fecundity of infinite time? Is there such a thing as divine substitution which would radically transfigure the notion of selfhood as irreplaceable? Do we need the idea of re-creation, the idea of a new creation to deal with the irreplaceability of the first creation, relative to the horrors we have heaped on it and its seemingly senseless death?

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JUDAISM AND HELLENISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF LEVINAS AND HEIDEGGER

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In France Levinas is known as *l'anti-Heidegger*. Throughout his work we find, besides expressed admiration for his genius, a continuous let's-not-mince-words polemics against Heidegger. The following lines, written more than thirty years ago, are characteristic: "In Heidegger's ontology the relation to the Other is subordinated to the Neuter which Being is, and hence this ontology perpetuates the glorification of the will to power whose legitimacy and good conscience can be shocked and disquieted only by the Other." In a preceding statement Levinas calls Heidegger's thought "the culmination of a long tradition of heroic pride, domination and cruelty".¹ This sort of assertion is not likely to make friends of those who hail Heidegger's philosophy as a counterbalance to thought aimed at control.

In this chapter I want to look more closely at this conflict between two of Husserl's students. I will do so in two stages. First, I will contrast Levinas's main work *Totalité et Infini* with Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. Next, I will set a later work of Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, against the 'Brief über den Humanismus', which Heidegger wrote in a later period. Prior to these comparisons, however, I offer some reflections on the nature of this controversy.

1. Ontology and metaphysics, philosophy and prophecy

Some have pictured the conflict between Heidegger and Levinas as a collision of philosophy and religion. Reason's thought, resting on Greek origins, is said to clash here with Jewish propheticism, which proceeds from an entirely different, ethical inspiration. Perhaps Levinas was instrumental in

conjuring up this image when in the Preface to *Totalité et Infini* he opposed the evidences of philosophy with the 'eschatology of Messianic peace'. The intent of this overture, however, is to deny a monopoly of reason to conventional Western philosophy, which both Levinas and Heidegger call 'ontology'. It is not the case that the religious tradition proclaims 'opinion' only, without rational certainty.² Rather, philosophy confronts philosophy here, each drawing from the wellsprings of a long tradition.

In support of his view on the task of philosophy Levinas can appeal to Heidegger himself. Heidegger holds that, although philosophy itself is not a view of life, it is certainly rooted in one.³ Heidegger was far from believing that philosophy could, as Husserl held, produce a view of man and of the world entirely on its own via the pure, autonomous power of thought. For Heidegger, the originality of thought is to be found in attentive listening and adequate registration of what goes on in the interaction of the human being and the world around him. Phenomenology is the logos of what appears, specifically of this appearing or being itself. This ontology is a thinking in concepts of what we are already familiar with on the prereflexive level, or, in Heidegger's language, of what we know 'ontically'. It is clarification and illumination of a pre-philosophical experience. In Heidegger's philosophical terminology: philosophical structural concepts or 'existentials' have a factual, 'existential' ground. This view of philosophy, which goes back to Dilthey, breaks with a long philosophical tradition where philosophy's knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) is opposed to opinion (*δόξα*) in everyday life. For philosophy of life—Heidegger finds this a pleonasm—pre-philosophical experience is not the cradle of errors which must be overcome by thought; it is, rather, a source of inspiration, a fertile soil whose implicit rationality thought must bring to light.

If this is so, it means that no experience whatever can be excluded from philosophy—as if one could know in advance which manner of existing has a rationality of its own and which does not. Such exclusivism in the name of reason cannot itself be rational; rather, it bespeaks Western arrogance. In the space of free philosophizing all experiences are candidates. Quotations from the Scriptures are admissible alongside references to Hölderlin and Trakl,⁴ not to lend authority but as witnessing to a life form and a tradition. In the introduction to his *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Levinas says that the wisdom of the Talmud, too, is "an excellent source of experiences, food for philosophers". A talmudic text is philosophical; certainly it is no "edifying discourse". The Talmud is not an extension of the Bible, but a rational process of assimilation of the text. Talmudic scholars have a status equal to that of the philosophers in Greece.⁵

Accordingly, Levinas disagrees when, following Pascal, the God of the philosophers is set against the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the sense that the God of argument and demonstration is opposed to the God of narration.⁶ This would mean that biblical stories cannot be translated into the medium of reason. Conversely, it would mean that Western philosophy

cannot be presumed to rest on a story, on a 'grand narrative'. Well, after Lyotard we know better.

Moreover, it is not true that narrative traditions present an alternative to Western ontology merely because they rest on stories. Stories, too, if not drawn from alternative experiences, 'speak the language of being'. This is why, as Levinas correctly notes, stories as such, including religious stories, cannot 'shock' philosophy.⁷ This can occur only when the experience told or translated brings us into contact with the 'other side of totality',⁸ or, as the later expression goes, with 'the other side of being'. The philosophy of Levinas is a series of attempts to express discontent with being. It is the voice of unease, resistance and protest. This, as I hope to show, is something other than 'revelation of being'.⁹

The phrase 'on the other side of Being' comes from Plato—and its use indicates that the experiences which Levinas is after are not to be found in Jewish writings exclusively. In *Totalité et Infini* Levinas emphasizes: "The place of the Good above all essences is the profoundest, definitive teaching—not of theology but of philosophy."¹⁰ In this way he underscores that he would attach himself to a tradition within Western thought itself, a forgotten current as it were, continuing alongside mainstream thought which is a 'thinking of the Same'.¹¹ To that extent Levinas reminds Western philosophy of an aspect of its own history.¹² Besides Plato, Levinas holds that, for his 'metaphysics' or thinking of the Other, points of contact may be found in Socrates, Aristotle, Plotinus and especially Descartes.¹³ Pointing out such metaphysical openings in conventional ontology, Levinas wants to show that the experience of Transcendence, of the 'non-allergic' relation to the Other,¹⁴ is a universal phenomenon, a mode of existence open to all in spite of the historical association of this thought with Jewish propheticism. Such universal experience can be thought and articulated in universal ways. This is the rationality of metaphysics.

2. Dialogue and substitution; from Dasein to u-topia

Although in Levinas's thought dialogue occupies an important place, he has repeatedly declared that dialogue is not enough. To put dialogue center stage—as Buber does—is to fall short of 'the Jewish genius' (*le génie juif*).¹⁵ In Heidegger's philosophy dialogue is not absent either. In *Vom Wesen des Grundes* he expressly integrated the I-Thou relationship into his philosophy.¹⁶ The locus of difference between Heidegger and Levinas, then, must be in a zone on the other side of dialogue. Perhaps a more precise analysis of what they have in common will shed more light on their differences. I will do so in two steps.

1. To begin with, I note that for Heidegger the relation to one's fellow man—other than for Husserl—is immediate and original. For Husserl the

other is an analogon of myself, a kind of re-edition; hence the relation that I have to myself in recollection, to the I in my own past, can be a model for the relation to the other. Dialogical thinkers tend to turn this around, The relation to the other is original and the relation to myself is derived from it.¹⁷ Heidegger's position straddles both; he maintains that the relation to myself is just as original (*gleichursprünglich*) as the relation to the other (and to all innerworldly beings). Acquaintance with the other is part of the definition of being human, as is the relation to oneself.

For this reason isolation (*Vereinzelung*) in Heidegger is not a starting point, as is Husserl's lonely Ego, the result of the egological reduction which, abstracting from the other, leads back to the genuinely basic datum. Proceeding from this primordial region, Husserl reconstructs the world of others and intersubjectivity. For Heidegger, isolation is a movement *within* the original, underivable relation to the other. It determines only the quality, not the fact of this relation: authentic or inauthentic. For a real encounter with my fellow man I must shed the distance, thoughtlessness and uniformity of the 'they'. 'Resoluteness' (*Entschlossenheit*) isolates *Dasein* from this 'they', but because of this pushes it toward authentic community (*Mit-sein*) with others.¹⁸

Death, which individualizes and reminds us of our own finitude, also opens us to the untraceable possibilities of the other. Being-unto-death dispels the danger that I reduce the other's mode of existing to mine.¹⁹ In his hermeneutics Gadamer builds on these insights, seeking to show that the experience of one's own finitude alone provides access to the otherness of the other. It is then that the desire to dissect him or to encapsulate him disappears and that the other truly speaks to us.²⁰

In his early work Levinas described his relation to Heidegger from the dialogical point of view. The true relation to the other, he says, is to greet him or to invoke him, rather than, as in Heidegger, to understand him.²¹ It is indeed true that for Heidegger understanding the other is a component of the comprehensive understanding of Being (*Seinsverständnis*). This understanding of Being pertains equally to ourselves, to innerworldly beings and to the other. But this does not mean that Heidegger, as Levinas claims, sees this understanding of the other as analogous to the understanding of beings in the sense that he would understand the other in terms of a comprehensive horizon, as in the case of things. Heidegger could reply that this inauthentic approach is typical of the way of understanding of the 'they'. Gadamer would remark that this kind of understanding is typical of historicism, a kind of historical understanding in which everybody is 'dated' in terms of an implicit, superior point of view which itself is removed from history. In that case, however, one is still caught up in the illusion of the infinite concept which, unreflected, finds its own standpoint self-evident. In that case I approach the other, as Levinas says, in terms of his background, his environment, his habits.²²

2. In the same writing the real difference becomes clear when Levinas says that the face of the other means the impossibility of killing him. The naked face reveals infinite resistance to the murderous will. This is what the other's face signifies or expresses.²³ The relation to the other is asymmetrical. Decisive in this relation is not that I call out to him or greet him, but that he interrupts me and calls me to account. The naked face is the face of one denuded and deprived (*dénué et dénudé*) and completely exposed (*absolument exposé*).²⁴ To perceive the other is: to be able to perceive the offense against the offended. From the beginning of *Totalité et Infini* it is clear that the Other is the stranger who causes a crisis in my happy existence.²⁵ Profoundly, I experience that the other is not a duplication of myself. Not only does he question my convictions and prejudices—as happens in the communication among subjects aware of their finitude; his questioning reaches behind my very existence, behind the self-evident legitimacy of being at home with myself (*le chez soi*). This confrontation, then, transcends the situation in which I let myself be instructed by another. In other words, the openness to new experiences, the culmination of hermeneutic understanding, breaks as it were its own record as the absolutely new is experienced. The naked face is a "significance without context".²⁶ This experience of the Other comes about on the other side of hermeneutics—without fusion of horizons or mediation between the Same and the Other.

Whereas within the limits of hermeneutics every experience is enrichment and deepening of the self, Levinas speaks of uprootedness, of loss of identity even. The ego no longer turns on its own axis of being 'for-itself' (*umwillen seiner*); the center of gravity lies elsewhere. Thus, *Dasein* has become u-topia. Heidegger describes existing as 'the potentiality-for-being' (*Seinkönnen*), as a mode of existing in which *Dasein*'s own being is at issue. From this point of view, utopian consciousness is 'on the other side of being'. This dimension beyond ontology remains outside of Heidegger's purview; hence, he tends to misinterpret certain phenomena and fails to see others altogether.

A sample of misinterpretation is his treatment of guilt and conscience. The call of conscience, Heidegger says, certainly does not come from someone else.²⁷ It is a call to authentic existence rather than a voice of criticism. It attests to one's 'own-most potentiality-for-being' (*eigenste Seinkönnen*).²⁸ *Dasein*'s guilt is described as the (nugatory) being-the-basis of notness, (*[nichtige] Grund-sein einer Nichtigkeit*).²⁹ If man were not finite he would not be guilty. To be sure, this guilt is an existential and, as such, the structural condition of factual guilt, but factual, concrete guilt cannot affect the ontological analysis. Factual guilt is the implementation and affirmation of the latter.

One could argue that this is an inappropriate, ethical interpretation of an ontological analysis. Does not Heidegger himself hold that the thesis '*Dasein* exists for its own sake' (*Dasein existiert umwillen seiner*) is neutral vis-à-vis

ontic phenomena such as egoism and altruism?³⁰ That this ontological structure leaves open both possibilities? Authentic being, then, must be the condition for taking the other's side, since I can do so only when the whole of my existing is at issue. But the question is whether the phenomenon which Levinas describes as 'fearing murder more than death' can be understood in Heidegger's ontological framework. How can we do justice to this phenomenon if the concept of existing continues to direct the analysis? Can it be fitted into an ontological structure in which authenticity is the ultimate task of *Dasein*?³¹ It can, if altruism is no more than self-affirmation. Sympathy, friendship, even love can (usually) be described in these terms. But some phenomena transcend that framework.³² Levinas denies that fear of murder has the characteristically reflexive structure accorded by Heidegger to fear and dread. For Heidegger, fear is always fear *of* something and fear *for* yourself. Likewise, dread is dread *of* nothingness and *for* the authentic self. In dread one's own existing is at stake; one's own 'potentiality-for-being' is its hidden motor.³³ Levinas opposes the universal validity of this double intentionality. The fear of committing murder has a 'rightness' (*droiture, rectitude*) which excludes such self-concern.³⁴ This ontic phenomenon explodes the ontological framework in which existing is defined as existing 'for one's own sake'.

Another dimension which cannot be thematized in terms of Heidegger's ontology is substitution or hostageship as ultimate responsibility for the other. Describing solicitude (*Fürsorge*), Heidegger distinguishes two possibilities: stepping in to dominate (*einspringend beherrschen*) or stepping forward to liberate (*vorspringend befreien*).³⁵ This is somewhat like the difference between a person whose personality fills the room and another whose personality creates room. The first is the kind of solicitude which lifts the cares from the other's shoulders and so, in fact, edges him aside. We are familiar with this kind of thing in certain forms of social care. The second type of solicitude enables the other to shoulder his task himself. To jump into the breach for someone is to return his freedom. Speaking of authenticity, Heidegger points out that in this mode of existing the other is respected.³⁶

Prima facie it seems as if this second possibility corresponds to the relation to the other which Levinas has in mind. To substitute for another, however, is not a possibility which an autonomous subject can choose. Strictly speaking, it is neither jumping forward nor liberating. A jump presupposes firm ground from which, gathering energy, one pushes off. Levinas, however, speaks of being assigned to responsibility³⁷ as being unseated, thrown out of the saddle—a halt called to the energy of life. This energy is 'inverted'—suspended and brought to heel.³⁸ Accordingly, substitution is not a free subject's act. To be called to responsibility is the highest form of passivity; hence the imagery of hostageship. The hostage is a prisoner, though of the face not of violence. He is a 'voluntary' prisoner, though on the basis

of a freedom which cannot be thought in terms of a *Dasein* concerned with its own being. There is a being-concerned with the other in which concern with one's own being is neither overtly nor covertly at stake. The phenomenon is difficult to fit into the ontological scheme of the quest for self-realization and self-identity. The definition of *Dasein* offered by Heidegger draws the boundaries of being human too narrowly. Next to a desire-to-be (to use a Sartrean term) there is a metaphysical desire which escapes such ontological gravity. The desire-to-be—the crudest of obligations—is out-distanced by the desire for justice. The care for being, for one's own identity, is momentarily forgotten. The subject 'transcends', in the true etymological sense of the word rather than in the existentialist sense, where 'transcending' invariably means a return to the self. The momentary halt in the inescapable, inexorable progression of being announces the dimension 'on the other side of being'. Being has no critical principle in and of itself. That comes from outside. It is in the heart of human existence—in the condition (or in-condition) of substitution and hostageship—that Transcendence reveals itself.

3. Otherwise than Being

In this section my method will be the same as applied above. I want to explore what Heidegger and Levinas have in common in order to expose the differences. I focus on Heidegger's "Brief über den Humanismus" and Levinas's *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. This second cycle is justified, since after *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger announced a 'reversal' (*Kehre*) which seems to meet some of Levinas's objections. I will try to sketch this *rapprochement* and take a closer look at its consequences.

1. The later Heidegger, like Levinas, rejects the entire Western tradition since Descartes in the sense that he denies consciousness as the last foundation of philosophy. This is the basic difference to Husserl. For the later Heidegger, the understanding of being is not a free subject's act. *Sein und Zeit* spoke of such understanding as a 'project' (*Entwurf*); now it is called an "ecstatic relation to the clearing of Being" (*ekstatischer Bezug zur Lichtung des Seins*).³⁹ Of the 'thrownness' of the 'project' he now says that Being does the launching, since it sends and destines (*schickt*) humans into existing.⁴⁰ The clearing of Being in *Dasein*, the history (*Geschichte*) of truth, is a dispensation (*Geschick*). The history of Being sustains and defines the human condition. In the phrase 'thought of Being', being is a subjective genitive.⁴¹

The concept of existence (*Existenz*), as Heidegger now interprets *Sein und Zeit*, is not the lonely ego cogito, nor the being-with of subjects working with and for each other and thus becoming who they are. 'Ek-sistence' is an ecstatic state of dwelling in the nearness of Being or in the truth of Being.⁴² Care (*Sorge*) is reinterpreted as taking into care the light or 'clearing' of Being (*Lichtung des Seins*). And it is Being which has thrown man into this

custodianship.⁴³ One wonders whether in view of this revision Levinas's judgment can be maintained that Heidegger's philosophy is the culmination of a long tradition of pride, domination and cruelty. After all, henceforth man is lord of beings no longer; he is a custodian, a keeper of Being.⁴⁴

This shift in *Dasein's* relation to Being is evident also in the philosophy of language. Language is not an instrument of mastery; it is the 'clearing-concealing advent of Being' (*lichtendverbergende Ankunft des Seins*).⁴⁵ Man is defined as 'relation to Being' (*Bezug zum Sein*), which means that he becomes hearer of Being, one who attends to what language tells him. Language is the house of Being, the home in which man dwells.⁴⁶ In *Sein und Zeit* the summons to *Dasein* was issued by *Dasein* itself. Now man is 'claimed' (*in den Anspruch genommen*) by Being. Being calls him to stand watch over his truth (*Wahrnis seiner Wahrheit*).⁴⁷ This claim and the compliance with being allows *Dasein* to find its essence.⁴⁸ Once again, then, Heidegger seems closer to Levinas than before. Primordial in language, according to Levinas, is being addressed.

A degree of rapprochement with Levinas, finally, may be indicated by certain terms the later Heidegger uses to qualify ek-sistence. Essentially, the thinking of Being is poverty. It is no achievement of any kind; rather, it has the slightness of carrying out something inconsequential (*das Geringe eines erfolglosen Vollbringens*).⁴⁹ Thinking of Being is 'original ethics'.⁵⁰

2. To what extent does the above indicate real correspondence with Levinas? The answer, it seems to me, depends on how reference to the 'essence' of Being (as *nomen actionis*) really means a break with traditional ontology. The later Levinas often uses the term *inter-essé-ment* to refer to existence. Being, *esse*, is *inter-esse*, having an interest in. Being has an interest in its enduring, its expansion and radiation. The urge to exist, the *conatus essendi* (Spinoza) is intent on the preservation of being. For Levinas the 'otherwise than being' can be approached only when that law of being is broken through, when a higher standard comes to obtain, in the face of which being and all its brilliance must retreat.

Certainly, both thinkers plead a decentered subject. But the new center is vastly different. When Heidegger shifts attention from the Being of beings to the truth of Being, he is consistent with his initial approach. To that extent the *Kehre* is no breach; it is a continuation, another step on the same route.⁵¹ By the same token, the reinterpretation of *Sein und Zeit* offered in the "Brief über den Humanismus" is not arbitrary. For Levinas the new center is not the truth of Being but the "unreal reality of the persecuted in the day-to-day history of the world . . . a reality to which philosophers up till now have closed their eyes".⁵² Levinas does not reproach traditional metaphysics for forgetfulness of the truth of Being; his reproach is that the dignity of 'the other person' (*l'autre homme*) is forgotten. Heidegger is wrong in saying that Being is most proximate to us.⁵³ Nearest to us is the fate of the

persecuted, whose hostage I am. Above, I called the turn away from the autonomous subject toward the face 'inversion', a turning in upon oneself in which the power exercised is as it were ashamed of its own force. I add that simultaneously it is investiture. Freedom is clothed in goodness. What occurs here is other than relocating the center from an autonomous subject to an impersonal process. The existence of the subject does not evaporate, is not wiped out; it is subjected to criticism, called to responsibility, and hence individualized rather than rendered anonymous. Nothing is less interchangeable than my responsibility.

Let us repeat the question posed in the first cycle: Is it possible to interpret Heidegger's thinking of Being such that there is room for the phenomena which preoccupy Levinas? In other words, can Being, which holds in store every mode of being, give us also the mode of existence which Levinas describes as hostageship? Heidegger's thought certainly has this comprehensive pretension. He says, for example, that the significance of the word 'God' can be thought only when the truth of Being is thought first. It is only from the truth of Being that we can move in thought to the essence of the Holy, and from the Holy to the essence of divinity, which in turn is decisive for the meaning of the word 'God'.⁵⁴ Heidegger holds that ontology is neutral vis-à-vis the theological question, in the sense that it offers neither a positive nor a negative answer. It does, however, provide the foundation on the basis of which the question can be asked. Here again we see that ontology determines the framework in which concrete experiences must be interpreted. But the question is whether situations in which, as Levinas urges, use of the word 'God' makes sense,⁵⁵ do not explode this apriori framework.

Although at first sight it appears self-evident that the question regarding the meaning of Being is all-embracing, this thesis can be questioned. What do we mean when we speak of 'Being' and 'meaning'? That 'thinking of Being' is imperialistic is indicated by the fact that the question of meaning is formulated such that the primacy of Being is presupposed and affirmed a priori.⁵⁶ Heidegger defines meaning as the non-concealment or truth of Being. The meaning of Being is: to appear, to become manifest. Thinkers and poets are they who 'enact the manifestation of Being' (*Vollbringen der Offenbarkeit des Seins*).⁵⁷ Dwelling in this truth man attains his essence. Conversely, Being is in need of man to unfold its truth.⁵⁸

In these utterances (or oracles) decisions are made about the meaning of Being and the meaning of being human which are not self-evident. Should we say that the manifestation of Being is always the highest priority, and that man is invariably subservient to that? Is this ontology or ontologism? Should we say that the human being exists only at the behest of Being (*dem Sein zur Würde*)?⁵⁹ Shall we say that the entire meaning of being human consists in manifesting Being? If the fate of the persecuted takes center stage, all these statements can be questioned radically. Could it be that the

meaning of being depends on whether or not Being serves justice and righteousness? Heidegger never asks about this because, as I see it, the ultimate horizon of meaning for him is: to become manifest. An intrinsic critical standard is lacking. Of itself, Being is insensitive to justice and injustice, indifferent to good and evil.⁶⁰

When man is viewed as a willing and obedient listener to the voice of Being, we can ask whether this does not amount to a new kind of slavery after past philosophy overcame vassalage to dogmatism.⁶¹ I suggest that such servitude is profoundly present in Heidegger's concept of the 'allotment of Being' (*Geschick des Seins*). Thinking attains its highest level when it attends to what Being 'gives to thought' in the present moment of history.⁶² In contrast to this, Levinas invites us to live 'on the other side of history'. The jurisdiction of history is a reign of terror. But its victims, while they may not have collaborated in the 'truth of Being', judge history. Attending to this judgment is more in keeping with the worth of philosophy than when it lends its tongue to the anonymous process called 'truth of Being'.⁶³ A being whose being is shaken by the face transcends this meaning of Being and is 'otherwise than Being'.

Notes

- 1 *En découvrant l'existence*, 170.
- 2 *Totalité et Infini*, x; see below, 154, 177.
- 3 "Davos-Gespräch", in G. Schneeberger, *Ergänzungen zu einer Heidegger-Bibliographie*, 21. Levinas agrees with this, *Autrement qu'être*, 154; see also *Totalité et Infini*, 18, and below, 147.
- 4 *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 96.
- 5 *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 12, 18.
- 6 See below, 177.
- 7 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 96, 103; see also *op. cit.*, 118, 124.
- 8 *Totalité et Infini*, xi.
- 9 *Totalité et Infini*, x; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 97; *Noms propres*, 70.
- 10 *Totalité et Infini*, 76; see also *op. cit.*, 4 note 1, 20, 53; *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 45, 78.
- 11 *Totalité et Infini*, 13ff., 34, 87.
- 12 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 124.
- 13 *Totalité et Infini*, 20; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 48, 185; *En découvrant l'existence*, 171.
- 14 *Totalité et Infini*, 18.
- 15 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 129, 156; see above, 40–44.
- 16 *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, 38; cf. *Sein und Zeit*, 124.
- 17 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 224.
- 18 *Sein und Zeit*, 298; cf. 127; see above, 10.
- 19 *Sein und Zeit*, 264.
- 20 H-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 339, 341, 343; cf. Heidegger, *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, 54.
- 21 "L'Ontologie est-elle fondamentale?", in *Entre nous*, 17ff.; see above, 10.
- 22 See above, 175 note 15.

- 23 *Entre nous*, 22.
- 24 *Autrement qu'être*, 69; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 131.
- 25 *Totalité et Infini*, 9.
- 26 *Totalité et Infini*, xii.
- 27 *Sein und Zeit*, 275, 287.
- 28 *Sein und Zeit*, 279, 288, 295.
- 29 *Sein und Zeit*, 283, 285ff.
- 30 *Vom Wesen des Grundes*, 38.
- 31 Levinas speaks of a "task of being" (*tâche d'être*) or a "care for existence" (*souci pour l'existence*), *Totalité et Infini*, 84, 107, 111, 118; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 78, 82.
- 32 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 263; *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 45, 51ff.
- 33 *Sein und Zeit*, 140ff., 184ff.
- 34 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 83, 89, 129. *Ethique et Infini*, 129.
- 35 *Sein und Zeit*, 122.
- 36 *Sein und Zeit*, 298.
- 37 *Autrement qu'être*, 68.
- 38 *Autrement qu'être*, 65ff.
- 39 "Humanismus", 71ff. See above, 29.
- 40 "Humanismus", 84, 90, 100.
- 41 "Humanismus", 54, 57.
- 42 "Humanismus", 58, 69, 91.
- 43 "Humanismus", 61, 71, 76ff., 91, 100.
- 44 "Humanismus", 75, 90.
- 45 "Humanismus", 60, 70, 92.
- 46 "Humanismus", 53, 57, 79, 115.
- 47 "Humanismus", 53, 60, 66, 79, 117.
- 48 "Humanismus", 90, 111.
- 49 "Humanismus", 115.
- 50 "Humanismus", 109.
- 51 See O. D. Duintjer, *De vraag naar het transcendentale* (The quest for the transcendental), 289ff.
- 52 *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 98.
- 53 "Humanismus", 76.
- 54 "Humanismus", 101ff.
- 55 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 7ff., 95.
- 56 See *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 173.
- 57 "Humanismus", 53.
- 58 M. Heidegger, *Die Technik und die Kehre*, 38; *Holzwege*, 343.
- 59 "Humanismus", 74; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 82.
- 60 This is evident also from Heidegger's identification of evil with the 'negating' (*Nichten*) which belongs to Being. Both the 'hale' (*das Heile*) and the 'grim' (*das Grimmige*) rise up from Being, "Humanismus", 112ff.
- 61 *Noms propres*, 69; *Totalité et Infini*, 19; *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 166.
- 62 "Humanismus", 118.
- 63 *Totalité et Infini*, xi; *Difficile liberté*, 249.

CONSCIENCE, CONSCIENCE, CONSCIOUSNESS

Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust and the logic of witness

Sandor Goodhart

Source: J. Roth and E. Maxwell *et al.*, *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 98–113.

CONSCIENCE n. f. Faculté qu'a l'homme de connaître sa propre réalité et de la juger; cette connaissance. I. *Conscience psychologique*. 1. Connaissance immédiate de sa propre activité psychique . . . *Conscience de soi* . . . II. (*Conscience morale*) 1. Faculté ou fait de porter des jugements de valeur morale sur ses actes . . . *Avoir de la conscience*.

Le Petit Robert

La conscience de soi se surprend inévitablement au sein d'une conscience morale. Celle-ci ne s'ajoute pas à celle-là, mais en est le mode élémentaire. Etre pour soi, c'est déjà savoir ma faute commise à l'égard d'autrui. Mais le fait que je ne m'interroge pas sur le droit de l'autre indique paradoxalement qu'autrui n'est pas une *réédition du moi*; en sa qualité d'autrui, il se situe dans une dimension de hauteur, de l'idéal, du divin et, par ma relation avec autrui, je suis en rapport avec Dieu.

La relation morale réunit donc à la fois la conscience de soi et la conscience de Dieu. L'éthique n'est pas le corollaire de la vision de Dieu, elle est cette vision même. L'éthique est une optique. De sorte que tout ce que je sais de Dieu et tout ce que je peux entendre de Sa parole et Lui dire raisonnablement, doit trouver une expression éthique.

Levinas, 'Une religion d'adultes'¹

Dieu qui se voile la face . . . c'est l'heure où l'individu juste . . . ne peut triompher que dans sa conscience, c'est-à-dire nécessairement dans la

souffrance. . . . La souffrance de juste pour une justice sans triomphe est vécue concrètement comme judaïsme.

Levinas, 'Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu'²

What is the difference between consciousness and conscience? The first, we say, is a matter of perception or awareness. In philosophy, for example, I am a subject of consciousness before an object of knowledge. The second is a matter of moral authority, the degree to which I am constrained or governed by a voice which speaks to me of what I should or should not do. In Freudian language (as opposed to Kantian language), the first would correspond to the scheme conscious, pre-conscious, unconscious, the second to the scheme id, ego, and superego, where conscience would translate superego. In French, the same word, *conscience*, designates both.

Could their conjunction be more than an accident of language? In the final pages of his introduction to Ellen Fine's book on Elie Wiesel, Terrence Des Pres speaks of a 'kind of consciousness identical with conscience' which would be necessary if we are to encompass the 'enormity' of the 'capacity for destruction' that the event of the Holocaust brings with it.³ A 'French' consciousness we might say then, an awareness in which what we should or should not do is coextant (and coterminous) with awareness itself, an awareness, that is to say, in which it is no longer possible to separate ethical questions from perceptual ones, in which both the detached observer and the isolated voice of moral authority are historical, psychological, or metaphysical fictions.

An awareness in which the ethical results of my behaviour, the suffering or injury they may cause, are known in advance, calculated into the very possibility of my behaviour. An ethics that is also an optics. A testimonial or prophetic understanding, therefore, as opposed to a representational one, a factoring in of my responsibility for the origins and consequences of that behaviour, for myself, and for others, an owning of the continuity of myself with those others from whom I would most want to detach or isolate my observation or my morality. In short, Judaism, as Emmanuel Levinas understands it.

Is such a post-Holocaust perspective, such a *conscience*, or consciousness, or 'conscience-ness', possible?

In the paper that follows, I will explore this notion of such a Levinasian conscientiousness, an ethics that is also an optics, in three different registers. I will turn first to the work of Zvi Kolitz, a Lithuanian-born Jewish writer, theatre (and film) producer and political activist who writes a short story about the Holocaust shortly after the war that strangely takes on, as he describes it, a 'life of its own.' Secondly, I will turn to the work of Jesuit Father Frans Jozef van Beeck. Father van Beeck is interested in Jewish-Christian relations and in particular in Martin Buber and happens upon

the work of Emmanuel Levinas in this context, and through Levinas, upon the work of Zvi Kolitz as the author of one of the texts upon which Emmanuel Levinas comments. Van Beeck puts the two of them, Emmanuel Levinas and Zvi Kolitz, side by side in a way that only complicates and compounds the problem he is trying to resolve, both when he tries to correct what he sees as a misunderstanding in the reception of Kolitz's text, and when he tries to translate Levinas for a Christian audience. Finally, I will turn to the work of Levinas, who has written the text about Judaism and about the Holocaust that van Beeck finds so powerful, and which turns out to concern the Zvi Kolitz story (a fact apparently unknown to Levinas), and I will suggest some of the ways in which Levinas's interpretations of Zvi Kolitz's story (and through it of Judaism and the Holocaust) help us to develop insights about his subject matter that also enable us to read the gestures and the fortunes of these two other writers.

Part 1 Possession

Is a perspective that unites conscience with consciousness possible after the Holocaust? Zvi Kolitz's story, 'Yossel Rakover Speaks to God', offers us an occasion for asking this question in some detail. In the summer of 1946, Zvi Kolitz travelled to Argentina to attend a meeting of the World Zionist Congress.⁴ Sitting in his hotel room in Buenos Aires (the City Hotel, we are told), he penned in Yiddish a short story to which he assigned the title 'Yossel Rakovers Vendung Tsu G-ot' ['Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God'].⁵ Later that fall, the story appeared (on Tuesday 25 September 1946) in *Di Yiddische Tsaytung*, a Yiddish language daily whose editor had in fact first requisitioned the piece.⁶ The following year, back at home in New York City, Zvi Kolitz had the story translated into English (by Sh'muel Katz so the story goes) in an abbreviated form under the title 'Yossel Rakover's Appeal to God' and he included it in a collection of short fictions he published with Creative Age Press, which he entitled (borrowing a phrase of Ury Zvi Greenberg), *The Tiger Beneath the Skin: Stories and Parables of the Years of Death*.⁷

The story seems to have been a smashing success. It was reprinted in a somewhat abbreviated form in 1968 by Albert Friedlander in *Out of the Whirlwind: A Reader of Holocaust Literature*.⁸ Friedlander notes in a brief introduction that it was circulated among students in typescript form during the High Holiday liturgy at Yale University.⁹ Zvi Kolitz himself revised and reprinted the piece in a new collection entitled *Survival For What?*¹⁰

The story also attracted a wide audience in Europe, and even in Israel. It was translated into French and drew the attention of Emmanuel Levinas, Jewish philosopher and teacher. In 1955 Levinas made it the centrepiece of a radio broadcast, 'Écoute Israël', which he included later in a collection

of his essays on Judaism, *Difficile liberté*.¹¹ It was translated into German in the 1950s by Anna Maria Jokl and attracted the attention of a number of writers, among them Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, Sebastian Müller, and perhaps most famously, Thomas Mann. The story was translated into Hebrew and included in a volume entitled *Ani Mamin* [*I Believe*], and a version of it sparked discussion of the piece in Israeli journals.¹²

What is the nature of the story that garnered so much attention? The story assumes the form of a document, the last will and testament of a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (a pious Hasidic Jew), written on the night before the final onslaught. The narrator describes the death of his children and other family members under conditions of atrocity, as well as the death of his eleven comrades, and he offers us his final thoughts upon the fate that has befallen himself and his people.

What are those thoughts? A modern-day commentary on the Rabbinical theme 'though He slay me, I will love Him.' In the face of the *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face, as Deuteronomy describes it, 'I will love You all the more. No matter what You do to me, no matter how difficult You make it for me to accept You, I will repudiate your attempts to dissuade me and I will accept You that much more fully. I am proud to remain among the ranks of the Jewish people. One thinks of the midrash about Rabbi Akiba, who was flayed and burned alive for teaching Torah, and who is said to have remarked, as his flesh was being combed from his body, 'All my life I have said the words of the Shema ["Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might," Deut. 6] and been troubled by the words "with all thy soul." Now, at last, I shall have the opportunity to really fulfill them.' He is said to have died pronouncing the word *echad* ('one').¹³

Zvi Kolitz could hardly have known, of course, that his little story about a pious Polish Jew, written by a secular Lithuanian-born Jew (living in Palestine during the war and America afterwards), would have such a strange itinerary. For after the Yiddish-language version appeared in the fall of 1946, another version surfaced in 1954, this one submitted to Abraham Sutzkever, editor of the Yiddish language publication *Di Goldene Keyt*. Slightly truncated and attenuated, this version did in fact generate something of an odd history – either deliberately or inadvertently. For this version failed to include one salient detail: the name of the author, Zvi Kolitz. It was passed off as itself a document, a last will and testament, found in the manner of so many other documents among the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto. In this form it was translated into French by Arnold Mandel for the Zionist French periodical *Le Temps retrouvé* (where it drew the attention of Levinas – who later called his essay, 'Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu' ['To Love the Torah More Than God']) – and it was in this form, without authorial attribution, that it drew the attention of the German writers I mentioned

previously. Krämer-Badoni wrote a posthumous and effusive open letter to 'Yosl Rackower', Sebastian Müller wrote a similar piece, and Thomas Mann's comment, given shortly before his death, has become legendary.¹⁴

On the surface, at least, it is not hard to see how such a text, such a fictional construction, may give way to misunderstanding. In form, the text may not appear significantly different from other texts that have been found (one thinks of Adam Czerniakow's diaries upon which Raul Hilberg has commented, or of the diaries of Emmanuel Ringelblum). One would think that a simple notification by the verifiable author of the fictional status of the text would be sufficient to set matters straight.

But here is where the story begins to take an unexpected turn. As early as the 1950s Zvi Kolitz learned of the double history of the text and attempted to clear up the misunderstanding. To no avail, as it turns out. His attempts to claim authorship were met either with silence, or more interestingly, with the counter charge that he was attempting to usurp the rights of another, to claim authorship for a text that was not really his own and that in fact the text belonged to Yossel Rakover.

An incident in the 1970s reflects this strange process. In 1972, Zvi Kolitz writes to the magazine *Shedemoth* the following letter.

Dear Friends: A few months ago, my brother Haim Kolitz, who lives in Jerusalem, sent me issue No. 43 of *Shedemoth*, which contained a quotation from a story entitled *Yosl Rakover Argues With His God*, which the writer of the article uses as an authentic testament, allegedly found in the Warsaw ghetto. Now I want to draw your attention to the fact that this Yosl Rakover is not a will which was discovered in the ruins of the ghetto, but an original story which I wrote and published about twenty years ago in New York [...].

My attention has also been called to the fact that in a book, *I Believe* [...], to which the author of the article in *Shedemoth* was probably referring, this story of mine was published as a will. This error has apparently been repeated again and again, as has become known to me after the fact, ever since, in 1953, a great Yiddish poet, Avram Sutzkever, was misled by a Jew from Argentina, who had read the story in Yiddish and passed it on to Sutzkever as a 'document.' Mr. Sutzkever published it as such in *Die Goldene Kait* [...].

Meanwhile the origin of this error has become clear, but errors like these have a life of their own. The refusal of this particular error to die, and the fact that many persons, and capable ones to boot, like Mr. Sutzkever, who were in the ghetto (which is not the case with me), saw *Yosl Rakover* as something that gives an authentic expression to the spiritual turmoil of a believing Jew in the last hours of the Warsaw ghetto – all of this is certainly a source of satisfaction to me. But there

is a further testimony here. It is the testimony of my own spiritual turmoil, which did not subside with my giving it a fictional (and, I hope, artistic) expression; it went to the depth of the pain of a people that has the awesome right to take God to court.¹⁵

There is a great deal to comment upon in Kolitz's letter. The 'further testimony' about which he speaks, the fact that 'errors like these have a life of their own' – these ideas are not entirely contained by the context on which they appear. It is as if the very attempt to manage these matters through language only makes them worse, even more in need of management, and as if that unmanageability is somehow at the very heart of the problem. Before pursuing these issues, let us continue sketching the curious double history of this text. For the story does not end at this point.

Enter Frans Jozef van Beeck. In the middle 1970s, Jesuit Father Frans Jozef van Beeck, who had studied philosophy and theology for several years in Europe, and who happened to be interested in Martin Buber's work (and in particular *I and Thou*) as a way of engaging Jewish-Christian dialogue, is given a copy of Emmanuel Levinas's text on the Zvi Kolitz story. The text challenges his Christian faith. He decides that he needs to confront Levinas's work if he is to maintain his Christian belief intact. He also discovers that the story upon which Levinas comments in French is well known in the United States as the fictional composition of Zvi Kolitz (through the Friedlander anthology). He does a little research, finds the 1954 Yiddish version of the story published by Sutzkever, assumes it is an 'expansion' of the English original of 1947, and decides to publish a translated hybrid of the two (the discrepancies of the 1954 version added to the 1947 text) in English, with authorial attribution, along with Emmanuel Levinas's commentary (which he also translates into English), his own account of the implications of Levinas's Jewish thought for a Christian audience, and an account of the circumstances surrounding Kolitz's text and its double history. In 1989, he publishes *Loving the Torah More Than God? A Catholic Appreciation of Judaism*.¹⁶

Van Beeck's attempt to set matters straight is no more successful at first than Zvi Kolitz's, though for very different reasons. As theology, Father van Beeck's book is a wonderful volume for opening a serious discussion of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and the possible implications of Levinas for Catholicism, and Eugene's Borowitz's introduction is particularly helpful in that regard. But unfortunately, von Beeck gets the story of Kolitz wrong. Von Beeck assumes the original was the English language version of 1947 and that the Yiddish version of 1954 was 'pirated' from Kolitz's original, 'expanded' by an anonymous Yiddish speaker, and submitted in that form to Sutzkever to be published in South America. He makes this assumption, he reports later, on the basis of Kolitz's statement

in the above letter to *Shedemoth* where Kolitz writes '... this Yosel Rakover is not a will which was discovered in the ruins of the ghetto, but an original story which I wrote and published about twenty years ago in New York.'

Some time after publishing his book in 1989, van Beeck has contact with Paul Badde, a journalist who had just interviewed Zvi Kolitz for a feature article in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Badde informs him of his error, and the fact that the original was indeed Yiddish, and in particular the text Kolitz wrote in 1946 for *Di Yiddische Tsaytung* which appeared on Tuesday September 25, 1946. With effusive apologies to Kolitz, and with the help of a young colleague and Yiddishist at Loyola University of Chicago, Jeffrey Mallow, van Beeck now publishes a second version of the story in *Cross Currents*, this one based on the Yiddish original of 1946. Billing this text as the 'first complete English language version' of Kolitz's story, he follows it with an 'Afterword' in which he explains the intervening events and in particular his error.

The story is not over. Some time before 1993, the text had attracted the interest of German journalist Paul Badde (mentioned above), who had read in German an earlier account of the story by Anna Maria Jokl – who had herself already published the story several times previously.¹⁷ Badde now flies to New York, conducts an interview with Zvi Kolitz, obtains a copy of the Yiddish original from the documentation centre in Buenos Aires (the Asociación Mutualista Israelita Argentina, miraculously, from the same Oscar Lateur who a few days earlier could not find it), speaks with van Beeck about it, and publishes a feature article on the story and the man in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in April of 1993.¹⁸ In 1995, the text is reprinted once more (a fourth time) by Zvi Kolitz himself (who was still alive in New York City) in a volume entitled *Yosel Rakover Speaks to God. Holocaust Challenges to Religious Faith*. This volume includes a new English translation of the Yiddish original of 1946, the Levinas text translated by van Beeck, a new essay (his third) by van Beeck on the circumstances of the double tradition and his misunderstanding of it, and the dossier of other essays (including those by Badde, Müller, and Krämer-Badoni) that were published in Germany, Israel, and elsewhere on the text. As a kind of coda, Kolitz adds another text of his own, 'Requiem for a Jealous Boy', concerning two boys named Mosheh and Akiba.¹⁹

A final addendum. In 1995, there is a terrorist bombing of the Jewish documentation centre in Argentina housing the original document (from which Paul Badde obtained a copy), and the building along with its contents is severely damaged. An e-mail note I received from the head of YIVO in New York (who had somehow learned about my intention to speak publicly about this text) informs me that some of the 'furniture' from the centre survived. 'Who knows,' the writer of my note quips, 'perhaps among the ashes we may still find Zvi Kolitz's original manuscript.'

Part 2 Dispossession

What is an author? Michael Foucault's question from the 1970s resonates in this new context in a powerful and unexpected way.²⁰ His response – that the author is a function, an effect, the product of a set of social determinants – was an important correlative to the Anglo-American literary critical tradition in which an author is the set of intentional, rhetorical, and commercial relations a writer maintains with his or her text.²¹ But in the present context, other aspects of authorial attribution become clear.

For although there may be more revelations to come (and there have been a number of twists and turns along the way I have not mentioned), a pattern is already emerging.²² A manifest confusion gives way to an attempted rectification but that rectification in turn, rather than put an end to the difficulty, serves only to compound it and lead to more confusion.

Zvi Kolitz writes and publishes his piece in 1946 on a trip to South America. An anonymous individual gives the piece without authorial attribution to Sutzkever in 1954 who is struck by its power and publishes it in his journal, and thus begins the double tradition. Kolitz tries to clear up the matter, and is rebuffed either by silence or with the claim that he is usurping the text of 'Yossel Rakover' who is his fictional character.

The pattern is not limited to these kinds of exchanges and recurs on other levels. Father van Beeck spots the problem of the two traditions and, trying to be helpful, compounds the difficulty. He writes a book in which he explains the anonymous transmission and assigns originality to the abbreviated English New York 1947 translation rather than the 1946 Yiddish version. The nature of the accident has shifted from omission to misunderstanding but the effect is the same.

In a similar vein, Albert Friedlander, who anthologizes Zvi Kolitz's text again in the sixties, and who is aware that the text has been circulated without authorial attribution, writes that although 'there is no actual document written by Yossel Rakover . . . there was a Yossel Rakover who died in the flames,' a claim that according to Paul Badde is also a fabrication ('None of this is true,' Badde writes).²³ And as if history itself were collaborating with the confusion, the terrorist bombing puts an end – presumably forever – to the question of the original newspaper publication since henceforth all versions will be copies.

What is going on? The motives of the participants are not to be impugned. Those who respond as if they are reading an actual will – Rudolf Krämer-Badoni or Sebastian Müller or Thomas Mann, for example – feel (and express) a heartfelt connection to this lonely figure in the Warsaw ghetto writing on the last night of his life. Kolitz has written a fiction which is part of a lifelong political and artistic activism in which he has served in the Irgun, and helped produce Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (also an historical fiction) and other theatre and film projects dedicated to exposing the horrors

of the war years, and it is not unreasonable for him to claim credit for the story he has written (in addition to being flattered that it has been considered by its readers so authentically). Van Beeck is doing his utmost to bring the confusion to the light of day and clear it up, a gesture perhaps not unrelated to his furthering of better Jewish-Christian relations.

But it remains curious nonetheless that accidents and confusions proliferate around this story, and that despite all the good intentions a pattern emerges that has an uneasy familiarity to it. Kolitz is charged with theft, with usurping intellectual property that is not his own. The copy transmitted to Sutzkever is said to be 'pirated' by an anonymous 'Jew' and 'expansions' are said to have been added to a smaller English language version – charges of dispossession, in other words, that align themselves with traditional negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism.

The case of Father van Beeck is particularly interesting this regard. Father van Beeck's unimpeachable intentions are marked by a kind of hapless misfortune. He is confident that his Christian belief is intact and then he encounters Emmanuel Levinas. He thinks he has Levinas under control and realizes the 'document' Levinas is working on is a fiction. He thinks he has the fiction/document issue resolved, and then he gets the account of the history of that confusion wrong.

Does he at last get things right in his translation? He republishes the Levinas text in the Kolitz book – as he had published it in his own book – but he gets one more thing wrong: he mistranslates Levinas's use of the word *conscience* for conscience, which might not be so bad if the word 'conscience' in English were not precisely a Christian characterization of Judaism over the past two centuries (as the 'conscience' of Europe).

Van Beeck translates the Levinas text in which he encounters Zvi Kolitz's narrative, in other words, in a way that *cannot have occurred*, that is decidedly Christian, and that curiously reproduces the very structures of exclusion he is trying to undo in the process of trying to undo them. He makes interpretive choices that can only come from a misunderstanding, even though such misunderstanding is precisely the one he trying to avoid.

Here is the French original French of Levinas.

Dieu qui se voile la face n'est pas, pensons-nous, une abstraction de théologien ni une image du poète. C'est l'heure, où l'individu juste ne trouve aucun recours extérieur, où aucune institution ne le protège, où la consolation de la présence divine dans le sentiment religieux enfantin se refuse elle aussi, où l'individu ne peut triompher que dans sa conscience, c'est-à-dire nécessairement dans la souffrance. Sens spécifiquement juif de la souffrance qui ne prend à aucun moment la valeur d'une expiation mystiques pour les péchés du monde. La position des victimes dans un monde en désordre, c'est-à-dire dans un monde où le bien n'arrive pas à triompher, est souffrance. Elle révèle un Dieu

qui, renonçant à toute manifestation secourable, en appelle à la pleine maturité de l'homme responsable intégralement.

Mais aussitôt ce Dieu qui se voile la face et abandonne le juste à sa justice sans triomphe – ce Dieu lointain – vient du dedans. Intimité qui coïncide, pour la conscience, avec la fierté d'être juif, d'appartenir concrètement, historiquement, tout bêtement au peuple juif 'Être juif, cela signifie . . . nager éternellement contre le crasseux et criminel courant humain . . . Je suis heureux d'appartenir au peuple le plus malheureux de tous les peuples de la terre, au peuple dont la Thora représente ce qu'il y a de plus élevé et de plus beau dans les lois et les morales.'²⁴

Here is Frans Jozef van Beeck's translation of these two paragraphs.

God veiling His countenance: I think this is neither a theologian's abstraction nor a poetic image. It is the hour when the just person has nowhere to go in the outside world; when no institution affords him protection; when even the comforting sense of the divine presence, experienced in a childlike person's piety, is withdrawn; when the only victory available to the individual lies in his conscience, which necessarily means, in suffering. This is the specifically Jewish meaning of suffering – one that never takes on the quality of a mystical expiation for the sins of the world. The condition in which victims find themselves in a disordered world, that is to say, in a world where goodness does not succeed in being victorious, is suffering. This reveals a God who, while refusing to manifest Himself in any way as a help, directs His appeal to the full maturity of the integrally responsible person.

But by the same token this God who veils His countenance and abandons the just person, unvictorious, to his own justice – this faraway God – comes from inside. That is the intimacy that coincides, in one's conscience, with the pride of being Jewish, of being concretely, historically, altogether mindlessly, a part of the Jewish people. 'To be a Jew means . . . to be an everlasting swimmer against the turbulent, criminal human current . . . I am happy to belong to the unhappiest people in the world, to the people whose Torah represents the loftiest and most beautiful of all laws and moralities.'

Many of van Beeck's renderings are quite helpful. He avoids all jargon and his style is exceedingly clear. But he misses the mark on a crucial point: he translates Levinas's use of the word *conscience* as 'conscience' rather than as 'consciousness'.

Now, the French language is supple, and certainly the French word *conscience* can be translated as 'conscience' in certain circumstances. The primary definition given for the word in *Le Robert* is 'faculté qu'a l'homme de connaître sa propre réalité et de la juger; cette connaissance,' a faculty which

is then divided into 'connaissance immédiate' and 'connaissance intérieure'. When the second usage is introduced, it often appears as *la conscience morale* to distinguish it from *la conscience de soi* which is its first meaning, although sometimes, it is true, the word *conscience* can be used to mean conscience alone.

But Emmanuel Levinas almost never uses it in this fashion. And since he is working within phenomenological philosophic tradition specifically, 'consciousness' would be his primary interest. And in those rare instances where Levinas does use *conscience* to mean 'conscience,' he spells that out specifically, as he does, for example, in 'Religion of Adults,' excerpted above, in an essay that we can be sure van Beeck knows about since he quotes it.²⁵

Why is this matter important? Is it possible van Beeck is simply making a minor translational error?

The matter is important because 'conscience' differs from 'consciousness' along precisely the lines argued against in Emmanuel Levinas's essay. In representing Levinas as saying 'conscience,' he represents him as arguing a different position with the effect that at least in English van Beeck can profit from that alteration.

For what is conscience? We customarily think of conscience (as we suggested above) as a kind of inner voice guiding our moral decision-making, or perhaps our memory of such past decision-making. It is an important word for Christian theology – as the work of a 19th-century Italian theologian, Antonio Rosmini, who writes a full-length treatise on *Conscience*, suggests.²⁶

But in Judaism, as Levinas argues, the entirety of consciousness is ethical. The Christian notion of a consciousness which identifies one part of consciousness as moral, namely, conscience, presupposes that there is another part which is not, which is free of its moral obligation to the other, and which can function as a 'detached observer' to objective experience. The whole of Levinas's argument is against such limitations. For Levinas, we are never finished with our ethical obligations to the other individual (*autrui*). As Buber argues (whom van Beeck has certainly read), there is no 'detached observer' and to act as if there is one is to suppress the ethical from which human decision-making begins. Rather than argue against Levinas, van Beeck suppresses Levinas's text so that Levinas already says what van Beeck would have him say. He rewrites Levinas in order to approve him – which of course is another form of rejecting what he does say.

Moreover, Levinas makes his case for limitlessness of our ethical obligation to the other individual among other places in this very essay. If the narrator of the story feels so alone, it is in order to feel on his shoulders all the responsibilities of God, responsibilities such that I can never reach a point where I can say that my obligations have been completed, and responsibilities that only I alone can fulfill (which is how I am elected by this

obligation and how paradoxically this infinite obligation determines my freedom). No one other than me can fulfill these obligations anymore than another can die in my place.

Translating Levinas, van Beeck misses its import, even though he appears to appreciate Levinas's work on many other levels. At the level of translation, he misses the forest for the trees. He is like the game player described by Dupin in Poe's short story who cannot see the word Europe on the map before him because it is written too large.

Why is van Beeck's misrendering of conscience important in this context in which Zvi Kolitz's text is misunderstood? Because the issue of conscience is not unrelated to readers who would like to think of Zvi Kolitz's text as a document and of their reply to it as an act of conscience. To render Levinas as saying that suffering is a matter of conscience rather than consciousness is to put on the very 'spectacle of the Passion' and render suffering 'expiatory' in a way that Levinas explicitly refuses, and as such to participate in the very suppression of Judaism that van Beeck is trying so hard in other ways to dismantle.²⁷

To bring these matters together, let us turn to Levinas's own account of Zvi Kolitz's text, where he raises larger questions about Judaism and the Holocaust and Jewish-Christian relations, questions that are not unrelated to the dispossession of Zvi Kolitz's text, or to van Beeck's attempt to set matters straight, actions which issue only in factual and translational mishaps that we might justly characterize as a 'further testimony.'

Part 3 Theodicy and useless suffering

Emmanuel Levinas has presumably no idea that the narrative before him upon which he comments in his radio broadcast in 1955 is written by Zvi Kolitz, although he raises the possibility that the text is fiction with an almost uncanny awareness.²⁸ Whether fiction or non-fiction, however, it is in his view testimony and its testimonial or witness status is primary. It offers we may say a 'further testimony' to the spiritual turmoil in which both its narrator and its author are immersed. Within it, Levinas notes, 'each one of us who are survivors may dizzily recognize his own life.'

I have just read a text that is both beautiful and true, true as only fiction can be. Published in an Israeli journal by an anonymous author, and translated under the title of 'Yossel, son of Yossel Rakover of Tarnopol, speaks to God' for *La Terre retrouvée* – a Parisian Zionist periodical – by Arnold Mandel, it . . . translates an experience of spiritual life that is at once profound and authentic.

The text presents itself to us as a document, written during the final hours of the Resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto. The narrator would have been witness to all the horrors; he would have lost his young

children under conditions of atrocity. As the last survivor of his family and with only a few moments left, he bequeaths to us his ultimate thoughts. This is literary fiction, of course; but fiction in which each one of us who are survivors may dizzily recognize his own life.²⁹

What is the theme of this turmoil? The impossibility once and for all of a God of children and the necessity of a God (and a religion) of adults. The abrogation of a Supreme Being and of a universe in which an all-powerful and all-knowing God punishes the bad and rewards the good, and the assumption rather of a God that is otherwise than being, and of human responsibility for human behaviour, of infinite responsibility or obligation for the other individual. In short, the end of theodicy and the beginning of witness.

What is the meaning of this suffering of the innocent? Does it not bear witness to a world that is without God, to a land where man alone measures Good and Evil? The simplest and most common response to this question would lead to atheism. This is no doubt also the sanest reaction for all those for whom up until a moment ago a God, conceived a bit primitively, distributed prizes, inflicted sanctions, or pardoned faults, and in His kindness treated human beings as eternal children. But with what narrow-minded demon, with what strange magician did you thus populate your sky, you who now declare it to be deserted? And why under such an empty sky do you continue to seek a world that is meaningful and good?

Yossel ben Yossel reveals to us the certitude of God with a new force under an empty sky. For if he exists so alone, it is in order to feel upon his shoulders all the responsibilities of God. On the path that leads to the unique God there is a relay point that is without God. True monotheism must respond to the legitimate exigencies of atheism. The God of adults manifests Himself precisely through (*par*) the emptiness of the sky of a child. This is a moment when God withdraws from the world and conceals His face (according to Yossel ben Yossel) . . .

A God who conceals His face is not, I think, a theological abstraction or a poetic image. It is a way of talking about the hour when the just individual no longer finds any external recourse, when no institution protects him, when the consolation of divine presence in childish religious sentiment is similarly of no avail, when the individual can no longer triumph except in his own consciousness (*conscience*), which is to say, necessarily in suffering; a specifically Jewish sense of suffering, which never at any moment assumes the value of a mystical expiation for the sins of the world. The condition of being a victim (*la position des victimes*) in a world in disorder, which is to say, in a world where the good does not triumph, *is* suffering. Suffering reveals a God who,

renouncing all helpful manifestation, appeals to the full maturity of the integrally responsible man . . . The suffering of the just for a justice that is without triumph is lived concretely *as* Judaism. Israel – historic and carnal – has become once again a religious category.³⁰

(italics in final paragraph added)

In the wake of the Holocaust, the idea that God has died or that God never existed at all might well seem the most natural (perhaps even the most reasonable) conclusion to reach. But we reach that conclusion only if we have held up until this moment a particularly childlike conception of God – of one who inflicts injury and awards prizes, a God, that is to say, of eternal children.

On the other hand, if we expand our conceptualization of transcendence, alternative possibilities appear. God's very absence may be taken, for example, less as a sign of our abandonment than an index of our own responsibility for (and implication in) human behaviour. It may lead to the recognition that suffering is not an interruption of human experience from the outside (as if a condition independent of suffering were achievable under the right circumstances) nor an experience to which may be attached any symbolic value whatsoever (as if, for example, it were redemptive) but a given in consciousness, an inevitable extension of that consciousness in a disordered world where the good and the just do not triumph.

Moreover, that in the face of such ineluctable suffering, what we *can* do is respond, trace the path of our own implication in the fortunes of the neighbour, the other individual, whose absolute alterity from us I have attempted to objectify and master. Discovering the suffering of the other individual, we discover the origin of our own subjectivity and the fact that Judaism has never been any other but the living of that discovery. 'The suffering of the just for a justice that is without triumph is lived concretely *as* Judaism' (italics added).

In another essay, 'Useless Suffering,' Levinas makes the point even more directly.³¹ Suffering, he says there, is 'unassumable' and 'unassumability,' the collapse of the ability to appropriate. Suffering is 'dans la conscience, une *donnée*,' a 'given in consciousness, like the lived experience of colour, of sound, of contact, like any sensation.' As such, it has no inherent meaning, no use; it is 'intrinsically meaningless' and therefore when it occurs it is 'precisely an evil.' Suffering is 'pure undergoing,' a passivity 'more passive than experience,' more passive than the opposite of active.

On the other hand, since suffering is 'pure undergoing,' it can open the possibility of a bond within the 'inter-human,' the 'between human beings' as Buber called it, *das Zwischenmenschliche*.

In this perspective a radical difference develops between *suffering in the Other (la souffrance en autrui)*, which for *me* is unpardonable and solicits

me and calls me, and suffering *in me*, my own adventure of suffering whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only meaning to which suffering is susceptible, in becoming a suffering for the suffering – be it inexorable – of someone else.³²

Useless and of no value in itself, and unforgivable when it occurs in the other individual, suffering can acquire meaning in my own case as a suffering for the other individual, as an act of my ‘non-indifference’ and ‘dis-inter-ested-ness’ (the removal of myself from among others with whom I maintain an ontological identity). As such, it becomes a modality of my responsibility for the other individual and can provide an ethical foundation across human groups.

It is this attention to the [suffering of the] Other [individual] which, across the cruelties of our century – despite these cruelties, because of these cruelties – can be affirmed as the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle – the only one which it is not possible to contest – a principle which can go so far as to command the hopes and practical discipline of vast human groups.³³

In this context, to wait ‘for the saving actions of an all-powerful God’ is a form of ‘degradation’ (*déchoir*). The Holocaust in this context is the paradigm of unmitigated and useless human suffering not because it is transcendental or transhistorical but because it is transhuman. ‘À la mémoire,’ reads the French dedication (in contrast to the Hebrew) to *Autrement qu’être, ou au delà de l’essence* (the second of Levinas’s major philosophic treatises), ‘des êtres les plus proches parmi les millions d’assassinés par les nationaux socialistes, à côté des millions et des millions d’humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l’autre homme, du même antisémitisme.’³⁴

Auschwitz, in other words, for Levinas, is an event in the history of the human. After the Holocaust, a *conscience* which unites consciousness and conscience, in which perceptual consciousness rediscovers itself at the heart of a moral consciousness, is not only possible but necessary. It has never in fact not been necessary. But after such a demonstration, the alternatives are unthinkable. To go on as if nothing has changed is monstrous. But is equally monstrous to go on in such a way that claims to acknowledge Auschwitz and implicitly represses its evidentiary signs, a repression that in effect secures its perpetuation.

How does Levinas escape such monstrosity? By recognizing, I suggest, the commentary and the witness implicit in the text before him, whether or not the text itself acknowledges such commentary or such witness. Levinas uncovers the anti-theodical potential of Kolitz’s text whether or not the story’s

narrator or Zvi Kolitz himself acknowledges that potential, and whether or not readers of the story such as Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, Sebastian Müller, or Frans van Beeck acknowledge or enact it. In fact, one of the reasons van Beeck may be so attracted to Levinas's work is that Levinas manages to express the difficulty he finds with a Christian approach in a way that offers Christians a way out, a way to save face, a way to make oneself more fully Christian rather than less.

The Holocaust, Levinas tells us, is the end of theodicy. Theodicy as a word entered the language as the title of a book by Leibnitz at the beginning of the eighteenth century. But as an idea, and in particular as the 'vindication of divine justice in the face of the existence of evil,' it may be as old as Judaism.³⁵ We find echoes of it in the Book of Ezra, for example, where the collapse of the Temple is justified as a divine punishment for the sins of the people. Theodicy is the continuation of mythic thinking into revealed religious thinking.

Theodicy, in other words, was never a fact of life. But if we ever thought it was and needed a demonstration of its insufficiency, the Holocaust was such a demonstration with a vengeance. The Holocaust as an event for Levinas aligns itself with the deepest order of human catastrophe. It is the return of the moment of the exile, the beginning of the first diaspora. All responsibility is in our hands, not because there is no God, or because God has concealed or veiled His Face but because, he tells us, there never was such a God to begin with, because the dream of such a God is the dream of children who would deflect human responsibility onto the divine. To become adult for Levinas is to assume a full responsibility for human behaviour that is not the product of my freedom but ironically its condition, that is given in the created fabric of the world. And to become such an adult – infinitely responsible for the other individual (and here is really the second part of it) – is clearly in fact to engage God in relationship, a God who is otherwise than being, a God who demands of us nothing less than shouldering God's own responsibility for others, for their lives, for their responsibility, even for their deaths.

how does Judaism conceive of humanity? . . . by experiencing the presence of God through one's relation to man. . . . The way that leads to God therefore leads *ipso facto* – and not in addition – to man. . . . The fact that the relationship with the Divine crosses the relationship with men and coincides with social justice . . . epitomizes the entire spirit of the Jewish Bible.³⁶

The truth of testimony, for Levinas, is not the truth of representation. The inability of Zvi Kolitz's readers to recognize themselves in Zvi Kolitz's narrative itself bears witness to the truth of its claims, as Levinas reads them. The struggle to separate what is true from what is fictive about it

continues the circumstances already internal to it and generates the problem to anew. Yossel Rakover finds himself in a circumstance in which the unthinkable has happened in the Warsaw ghetto and to deal with it he relies upon the traditional Rabbinic theme of *hester panim*. Zvi Kolitz in 1946 finds himself in a situation in which the unthinkable has occurred in Europe and responds by invoking a traditional literary theme. He writes a short story about it in which heroism triumphs over adversity. Reading Zvi Kolitz's text from 1946 to 1995, van Beeck finds both the circumstances internal to the narrative and the circumstances involving its transmission intolerable and responds by invoking a traditional rationalist theological schema to set things straight: whether the text is a 'real document' or 'only a fiction,' Zvi Kolitz deserves credit for having written it and Emmanuel Levinas deserves credit for having noticed its testimonial potential.

The subject matter of the unthinkable changes. In one case, it is the behaviour of the Nazis and the world surrounding them. In another, it is the experience of a secular Yiddish writer living after the war in America reflecting upon his past. In still another, it is the experience of a writer living after the war in Germany, or a Lithuanian Jewish philosopher working after the war in France, or a Dutch Jesuit theologian doing work after the war on Jewish-Christian relations reflecting upon their own memories. But in each case the insupportability of the reality they encounter is noted and a traditional response engaged, and in that fashion the 'same' situation continues. The internal narrative and the external narrative bear witness, finally, not to the heroism of Yossel Rakover or of Zvi Kolitz or of Krämer-Badoni or of Frans Jozef van Beeck (or for that matter of Emmanuel Levinas) but to the circumstances in which such judgement is rendered, circumstances in which a structure of possession and dispossession has the potential to unleash accusation, suffering, and theodicy – mythic, anthropomorphic, interpretative, sacrificial consequences that engender only more suffering and more evil.

Conclusion

We continue to live in the shadow of Auschwitz – all the more fully as we attempt to evade or deny that shadow. And we are likely to do so – Geoffrey Hartman observes – for some time to come.³⁷ The literature of our age bears witness to that shadow whether we would present it or conceal it. We may act out that shadow in our fictions, in our literary criticism, in our theologies, in our philosophies, or in our day-to-day behaviour. Or we may work through it, a working through that does not necessarily avoid acting it out (and may even require it), but that attempts at least to take stock of it, and in doing so binds as to a tradition of scriptural exegesis which has also never not been thinking and acting along the same paths, a traditional Jewish Talmudic interpretative mode which, far from having ended in the second century of the common era (as is sometimes said) continues in this fashion

in writers like Emmanuel Levinas as an ongoing available prophetic creative thoughtful possibility.

On the eve of the 21st century, it might be more helpful for us to register the critical testimonial prophetic status of our most powerful writing and reading rather than try to determine what is true or untrue about it, fictional or non-fictional, decidable or (as much of avant-garde critical theorizing is wont to say), undecidable. Our most powerful writing, like our most powerful reading, is both/and, and neither/nor, already entirely otherwise than the being within which we would struggle to discover and confine it.

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Notes

- 1 'Self-consciousness inevitably surprises itself at the heart of a moral consciousness. The latter cannot be added to the former, but it provides its basic mode. To be for oneself is already to know the fault I have committed with regard to the other individual. But the fact that I do not question myself about the rights of the other paradoxically indicates that the other individual is not a *new edition of myself*, as another individual he is situated in a dimension of height, of the ideal, of the divine, and through my relation with the other individual, I am in touch with God. The moral relation therefore reunites both self-consciousness and consciousness of God. Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression.' See Levinas (1983), 33 and 1990, 17. I have modified Seán Hand's translation slightly.
- 2 'A God who conceals his face . . . is a way of talking about the hour when the just individual . . . can no longer triumph except in his own consciousness (*conscience*), which is to say, necessarily in suffering . . . The suffering of the just for a justice that is without triumph is lived concretely as Judaism.' Levinas 1983, 191. My translation.
- 3 For the remark by Des Pres, see Fine (1982), xi.
- 4 Van Beeck and Mallow (1994a), 373.
- 5 *ibid.*; Badde (1995), 12.
- 6 *ibid.*, Badde says the piece was requisitioned by a Señor Mordechai Stoliar (Kolitz 1995), 5.

- 7 See Kolitz (1947), vii. The quote from Greenberg reads: '... For we are tired of bearing our sadness alone/And the secrets of tigers under the skin of a lamb.'
- 8 Friedlander (1968).
- 9 Friedlander (1976), 390.
- 10 Kolitz (1969).
- 11 Levinas (1983) and Levinas (1990).
- 12 See Eliav (1965) and van Beeck (1989).
- 13 The opening six words of the shema are *Sh'ma 'yisrael Adonai eloheinyu Adonai echad* ('Listen, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one'). The extension of the pronunciation of the initial *ayin* (concluding the word *sh'ma*) and the final *daled* (concluding the word *echad*) are gestures suggested by the Rabbis to produce in hearing the Hebrew word for witness, '*eid*.'
- 14 According to Badde, Mann 'praised it as a holy text, a "shattering human and religious document"' (Kolitz 1995), 7–8.
- 15 See van Beeck (1989), 86–7.
- 16 See Van Beeck (1989).
- 17 According to Badde (Kolitz 1995, 7), the "discovered document" is broadcast in the German language version of Anna Maria Jokl by Radio Free Berlin' in January 1955. In October 1955, the text was broadcast again, this time 'with the author's full and correct name' (Kolitz) 1995, 8. Jokl reports and comments on it later that year in the *Tagesspiegel* and again the following year in the *Neue Deutsche Hefte*. In 1985, Jokl publishes the text in a book with Kolitz's name. See Jokl (1985).
- 18 Kolitz gives the date of Badde's story and article as 'April 1, 1993' although van Beeck gives it as 'April 23, 1993.' See Kolitz (1995), xviii and 51.
- 19 Kolitz (1995).
- 20 For the Foucault essay, see Bouchard (1977).
- 21 On the intentional and implied author, see Booth (1983).
- 22 For example, in Kolitz (1995), xviii, Kolitz notes that Paul Badde 'wrote his comprehensive article, which was published in the magazine of the Sunday edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on April 1, 1993.' In the same volume (Kolitz 1995, 51), Father van Beeck writes that the first three pages sent by Oscar Lateur to Paul Badde were 'sufficient to enable Paul Badde, a few weeks later, In [sic] the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazin* of 23 April, 1993, to publish an almost complete German translation of the story based on the Yiddish, along with a moving feature article on Zvi Kolitz' ('April 23, 1993' is the same date van Beeck gives in his second article in van Beeck (1994), 375). Is the article to which van Beeck refers another article by Badde on Kolitz written three weeks later? Has Kolitz gotten the date wrong? Has van Beeck gotten the date wrong? Again?
- 23 Friedlander (1976), 390. For Badde, see Kolitz (1995), 8.
- 24 Levinas (1983), 189–91.
- 25 See epigraph.
- 26 Rosmini (1989).
- 27 'Nous nous refusons à offrir en spectacle la Passion des Passions et à tirer un quelconque gloriole d'auteur ou de metteur en scènes de ces cris inhumain' (Levinas (1983), 189). [We refuse the option of offering as a spectacle the Passion of all Passions and of deriving any glory whatsoever as an author or director from these inhuman cries.] Levinas may be referring to the responses of Krämer-Badoni and Müller to Anna Maria Jokl's broadcast of the story in German (on Radio Free Berlin) two months earlier, both of whom became effusive and saw the document as a call to conscience.

- 28 Jokl broadcast the story in German without authorial attribution in January of 1955. Levinas delivered his radio talk in April of the same year. Jokl rebroadcast the narrative with Kolitz's name attached in October of 1955. Levinas published his essay, 'Aimer la Thora plus que Dieu' in 1963. He may not have known initially that it was a text by Kolitz, but upon learning in October of the same year that it was a literary fiction, he may have decided to add some remarks when he came to publish it later, and thereby generate the text we have now. What is important for him in any event is not whether it is a literary fiction or a document but its 'further testimony,' its capacity to 'translate an experience of spiritual life that is at once profound and authentic.'
- 29 Goodhart (1996), 236.
- 30 Goodhart (1996), 237.
- 31 Levinas (1991), 100-12.
- 32 Levinas (1988), 159.
- 33 Levinas (1988), 159.
- 34 'To the memory of beings who were the closest to me among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, alongside millions upon millions of other human beings of all faiths and all nations, victims of the same hate of the other man, of the same antisemitism.'
- 35 Morris (1975), 1334.
- 36 Levinas (1990), 16.
- 37 See Hartman (1986).

SUBSTITUTION

Marcel and Levinas

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Abstract

The subject is under siege. In many disciplines the self that modern thought established and fortified has fallen to critique. But while many explore the implications for epistemology, for literary theory, for psychology, or for history and social thought, few writers have pondered the question in terms of ethics. After all, ethics must rest on a subject, a person who makes choices and decides for various reasons to commit acts in one's own name. I suggest that ethics can survive the fracturing, de-centering, deconstructing of the self? A selection of passages from Marcel and Levinas is offered, with commentary.

Introduction

It is perhaps ironic that the de-centered self was discovered in an ethical context long before the current hubbub called postmodernism. The "dialogical" philosophers (Buber, Rosenzweig, Marcel, and others), found that interpersonal ethics was the foundation of the self, or rather that the subject was not its own foundation but depended upon others in order to be itself. And perhaps even more ironic, the theme of that interpersonal self, that decentered self, is directly correlate with traditional religious concepts. The anti-religious agenda of postmodernism is not a necessary conclusion from the decentered self.

I believe it is fair to say that many in the Marcel Society did not realize that such "postmodern" concepts were available in Marcel. Nonetheless, I believe that contemporary discussion needs the resources found in thinkers like Marcel and Levinas in order amidst our context to make a truly ethical response.

The relatively simple task I have chosen is to comment on a few passages from Marcel and Levinas. [The indented passages in the article are excerpted from the full texts given in the Appendix to be found at the end of the article.] As introduction, I would say that each author has a profound interest in two co-ordinated themes: 1) the description of ethics as the substitution of the other's will for mine and 2) an interpretation of the self that allows for this substitution to be mine. In the first theme, autonomy of the subject is replaced by a radical and ethical heteronomy; while in the second theme this substitution is the self, preserving the self from complete dissolution into the other, from becoming the tool or slave for the other. I hope these texts say it more eloquently and concisely than I can.

Marcel

Marcel developed his thoughts on the other and intersubjectivity starting in the *Metaphysical Journal*, and *Being and Having*. Many of the themes developed in these passages are continued in his later works, but the two passages to be analyzed first were both written in 1939 and published in *Du refus à l'invocation*, (*Refusing the Call*) or as it is translated *Creative Fidelity* [1]. The first theme text is in the essay "Belonging and Disposability."

If I assert of a servant: he belongs to me, I would obviously provoke a genuine shock in my audience; assuming that I am not treated with the silent commiseration due an idiot, and am asked what right I have to assert that this servant belongs to me, I will answer that I treat him as a thing which I have acquired or which has been given to me, etc.

Why begin with he belongs to me? I suggest this assertion epitomizes the aggression of self-interest. Me is the true subject in this utterance, for he is not a subject, a person with freedom. He is a peripheral object. I am the center, the self. Marcel registers our shock, indeed our revolt. Notwithstanding the arguments of philosophers, we all are morally astonished by his degradation of a person into a possession.

We respond asking, what right I have to assert that this servant belongs to me. This question, addressed to a person, challenges the very degradation by its asking. Marcel answers in the first person, now assuming the center that he deferred at the outset: I will answer that I treat him as a thing which I have acquired or which has been given to me, etc.

Whatever the specified nature of the response, however, it is clear that it has every chance of not satisfying my questioner; on the contrary, it

will seem to him an extravagant and unacceptable claim. Of course, it would have been otherwise when slavery still existed.

Regardless of the reply, we discount his claim. Despite the pretense of dialogue here, we cannot accept the I's claim. Our resistance is on the behalf of him, of the servant, the third person. I cannot stand by while you enslave a third person. The injustice, the violation of right, here is beyond the realm of the faked dialogue of question and answer. The protest against immorality towards a third brooks no reasons, no rationalizations. Indeed the immorality of slavery is at least as much the communal tolerance of it as the aggression of the slave-holder. Injustice is not only a two-party relationship, as in Hegel's master/slave dialectic, but implicates the third party, the you to whom the master speaks of his slaves. However, we now leave behind a third person and problems of justice.

It is curious to note that the question is completely transformed if I happen to declare to another: I belong to you. Here we have completely shifted the ground.

The question is the relationship between the two terms of belonging. We leave the lecture hall, where I speak to you about my relationship with him. I am face-to-face with an other, indeed with a you. While before I spoke of him as a thing; now I speak to him, or rather to you. I am still subject, but now he shares the center.

First it must be observed – and this is essential – that I am evoking a situation that cannot really be objectified, strictly speaking; one, in any case, which cannot be objectified without its nature being radically changed.

Marcel speaks again in a first person discourse, and it “cannot be objectified without its nature being radically changed,” means that the first person cannot be replaced by a third person, by an object or even a “him.” Why not? Because here we reflect upon the address to another, the reality of saying to her, “I belong to you.” Such reflection requires that the I be me, and not some objective “One,” requires that I speak the speech, and not about the speech. The “he belongs to me” was objectification because it was speech about a person as object, as third person. The ethical reflection we are pursuing can be thought only in speaking to you about me and you, from inside the situation.

Let us examine closely the original relation: Jack, I belong to you. This means: I am opening an unlimited credit account for you, you can do

what you want with me, I give myself to you. This does not mean, at least not in principle: I am your slave;

The name (Jack) emphasizes that this is speech spoken to a unique person, a you with a name. The explanation involves a trust in you no matter how things go. Your will governs me, and what I am, I give to you. Here is true dislocation of the center, from the self. My self is no longer mine, but yours.

"This does not mean, at least not in principle: I am your slave." Notice that we did not simply invert the "he belongs to me," into "I belong to him." In that case, we would have the slave's ideology. I would tell you about him, the master, and you still would be complicit or offended. The subtle play of pronouns makes apparent what could only be argued laboriously philosophically: that relations between two people surpass the alternatives of either master or slave, but this will be clear later.

on the contrary, I freely put myself at your disposal; the best use I can make of my freedom is to place it in your hands; it is as though I freely substituted your freedom for my own; or paradoxically, it is by that very substitution that I consummate my freedom.

Were he the master, he would enslave me. But I am not enslaved. "I freely put myself at your disposal." What is this freedom in the freely? The freedom of substitution. (To the best of my knowledge, this is the only use of this term in Marcel's Oeuvre.) What would coercion be? You or He belongs to me. In some sense, I can slavishly tell a third that I belong to you – but always that is telling a you whom I face that I belong to him (a third). Only in an I/you situation may I announce the substitution that is not slavery. The freedom of speech itself displays my capacity to bestow my own freedom, my own interpretation on the situation. I perform the substitution, not you. The paradox, indeed, is that this freedom is truest, most perfected, consummated. While the aggression of selfishness is immoral, autonomy itself is imperfect; only yielding freedom, the substitution of your will for mine is fully free – because it is the freedom to not rule myself – but not the slavery of force compelling me to be ruled by another.

Only by expressly considering the belonging to an Absolute You, to God, will the depth of Marcel's discussion become clear. Marcel explores the issue of self-possession in his essay "Phenomenological Notes on Being in a Situation." Towards the end of that essay he returns to the issue of belonging to other people. He raises the question of whether Christ's claim "You belong to me" does not provoke an irritation and disavowal in himself.

What right has an other to claim that I belong to him? And we are back again at the issue of the immorality of treating a person as a thing. But Marcel pursues this case, for him unique, of God's claim.

Hence I shall refrain from supporting the strictly rebellious claim that the "you belong to me" stirred up in my center. But it must be clearly noted that it is the value rather than the formal possibility of the claim that is at issue.

Marcel tips his hand by referring to a "strictly rebellious claim," as he will soon interpret our resistance as rebellion (not, for example, justified autonomy). Again, it is not a logical issue, an objectifiable issue. It is a question for me, and it is a question of value.

"Indeed, who am I to pretend that I do not belong to You? In effect, if I belong to You, it is not to say: I am Your possession; this mysterious relation does not occur on the level of having as would be the case if You were a finite power."

To emphasize the I as speaker, the I for whom this is a question, Marcel inserts quotation marks. But he cannot maintain himself in the second person. Marcel cannot explore you belong to me, but turns from Christ, or an other, saying to me "You belong to me," to my question of whether "I belong to you." Once we have made that shift, we resume the question of the last passage. Such belonging cannot be possession, cannot be the loss of my self. However, Marcel suspects that finite wills (human or general wills) may reduce me to a thing ("as would be the case if You were a finite power"). The insistence on infinity is key to preserving my self as self.

"Not only are You freedom, but You also will me. You instigate me too as freedom. You call me to create myself. You are this very call."

Here substitution is taken to its fullest extreme. Your will is mine, indeed, you are my freedom. But you will for me to substitute myself. You are the origin of my freedom. Indeed, you are the call to substitution. The other here is not another self for me. He (YOU!) are discovered to me as a call to substitute your will for mine. The other is no object, no thing to be known. You are my call to freedom, to substitution.

"And if I reject it, i.e., You, if I persist in maintaining that I belong only to myself, if is as though I walled myself up; as though I bound myself to strangling with my own hands that reality in whose name I believed I was resisting You."

What measure of free choice do I have? To what extent am I free to choose between alternatives? The only alternative to the freedom of substitutions is to refuse the call, to maintain myself against your will, to be

autonomous. Marcel provides two images of that refusal: making a prison of my own will, and strangling myself. All in the name of self-possession, a false sense of freedom which is chained to myself, not freed to be for the other.

Marcel restates these themes and deepens the final point:

If this is so, to know that I belong to You is to know that I belong to myself only on this condition – what is more, this belonging is identical to and united with the only complete and authentic freedom which I can claim: this freedom is a gift; even though I must accept it.

To know that I belong to You is to know that I belong to myself only on this condition”: Self-possession is dependent on responding to your call by substituting your will for mine. True self-hood is freedom from the prison of my own will. Authentic freedom is responsive freedom. The substitution of your will for mine is my own freedom.

“This freedom is a gift.” I have no claim to this freedom you instigate. I do not earn it through moral struggle or deserve it inherently. “Even though I must accept it”; for it to be mine, I must act in response. It is not coercion nor an intrusion of force.

“the power dispensed to me to accept or to refuse it is inseparable from this gift, and there is a way for me to assert this freedom which amounts to a refusal, and this refusal, addressed to the very thing which makes it possible, has the distinctive character of betrayal.”

Here Marcel reaches his most challenging. Again, we see the absence of a power prior to the call. I am not choosing the call, but am empowered by the call itself. Even our power of refusing arises from the call. Thus the possibility of autonomy, or self-possession, derives from the other, but it is an inversion of the other's call. Here betrayal appears as the use of a gift to deny the giver. Notice, moreover, that the gift is the freedom to be free of myself, to belong to you, to make your will my own. All autonomy, all denial of your claims to me, originates in this prior power to substitute. Prior to my acceptance or refusal, my substitution or my protests of autonomy, is a gift from you, from an other.

Levinas

Thirty years later, in 1967, Emmanuel Levinas developed similar themes in an essay which later became the centerpiece of his second great work *Autrement qu'être* (Otherwise than Being) [2]. I begin with a discussion of the self and its agency in receiving the call to substitution:

The passivity this side of the passivity-activity alternative, more passive than any inertia is described by the ethical terms: accusation, persecution, and responsibility for the others.

"Passivity" for Levinas is the reception of what Marcel called the gift. In other texts Marcel had also situated this gift prior to passivity and to activity. Levinas insists it is named by ethical and not ontological terms. The terms are explained as we go on, but the last is key: responsibility for the others, for their willing and their actions, not responsibility solely for myself and what I have done.

The persecuted is expelled from his place and has only himself to himself, and has no place in the world to rest his head. He is pulled out of every game and every war.

I am persecuted by the other. Persecution is displacement. Like a prisoner in a concentration camp, I lack even a place to sleep. Parallel to Marcel's description of the other's call and instigation of my freedom, Levinas's persecution is an unchosen initiative by the other. The other displaces me, pulling me out of my own home, my own interests, my own battles with others, my own disinterested speculation.

Beyond auto-affection – which is still an activity were it strictly contemporaneous with its passivity – the self is stripped in persecution, from which an accusation is inseparable, in the absolute passivity of the creature, of substitution.

Two different concepts of the self are juxtaposed. On the one hand is auto-affection, which would traditionally be called auto-nomy, where my self-relation makes me the both cause and recipient of the command (the call) at the same time; on the other hand, the other persecutes me prior to my self-consciousness, prior to my autonomy. Levinas focuses on the second, because only there is the self stripped of its interests and its games. Here is absolute passivity, freed of all initiative. This is what it means to have been created, to not be one's own source. Creatureliness is ethical. It is my substitution for an other.

In divesting the ego of its imperialism, the hetero-affection establishes a new indeclinability: the self, subject to an absolute accusative, as though this accusation which it does not even have to assume came from it.

Absolute passivity taken grammatically is being absolutely in the accusative case, to be the object. This allows Levinas the pun on an indeclinable case – one which cannot be declined through the cases to become a subject

of action (nominative), nor an indirect object (dative), nor a possession (genitive). But also, one that one cannot decline, refuse. It is as though one did not even have to accept it. Again, Marcel's echo is that I must accept – but that even refusal requires the prior reception of the gift. And Levinas twists this, so that we appear to accuse ourselves. The other's accusation so defines me (instigates me, too, as freedom), that I appear to be its source.

The self involved in the gnawing away at oneself [*le se du se ronger*] in responsibility, which is also incarnation, is not an objectification of the self by me.

I consume myself in responsibility for the other, but I do not become an object to myself. Incarnation is this body which is mine, without being a possession, as Marcel often discusses. Responsibility is the self-relation of gnawing away at oneself.

The self, the persecuted, is accused beyond its fault before freedom, and thus in unavowable innocence. One must not think of it as the state of original sin; it is, on contrary, the original goodness of creation.

My persecution, my accusation precedes my freedom – it is persecution because I am innocent and unaware of my own innocence. Levinas rejects original sin, because I am not accused for some fault or some act of mine – I have no fault and have had no freedom with which to act. The very goodness of creation is the absence of self-origination, not the free adherence to the Right. The passivity of substitution is the accusative of being called to the Good by the other and not by myself. I stand accused, in the accusative, because I cannot originate my own freedom.

A second text from this essay, in its later revised form of 1974, takes us from the complexity of the nature of the self which cannot quite re-appropriate the accusation, the substitution, to a fuller statement of what substitution itself is.

... This describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the other in me. The other in me and in the midst of my identification itself. The ipseity fractured in its return to self.

The ellipses refer back to a discussion of substitution freeing oneself from one's own games without my freedom to assume or accept the demand. Continuing the thoughts about incarnation, Levinas locates the passivity of the call as the "vulnerability of the sensible" – the body's nudity. This is what Marcel termed the mystery of incarnation, that in me there is something which is other, that my relation to my body is not that of ownership nor of imprisonment, but of assignment or of vulnerability. The paradox is

that the other is found so deep within me that even my identification of my self is not a reflexivity of me and my self; instead, in forming my identification the other contributes, or even, is a prior condition. My self cannot make its way back to be me without an inescapable detour through the other. The me is also the other, or at least is the journey of myself through the other.

The self-accusation of remorse gnaws away even until opening the self, until fissioning it, gnaws at the closed nucleus and the firmness of consciousness – which always establishes equality and equilibrium between the trauma and the act where this equilibrium is at least sought in reflection and its forms, without having effectively ensured the possibility of total reflection and of the unity of Spirit beyond the multiplicity of souls.

The accusation (the call to substitute), instills the chewing over [re-mordere] which itself gnaws away at the closure and unity of me and myself. Levinas uses other images, like suffocating in oneself (recall Marcel's self-strangulation) to explain the self-enclosing self, but here we see that responsibility gnaws at, or chews over, this closure, destroying the capsule. What defines that encapsulation is the recuperation of the self through reflection. The trauma of accusation, of substitution, is made my own, my act through reflection, as though the other with her demands were not other but could be balanced by my thinking. Ethics would lose its exorbitance, its excess of duty, as reflection re-establishes a happy medium. The me recovers the myself by reflectively uniting the other and me ("the multiplicity of souls"), or at least it seeks this recovery – which it cannot accomplish. Indeed, the other's interruption is the fissioning, the accusation, that the other in me cannot be rendered my self. That my very effort must be preceded by that interruption by the other.

But isn't that the way, in itself, an other can be in the same without alienating it, and without the emancipation of the same from itself turning into a slavery to anyone? This way is possible because, since an "immemorial time," anarchically, in subjectivity the by-the-other ["par l'autre"] is also the for-the-other ["pour l'autre"].

The way is the splitting, the fracture of the self. Levinas, too, refuses Hegel's dichotomy of master and slave. The other interrupting the self does not enslave my self. The other frees the self from its own prisons of reflection, from its own will. To explain the possibility of this, Levinas refers to a past that was never present, a priority prior to all re-presentable priority (otherwise, consciousness will once again have restored equilibrium). This is an echo of Rosenzweig and even of late Schelling. The subject, in this deep

past, endures the actions of the other as its own action for the sake of the other. For the other's sake, what the other does to me I will. Substitution.

In suffering by the other's fault, suffering for the other's fault appears as supporting [supporter]. The for-the-other preserves all the patience of the undergoing imposed by the other.

This substituting oneself for the other is to substitute his will for mine. Only by willing his will, by supporting him, do I refrain from re-possessing myself, from asserting my freedom to choose. The for-the-other is the freedom from my own will, from my betrayal of me in reflection.

Substitution for [à] another, expiation for [pour] another. Remorse is the trope of the "literal sense" of sensibility. In its passivity it effaces the distinction between being accused and accusing oneself.

The final step is expiation. I make his will my own, his fault my own, his sin mine. I am for-the-other. I suffer for his faults, even for his cruelty to me. Such is being a creature, being incarnate. To chew over (re-mordere) to gnaw away at myself, to be accused by myself. The me is this movement of the accusative of the accusation which comes from the other in me. Substitution is the absolute accusative, the passivity of suffering for the other.

Into my own voice

In the remaining pages, I would like to draw out a few points of difference between these fundamentally sympathetic texts.

The first, and perhaps most serious difference is in the very concept of substitution. Have I forced a juxtaposition of Levinas's chief concept with a peripheral one of Marcel's? Despite the unique use of the concept in these passages, this theme is central in Marcel's thought, linked with more familiar themes like incarnation, the priority of the other, the belonging to God, and so on.

But still worse: Marcel speaks of substituting your freedom for my own; Levinas of substituting myself for the other. Is that really the same concept? Are they speaking of the same thing? I hope the commentary has made this obvious. Substituting the other's freedom for mine is perhaps less radical than being hostage for the other, substituting myself for him. But if the other's freedom is taken not only as his rational or moral will, but as his life, his sin, his faults, then Marcel's substitution is much closer to Levinas's. The deeper issue reveals the agreement, because each is trying to identify my dislocation, the penetration of my castle of consciousness by the other. Ethics depends on an irrefusable being for the other, whether I say I substitute for him, or I say I substitute his freedom for my own.

The second difference is more challenging, precisely because it verges into the theological distance between these two, a converted Catholic and a Jew. Marcel refers to the other in substitution as You, with a capital Y, as God. He is meditating, almost, on the mystery of Christ in me. Levinas criticizes both Marcel and Buber for that Absolute You. Yet as he verges towards the incarnation and the expiation for the other, when he extols the passivity, the suffering for the other's faults – well aren't we in Christian thought? Are we?

Levinas develops a Jewish concept of our human obligation to be for-the-other, an obligation developed throughout the Jewish tradition before and after Jesus of Nazareth. Marcel in the earlier writings, before converting to Catholicism (his mother had been Jewish, but his step-mother aunt, a converted Protestant) was aware of the priority of the other, and the betrayal of the gift of freedom in autonomy. The themes are as much Jewish themes as Christian.

Or maybe more? If a Christian thinker were to read Levinas, would she not have to re-cast Christology? Is not the other in the me, the other person, and not the absolute You of God? Are we not to substitute for the other in her humanity, and not because of the intimate relationship of prayer? Must not any person, any other, be one for whom I substitute myself? Is the "Christian" message anything else than that each of us is persecuted, accused by the other, and that that accusation makes us substitute for the accuser? Is not the truth of incarnation, that we are incarnate, vulnerable in our naked skin? That we are persecuted and so expiation for others, and not that some divinity is expiation for us? I make expiation and suffer for him: not "You or even He make expiation for me." Or less rhetorically, must not one read the Gospel as proclaiming that every person is the one for whom I must suffer, the one before whom I have infinite duties – but then perhaps we would no longer need to worry whether it was Jewish or Christian.

And perhaps the post-modernists need not be excluded by their disavowal or religion. The discovery that the self is not reigning in its own will can be, remarkably, the true discovery of others – the awareness that I am obligated towards others. If the egotism and solipsism of the subject is now readily dismissed, must we ignore this more ethical and more spiritual analysis of the human condition?

A few words about this paper. I am speaking to you, I am hostage for you, responsible for each of your faults, even your faults in understanding Levinas and Marcel, or worse, your failure to substitute. Levinas interprets speaking to the other as apology in the Greek sense, as an attempt to justify myself to you, for whom I bear responsibility, for whom I am substitute. Substitution is thus prior to apology, ethics prior to reason. It is not at all obvious that reading a paper, monopolizing the floor for this length of time is a good apology. I fear I must fail to be hostage for you – that instead I have made you hostage for my talk. [All the more, when you are my reader, tied to this text, line after line, with no chance to question me.]

To compensate for my betrayal of my responsibility in speaking, I chose to comment. I substituted Levinas's and Marcel's texts for my speech. In commenting I have not only substituted each for the other, but each for me. I substituted their thought for mine. Their thought accuses me. As commentator, I was hostage for them. The prospects for philosophical speech are somewhat dim, except when it is speech that is vulnerable to the other. Serving another's text is a form of vulnerability. Publishing this commentary is a delicate matter – for we are not available to each other. But by making public the words I stand behind, and so by withdrawing myself and leaving you only the words, I do offer to you my thought, my will. Writing, unlike speaking, is thus both an extreme invulnerability (I am not here when you read this), and an extreme vulnerability (but my work is now in your hands). At its best, a commentator leaves his or her readers with the other texts – you will now substitute Levinas and Marcel for me.

Appendix

Marcel "Essai de philosophie concrète", 64–5; all translations mine; see *Creative Fidelity*, 39).

If I assert of a servant: he belongs to me, I would obviously provoke a genuine shock in my audience; assuming that I am not treated with the silent commiseration due an idiot, and am asked what right I have to assert that this servant belongs to me, I will answer that I treat him as a thing which I have acquired or which has been given to me, etc. Whatever the specified nature of the response, however, it is clear that it has every chance of not satisfying my questioner; on the contrary, it will seem to him an extravagant and unacceptable claim. Of course, it would have been otherwise when slavery still existed. It is curious to note that the question is completely transformed if I happen to declare to another: I belong to you. Here we have completely shifted the ground. First it must be observed – and this is essential – that I am evoking a situation which cannot really be objectified, strictly speaking; one, in any case, which cannot be objectified without its nature being radically changed. Let us examine closely the original relation: Jack, I belong to you. This means: I am opening an unlimited credit account for you, you can do what you want with me, I give myself to you. This does not mean, at least not in principle: I am your slave; on the contrary, I freely put myself at your disposal; the best use I can make of my freedom is to place it in your hands; it is as though I freely substituted your freedom for my own; or paradoxically, it is by that very substitution that I consummate my freedom.

"Essai", 154–55 [*Creative Fidelity*, 100].

What right has an other to claim that I belong to him? I Hence I shall refrain from supporting the strictly rebellious claim that the you belong to me stirred up in my center. But it must be clearly noted that it is the value rather than the formal possibility of the claim that is at issue. "Indeed, who am I to pretend that I do not belong to You? In effect, if I belong to You, it is not to say: I am Your possession; this

mysterious relation does not occur on the level of having as would be the case if You were a finite power. Not only are You freedom, but You also will me. You instigate me too as freedom. You call me to create myself. You are this very call. And if I reject it, i.e., You, if I persist in maintaining that I belong only to myself, if is as though I walled myself up; as though I bound myself to strangling with my own hands that reality in whose name I believed I was resisting You. If this is so, to know that I belong to You is to know that I belong to myself only on this condition – what is more, this belonging is identical to and united with the only complete and authentic freedom which I can claim: this freedom is a gift; even though I must accept it; the power dispensed to me to accept or to refuse it is inseparable from this gift, and there is a way for me to assert this freedom which amounts to a refusal, and this refusal, addressed to the very thing which makes it possible, has the distinctive character of betrayal.”

Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 155–56; *Otherwise than Being*, 121.

The passivity this side of the passivity-activity alternative, more passive than any inertia is described by the ethical terms: accusation, persecution, and responsibility for the others. The persecuted is expelled from his place and has only himself to himself, has no place in the world to rest his head. He is pulled out of every game and every war. Beyond auto-affection – which is still an activity were it strictly contemporaneous with its passivity – the self is stripped in persecution, from which an accusation is inseparable, in the absolute passivity of the creature, of substitution. In divesting the ego of its imperialism, the hetero-affection establishes a new indeclinability: the self, subject to an absolute accusative, as though this accusation which it does not even have to assume came from it. The self involved in the gnawing away at oneself [*le se du se ronger*] in responsibility, which is also incarnation, is not an objectification of the self by me. The self, the persecuted, is accused beyond its fault before freedom, and thus in unavowable innocence. One must not think of it as the state of original sin; it is, on contrary, the original goodness of creation.

Autrement qu'être, 160–61; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 125.

This describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as the other in me. The other in me and in the midst of my identification itself. The ipseity fractured in its return to self. The self-accusation of remorse gnaws away even until opening the self, until fissioning it, gnaws at the closed nucleus and the firmness of consciousness – which always establishes equality and equilibrium between the trauma and the act – where this equilibrium is at least sought in reflection and its forms, without having effectively ensured the possibility of total reflection and of the unity of Spirit beyond the multiplicity of souls. But isn't that the way, in itself, an other can be in the same without alienating it, and without the emancipation of the same from itself turning into a slavery to anyone? This way is possible because, since an “immemorial time,” anarchically, in subjectivity the by-the-other [*“par l'autre”*] is also the for-the-other [*“pour l'autre”*]. In suffering by the other's fault, suffering for the others' fault appears as supporting [*supporter*]. The for-the-other preserves all the patience of the undergoing imposed by the other. Substitution for [*à*] another, expiation for [*pour*] another. Remorse is the trope of the “literal sense” of sensibility. In its passivity it effaces the distinction between being accused and accusing oneself.

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FACING THE OTHER

Levinas, Perelman and Rosenzweig

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Idealism completely carried out reduces all ethics to politics
 — Levinas (*Totality and Infinity* 216)

"Otherness" or "alterity" have become fashionable terms in recent literary theory. The most problematic question, however, is defining just what and who is the "other." In most post-structuralist theory, "otherness" is usually accompanied by the notion of a "radical rupture" which subverts closed identities and all-encompassing systems. Is "otherness," then, an inchoate anonymous unknown reminding us of the limits of our knowledge and thus the fount of endless skepticism? Or is it the passage through which the Otherness of divine transcendence crosses? Is it the basis for nihilism, or for a political awareness of the relation of power to knowledge and the commitment to subvert oppression? Is it Derrida's "difference," Kristeva's feminine semiosis, Lacan's Unconscious, Foucault's marginalized discourses?

Moreover, can the relation to the human other as an individual other person have anything to do with epistemological alterity in general? And what do these notions of alterity have to do with the relation of philosophy and literary theory to Judaism?

In this essay, I want to examine the ways in which the contemporary French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas addresses these issues, for they are at the heart of his work. Levinas is one of the few writers who is able to restore *ethical binding* in the face of the ruptures enacted in post-modern thought. His aim is to deconstruct the subject but retain it as responsible, lucid, awake, obligated. In fact, Levinas' work may be characterized as an extraordinary ethical critique of philosophy. It is a "summoning" of philosophical reason in the sense that a summons is an urgent call or order to

a trial. It is also a summons of "witnesses" whose testimony will enact a judgement on philosophy, and a summons to a prior obligation of both the philosophical "knowing subject," and the subject as the "contents" or object of philosophy.

I will analyze Levinas' work in relation to both contemporary literary theory and modern Jewish philosophy by comparing it to two other important modern theorists of language and ethics whose work, like his, needs to be brought much more into contemporary debates about these issues: the rhetorical theorist Chaim Perelman and the great German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. Finally, I will discuss some of the relations between Levinas' work and the Holocaust, that catastrophic event which seems to have broken all covenants between God and humanity, human and human, language and ethics.

I. Levinas' background

Since Levinas' work is not as well known in America as in Europe, let me begin with some biographical facts. Though Levinas is commonly described as a "French" philosopher, he was actually born in Russia, in Kovno, in 1906 and left in 1923 for philosophical studies (especially in phenomenology) in France and Germany. He became a French citizen and was mobilized into the French army when World War II began; the French uniform saved him from deportation to the gas chambers when he was captured by the Germans. While he was held in a prisoner-of-war camp, however, all his family remaining in Russia were murdered by the Nazis. When he emerged from the camp after the war, Levinas wrote of his "profound need to leave the climate of that [Heidegger's] philosophy" (*Existence* 19). He proceeded with an extensive critique of phenomenological thought and the way it related consciousness to being.

The entire thrust of Levinas' work is to reverse the subordination of ethics to ontology (the study of Being) and the other branches of philosophy. Ethics is not something to be added on after we establish a metaphysics or logic or aesthetics or epistemology. Ethics, which he defines as the irreducible relation of obligation to the other, is prior. Prior here does not mean "coming before" in any linear chronological sense, but a realm which has not been thought and upon which thought nevertheless depends for its possibility.

This search for what philosophy has not or cannot think is an enterprise common to many modern French and German thinkers, from Heidegger to Derrida. In Deconstructionist literary theory influenced by Derrida, the focus on the non-knowledge which always conditions and eludes knowledge led to a recognition of the instability of linguistic meaning, and a practice of skeptical critique as the constant unsettling of all foundations. Those more inspired by Foucault examine the hidden links of knowledge and power, force and signification. These varying means of rupturing philosophical

"totality" all involve a solicitation of what is "other" as what has been "marginalized, repressed, excluded" by philosophy and its modes of intelligibility. The "subject" defined as the individual perceiving self or transparent consciousness who makes meaning of the world has been put into question. Levinas, however, differs from most post-structuralist thinkers by asserting that "*l'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui*" (Totality 39). The word "*autrui*" signifies the other as personal other; in other words, absolute alterity passes or is traced through the personal human other.

But there is another sense in which what is other is the Jew, and there is this "other" side to Levinas the philosopher as well. In 1947 Levinas also became the Director of the École Normale Israélite Orientale, a Jewish school which is part of the Alliance Israélite, an organization dedicated to spreading French and Jewish culture throughout Jewish communities in France and its former Mediterranean empire. He held this position simultaneously with his posts teaching philosophy in French universities and has written prolifically on Judaism and Jewish life.

He has also delivered, for the past twenty years, the annual Talmudic lecture at the Colloquium of French-Jewish Intellectuals. In these lectures he has argued that what modern Judaism needs most of all is a renewed relation to the Talmud, that vast corpus of ancient and medieval rabbinic commentary on Jewish law and lore. His work is permeated with a distrust of religious mysticism; in his view, such attempts at ecstatic fusion or "direct experience of the sacred" destroy the lucidity of an ethical metaphysics.

One of the figures Levinas uses to describe alterity in both his philosophical and his Jewish writings is "face." But the "face of the other" is not for him a visual image; it is, rather, a facing *relation*. The other faces my own separate and narcissistic ego, interrupts, and shames it — a calling into question which is the call of conscience as both an appeal and an order. The connotations of the Hebrew word for face (*panim*) in biblical and rabbinic tradition are all important here. The verbal root *panah* in Hebrew connotes a "turning" towards something, and also a kind of personal presence.¹ In Levinas, facing is being confronted with, turned towards, facing up to, being judged and called to by the other. Facing is a disruption of that free, autonomous self which through its reasoning and consciousness thinks it can construct the world out of itself, or know the world from itself.

For both Levinas and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), the great German-Jewish philosopher whose work deeply influenced Levinas, that presumption is the archetypal gesture of philosophy: idealism. Indeed, Richard Cohen has persuasively argued that the very notion of the "face" in Levinas may have its source in the culminating pages of Rosenzweig's great work *The Star of Redemption* wherein Rosenzweig describes the apotheosis of truth with the figure of a face.²

The facing relation in Levinas is not, however, a relation of free reciprocal exchange, and *not* a Buberian I-Thou dialogue. Instead, this facing

traumatizes and empties the subject. It binds the self to the other despite the self's will in an obligation prior to freedom, a heteronomy or "*difficile liberté*," to use the title of one of Levinas' books on Judaism. Identity comes not from the coincidence of self with self but from the recurrence of the call of obligation to the other. On the one hand, Levinas seeks within the philosophical tradition for moments of recognition of this ethical otherness (for example in Plato's notion of the "Good beyond Being" and Descartes' "Idea of the Infinite"). On the other hand, I think he is also calling philosophy to this recognition in what I would characterize as a kind of prophetic and rhetorical appeal that coincides with Levinas' understanding of Judaism.

II. Rhetoric and politics in recent literary theory

The relations of Levinas' Jewish thought to his philosophical thought and to his personal biography are highly complex matters which I can only touch upon here. Levinas never directly mentions his own experience of World War II in his philosophical work, but it seems to me to be one reason why he "brings philosophy to trial" and part of the explanation for the kinds of witnesses he summons in that trial — and for his very notion of signification as a kind of witness, of language itself as summons, judgment, apology, and teaching. That devastating experience must have also have been one motivation for his attempt to construct a philosophy which itself is not based on war (even as a game) but on justice and peace — peace defined as that very moment of renunciation, apology, welcome, and vulnerable exposure to the other.

It is not fortuitous that Levinas begins and ends both his great philosophical books *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* with meditations on war and peace. The very first sentence in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* is "Are we duped by morality?" Isn't war the very "truth of the real" as Heraclitus long ago argued when he said "War is king of all"? If so, politics as the art of foreseeing and winning war would be the "very exercise of reason" and moral consciousness would have no recourse against "the mocking gaze of the political man" (21). Needless to say, that mocking gaze is found in much recent literary theory which has taken an intensely political turn through schools of criticism variously dubbed the New Historicism, cultural materialism, or cultural poetics.³ What might be some of the relations of Levinasian ethics to this new literary politics?

Both right-wing pragmatists such as Stanley Fish and left-wing Marxists such as Terry Eagleton argue that truth is a variable social construct connected to the interests and ideologies of particular social groups. The key question, however, is, What is the sociality of this social relation? For the political critics it is at bottom a contest for power, a struggle between domination and subversion wherein different social forces endlessly vie for control of meaning. The aim of this kind of criticism is to reveal the "social

constructedness" (or what some critics call the "rhetoricity") as opposed to the "ontological groundedness" of these historical and social versions of truth. This act of "demystification" is intended to empower other voices which have been muted or repressed to contest these accounts. Roland Barthes' "pleasure of the text" has been turned into the "war of discourse."

Yet for most of the cultural-political critics there is no space "outside" this realm of war and negotiation, or outside the mutual implications of discourse and power and the constraints of institutions on "cultural practices." Hence they call for what they term a "rhetorical" notion of truth, and associate rhetorical criticism with the detection and deployment of language in the assertion of power, or with "textual strategies" in the war of discourse. Or, rhetoric is used — as in de Man or Derrida — to denote a form of negative epistemology and antagonism to philosophy, a language of tropes that interferes with and undercuts the philosophical logos.⁴

In any case, this is a very distorted notion of rhetoric which severs it from one of its ancient roots — what Aristotle called "dialectic" or deliberative argument, a mode of reasoning which deals with theses that are not necessary but only probable. That is, where formal logical syllogisms cannot apply, where there are not absolute grounds for truth, but in which decisions and actions still need to be reasoned over and taken.

That is the aspect of rhetoric which Chaim Perelman revives in his masterwork *The New Rhetoric*. Rhetoric for Perelman involves a critique of modern forms of logical and mathematical rationalism which have their precursor in Descartes, but which have been overextended and misapplied as criteria for *all* argument. Perelman argues that there are many areas of human thought and endeavor — including questions of politics, ethics, religion, philosophy — which elude the methods of mathematical and natural sciences. If we restrict our notion of reason to the model of formal logic, and Cartesian intuitive self-evident truths, we create uncompromising and ineradicable dualisms such as "reason/imagination," "knowledge/opinion," "universal objectivity/incommunicable subjectivity," "judgments of reality/judgments of value," "theory/practice" (510). These dualisms "and the assertion that whatever is not objectively and indisputably valid belongs to the realm of the arbitrary and the subjective create an unbridgeable gulf between theoretical knowledge, which is rational, and action, for which motives would be wholly irrational" (512). The consequence is that practice ceases to be reasonable, critical argument becomes incomprehensible, and philosophical reflection itself becomes meaningless.

Why such a fear of an "end of philosophy" or of the irrational? I suspect that Perelman's *The New Rhetoric* (1958) was written, like much of Levinas' philosophy, in response to the catastrophes and violence of World War II. Perelman was a Belgian Jew and one of the leaders of Belgian resistance; he also had a distinguished career as a professor of philosophy and law.⁵ Like Levinas, he had personally experienced the effects of a massive collapse

of reasonable discourse in the violence of that war. Like Levinas, he is searching for a "third way" beyond these dualisms, and for a form of reason that is itself neither violent nor injurious to the other and to individual human responsibility. He shares the Levinasian impulse to modify the Enlightenment version of the universal light of reason rather than abandon it completely to a war of conflicting power interests and self-interested ideologies.⁶

So like Levinas, Perelman instead redefines, extends, and amplifies reason to include forms of reasoning which do not involve what is conceptually self-evident, necessary, or autonomous, but which "require an other" and depend upon the relation of address and assent of the other person through discourse. (Rosenzweig makes a similar turn from what he perceived to be the violence of the Hegelian version of history and philosophy to what he called *Sprachdenken* or "speech-thinking.")

In sum, Levinas and Perelman are both in search of a reason-of-the-other, an other-reason which is not however arbitrary, violent, or willful, but rather a non-necessary form of imperative. And that for Perelman is found in the forms of reasoning and persuasion of the rhetorical tradition from the Greeks onward, forms of discourse which were denigrated and neglected by Cartesian logicians and philosophers — described as merely "ornamental," "literary," or "sophistic." From this tradition, Perelman constructs a "critical rationalism" that "transcends the duality 'judgments of reality/value judgments,' and makes both judgments of reality and value judgments dependent on the personality of the scientist or philosopher, who is responsible for his decisions in the field of knowledge as well as the field of action" (*New Rhetoric* 514).⁷

In other words, for Perelman rhetoric is a form of social but non-coercive and non-violent reason which is required to deliberate in areas where there are no necessary or absolute truths. That is, a realm where there are no truths which have *coercive* power, such as the "coercions" of self-evident reason or deductive logic or non-rational faith. Formal Cartesian reason is founded on the solipsistic notion of self-evident truths, clear, distinct, and necessary — there is no need for deliberation with others, nor any question of varying intensities of adherence to these truths, nor the possibility of withholding one's assent from them. Such reason, like the theoretical reason of Kant, "imposes itself on every rational being" and "agreement is inevitable" (2). Rhetoric, by contrast, is defined by Perelman as that form of reason which involves the freely given and responsible commitment of a deliberating audience. Perelman's "new rhetoric" is then a "third way" between the compulsions of formal autonomous reason and the coercions of violence. To deliberate or argue with another

implies that one has renounced resorting to forces alone, that value is attached to gaining the adherence of one's interlocutor by means of

reasoned persuasion, and that one is not regarding him as an object, but appealing to his free judgement. Recourse to argumentation assumes the establishment of a community of minds, which, while it lasts, excludes the use of violence.

(55)

This is a notion of rhetoric quite at odds with the way the term is used in much contemporary literary theory where rhetoric has often been used to denote the ineradicable political biases and ideologies involved in language use and interpretation. Rhetoric is then the deployment of "textual strategies" in the war-game of interpretation; and/or linguistic self-consciousness and self-reflexivity; and/or the critical self-consciousness of the interpreter who recognizes that there is no ontological or transcendent foundation to language or truth, that all truth is embodied in the social constructs of linguistic practice. To attain this critical self-consciousness is posited as an act of demystification which is a necessary part of a politically progressive practice, a kind of "post-modern ethic."

In fact, much of the recent epistemological skepticism and political criticism in literary theory justifies itself through an implicit stance of ethical and moral superiority: that is, it claims to resist by its demystifications and radical critiques the absolutism of tyrants and fanatics. But Perelman has a remarkable insight to add to the debate: the radical skeptic is often not the opposite, but the counterpart of the fanatic — for both equate adherence to theses with recognition of absolute truth. Both skeptic and fanatic thus foreclose deliberative argument about choice when no absolute ground exists. Writes Perelman:

Since rhetorical proof is never completely necessary proof, the thinking person who gives his adherence to the conclusions of an argumentation does so by an act that commits him and for which he is responsible. The fanatic accepts the commitment, but as one bowing to an absolute and irrefragable truth; the skeptic refuses the commitment, but under the pretext that he does not find it sufficiently definitive. He refuses adherence because his idea of adherence is similar to that of the fanatic: both fail to appreciate that argumentation aims at a choice among possible theses; by proposing and justifying the hierarchy of these theses, argumentation seeks to make the decision a rational one. This role of argumentation in decision making is denied by the skeptic and fanatic. In the absence of compelling reason, they both are inclined to give violence a free hand, rejecting personal commitment.

(62)

This passage might be used to gloss the painful political controversy that has so troubled many contemporary literary critics — the connection

between Paul de Man's radical skepticism and his pro-fascist writings in World War II.⁸ Many of de Man's defenders have argued that his deconstructive skepticism was an implicit repudiation and overcoming of his earlier ideological writings, a posture of critical self-reflexiveness whose notions about "undecidability" and the "impossibility of reading" are intended to guard against all violent engagements. But Perelman's analysis indicates that such radical skepticism, which denies the grounds for any choice between meanings, is overly restrictive in its definition of truth and knowledge. Foreclosing deliberation and choice in endless aporias and "undecidabilities" is an act as absolutist and open to violence as that of the fanatic who refuses to debate due to her or his conviction of possessing that absolute truth.⁹

The same criticism could be made of the "ideological" critic, who holds that all values are masks for self-interested power plays; or the relativist who is intent on constantly undermining any and every claim to a firm foundation for a given value or truth, and refuses to allow for any deliberative argument about the hierarchy of values or criteria for making choices among them. For as the jurist knows, regardless of the lack of any absolute, clear, or unambiguous ground, choices still must be made and decisions rendered.

In Perelman's view, both the fanatic and skeptic relieve themselves of the burden of personal responsibility, action, and commitment to choices made. Rhetorical argumentation, though, is oriented towards decision and the future: "it sets out to bring about some action or prepare the way for it by acting, by discursive methods, on the minds of the hearers" (47). Argumentation, Perelman reminds us, is not merely an intellectual exercise divorced from practical preoccupations. "Language is not only a means of communication: it is also an instrument for acting on minds, a means of persuasion" (132). That is precisely why argumentation is a substitute for the violence which attempts to obtain an action by the use of force or compulsion. I would argue that there are many lessons here for literary criticism and theory. First, restricting questions about meaning or the nature of the literary text to questions about the epistemological status of language is as artificial as the attempt to restrict all reasoning solely to formal logic. Nor is the only alternative an uncritical embrace of "politics" and the assertion that the way language acts on the world is essentially ideological and marked by relations of force, domination, and violence.

In sum, for both Perelman and Levinas, aesthetics and politics need to be subsumed to a critical rationalism which for Perelman is rhetoric and for Levinas ethics.¹⁰ As philosopher, however, Levinas partakes of the ancient philosophical contempt for rhetoric, which he views as the approach to the neighbor through ruse, as a mode of sophistic manipulation and violence rather than as a search for truth. But Levinas' insistence on language as pre-eminently a call or command before it is an exchange of information, is at bottom "rhetorical."

III. Rosenzweig's critique of philosophy

In other words, ethics as the obligation and binding of the self to the other constitutes what Levinas describes as "the 'rationality' of a reason less hard on itself than the reasons of the philosophical tradition," not a decline of rationality, but a fuller rationality (*L'Au-delà du verset* 176). Levinas' critique of reason does not negate reason but tries to formulate a "second" type of reason, a reason which is not autonomous and imperialistic or slavish and mindless. The essential point is that when aesthetics or politics become their own autonomous realms, obliterating the prior realm of the ethics, they inevitably convert into forms of violence and tyranny. They deny the alterity and singularity of otherness, which for Levinas passes through the human other and is the essence of the ethical relation.

To explain this idea more clearly and consider the relation of Levinasian ethics to Jewish thought, we need to examine Levinas' relation to Rosenzweig. Along with Rosenzweig, Levinas saw (long before Foucault) the complicity of power and knowledge, of philosophy and violence. Rosenzweig's work was a fierce attack on Hegelian philosophy and especially Hegel's assertion that "History is the judge of history," that is, that immanent history was the dialectical Life of the Spirit on its road to the consummation of self-knowledge. In Rosenzweig, there is a devastating critique of philosophical idealism, but also an attempt to reconstellate the shattered fragments of that idealism in a new way. And this way involved Rosenzweig in a new relation of philosophy to theology.¹¹

What World War II was for Levinas, World War I and its catastrophic slaughter had been for Rosenzweig. For both thinkers, it became imperative to judge the violence of that history and to give its victims voice. That meant locating an "elsewhere" or "beyond" or "other" which could enact a judgment upon immanent history, even while recognizing that there can be no recourse to traditional theology or traditional notions of transcendence to secure this judgment.

This project ultimately involves both Levinas and Rosenzweig in a kind of prophetic eschatology. And this search for such an elsewhere, or "otherwise than being," or time of the other, is central to the project of many other modern Jewish thinkers — even those who are highly secularized such as Walter Benjamin. One line could be traced that goes from Rosenzweig to Levinas, and from Levinas to Derrida on into post-structuralism; another line goes from Rosenzweig to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory through Benjamin and T.W. Adorno, both of whom were influenced by Rosenzweig's critique of totality.¹² Levinas mentions his profound debt to Rosenzweig in the very first pages of *Totality and Infinity*: "We were impressed by the opposition to the idea of totality in Franz Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung*, a work too often present in this book to be cited" (28).

To briefly (and too simplistically) explain this reference: Rosenzweig's great undoing of "totality" in *The Star* was a critique of the pretensions of Western philosophy from, as he puts it, "the Ionean Islands to Iena" (that is from the Greeks to Hegel) to "know the All." This project, Rosenzweig argued, has roots in the fear of death. Philosophy flees this singular human mortal self by attempting to construct impersonal death-less systems. It tries to reduce the heterogeneity of reality into single, impersonal, explanatory principles (*Star* 1-15). The project culminates in Hegelian idealism where philosophy seeks to construct out of itself a completely autonomous totality, identifying the self-fulfillment of Thought with the consummation of world history, and with Hegel's claim that his own philosophy itself is the final union of Thought and Being wherein identity dialectically overcomes difference. Needless to say, Rosenzweig is only one of the countless philosophers and critics from Kierkegaard to Derrida who have devoted their energies to opposing that notion.

One of Levinas' special contributions, however, is the application of Rosenzweig's critique to contemporary forms of impersonal reason. For example, he writes "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny" (*Totality* 47). Levinas' critique of Heidegger and his connection of Heideggerian philosophy to political violence may be applied, I would add, to de Man's linguistic theory, the key to which is the impersonality and autonomy of language. And this critique would shed another light on both Heidegger's and de Man's own problematic relations to Nazism.

One could even say that in much literary theory of the 1970s and 1980s, "Language" or "History" have taken up the role of impersonal term through which all is mediated or known. The alterity of the singular, personal human other is then defined only as a subordinate function or "site" of impersonal significations or ideologies. But Levinas' critique of impersonality is not made to defend the personal ego as some individual, unified, sovereign center of meaning — a notion which most post-structuralists have also vigorously attacked. As he puts it, "It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other" (*Totality* 40).

The aim of Levinas' work is to show that reason and freedom are not autonomous but are founded on prior structures, and that freedom is justified not of itself, but *by and for the other*. In other words, what claims to be autonomous, independent "for and of-itself" (classical reason, the dialectical march of History, reflexive self-consciousness, the impersonal world of art, the narcissistic ego, the play of the signifiers, institutional Discourse, etc.) in Levinas is "faced" with the other and this facing, as the very questioning and shattering or hollowing out of the subject becomes an extraversion

into a *for-the-other*. Before the face of the other I am judged, brought to account, accused and so made responsible.

But one cannot logically or deductively prove that the other puts me in question; one cannot accomplish the break with totality through the very kind of philosophical consciousness which is by definition the attempt to grasp and master the All, or what Levinas calls an "ego-ology." His notion of the "face" is thus a rhetorical appeal, an attempt to create an "outside" of philosophical consciousness (or the totality) by which it can be judged and brought to account.

That is why he writes that "the call to question is not a matter of turning around upon oneself and becoming conscious of the calling to question. The absolutely other is not reflected in consciousness. . . . We are concerned with questioning a consciousness, and not with the consciousness of questioning" ("Trail" 41). The exile of the self through the demand of the other is not the negative "consciousness of this exile." In Levinas, the exile of the self is a turning outward, an extraversion, a positivity, "precisely the welcome reception of the absolutely other" which summons me to reply. He redefines the subject as "for-the-other," not as a consciousness bringing objects to representation "for itself." Moral consciousness, then, is not "an experience of values" but an access to exteriority, to Being as other, and finally beyond ontology to the otherwise than being ("Signature" 183).

Subjectivity as for-the-other, in sum, involves a "plural reason" commanded not by the logic of identity which itself is the return of difference to the same — a "for itself" — but instead a reason commanded and penetrated by the other, heteronomous instead of autonomous.

IV. For itself and for-the-other

The "extra-version" of the for-itself into the for-the-other is another key move one finds in Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig models for Levinas a path by which the totality of Idealist cognition of the All is shattered, and how the subsequent fragments (subject-object-universe, or God-humanity-world) each isolated in and for themselves can then be opened up to and for-the-other. In Levinas this opening constitutes the ethical move par excellence; in Rosenzweig it is the very meaning of Revelation. And for both Rosenzweig and Levinas, it is a fundamental characteristic of Judaism.

In an essay on Rosenzweig, Levinas makes the crucial comment that the conjunction "and" used to designate the re-connections made in *The Star* among God, humanity, and world as Creation, Revelation, and Redemption means "for": God for humanity, humanity for world, etc. The unity Rosenzweig constructs is not any formal unity of philosophical logic but "is in the sense that they are one for the other, when one is placed in these elements themselves" ("Entre" 128). "One for the other" is a "living" relation,

not a philosophical category, or a Hegelian dialectical synthesis which empties the terms of their irreducible individuality, or perceives them from the "outside" in the all-seeing gaze of the philosopher.

For Rosenzweig, the "I" is drawn out of its mute and isolated self-enclosure, (which Rosenzweig identifies with the mythical, aesthetic, and pagan worlds) by God's emerging from God's concealment, questing for and turning to the individual human self (*Star* 156). That is how Rosenzweig understands God's question to Adam, "Where are You?" in Genesis. But as Rosenzweig notes, God receives no real response from Adam to this initial question; instead Adam hides himself, and blames Eve and the serpent; Adam remains defiant and self-enclosed. Only when God calls out to Abraham in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1 — in the vocative, in direct address, not with an indefinite "you" but with his proper name "Abraham" — that is, in all his non-conceptual individuality, in love for his singularity, "now he answers, all unlocked, all spread-apart, all ready, all soul: 'Here I am.' Here is the I, the individual human I, as yet wholly receptive, as yet only unlocked, only empty, without content, without nature, pure readiness, pure obedience, all ears" (176). For Rosenzweig, this movement of turning and opening to the other is the essence of Revelation before Revelation signifies any propositional or doctrinal content. And this "turning towards the other," as we remember, is a prime meaning of the "face" (*panah, panim*) and is also essential in Levinas.¹³

In Levinas' philosophical writings, a similar pattern emerges but it is derived without direct exegesis of the Bible or explicit reference to Jewish thought, although terms such as "election," "creation" and "here I am" are used. The subject is elected (the "chosen people"), called out of its narcissistic self-enclosure not by any traditional God of theology but by the "revelation of the face" of the other, the human other through whom the other-than-being "passes" or is traced. Levinas reverses, in a sense, the path of the *Star*: in the *Star*, God's immediate and pressing love as "shining countenance" (157; 164) opens up and awakens the human soul to both God and to the love of the neighbor; in Levinas, the immediate and pressing face of the other opens and awakens the ego, and traces the otherness of a divinity which is otherwise than being, otherwise than any theology, escaping the revelation of any logos.

It is important to emphasize here that like Rosenzweig, Levinas claims not to base his philosophical writings a priori on any traditional "theology." He firmly maintains that he does not use the Bible or theology as his starting point, nor does he rely on or intend any orthodox theology. His "other than being" is not intended to be theological — "of the logos," or any "ology" — i.e. any identification of logos and being or assertion of a God who is the Being behind or beyond beings. Though the other "resembles God," the relation to the other and the assignation from the Good survive the death of God (*Otherwise Than Being* 123).¹⁴

The face is not, he reiterates, the image of the God who has passed. "Being in the image of God does not signify being the icon of God but to find oneself in his trace":

The God of Judaeo-Christian spirituality preserves all the infinity of his absence which is in the personal order itself [*illeity*]. He does not show himself except in his trace, as in the 33rd chapter of Exodus. To go toward Him is not to follow the trace, which itself is not a sign. To go toward him is to go towards the others who are in the trace.
(*"Trail"* 46)

In other words, ontological absence becomes ethical presence; difference becomes my non-indifference to the other. Ethics as obligation and responsibility to and for the other is the relation and Revelation of Otherness.

V. The Holocaust witness

Finally, I want briefly to examine how this notion of the self emptied out and bound over to the other is radicalized in Levinas' later work, and its possible connections to Levinas as a holocaust survivor.

The famous biblical phrase "here I am" with which Abraham answers God (*hineni* in Hebrew) is also, of course, the formulaic response given by many other biblical characters and prophets when called by God. In Levinas' later philosophical works, he uses this phrase to analyze and describe subjectivity as unlocked, wholly receptive, emptied and bound over to the other: "The word *I* means *here I am* [*me voici*] answering for everything and everyone" as a gratuitous sacrifice (*Otherwise* 114). He describes the "here I am" as the "I possessed by the other," a figure of inspiration and obsession, and a "reason" or "intelligibility" beyond the *cogito*. In effect, this analysis founds the "I think" of the rational Cartesian *cogito* (which itself founds modern philosophy) upon the biblical "here I am" of subjectivity and ethics.

"Here I am" is also a language of the accusative — both grammatically and as the language of "witness," of the "first person." But he emphasizes that "here I am" is a witness before any content or "truth of representation": "it is the meaning of language, before language scatters into words. . . ." This "bearing witness of itself to the other" (*Otherwise* 119) is the "sign bearing witness of the giving of signs" — an ultimate exposure and vulnerability which is the condition for all communication.

In other words, this one-for-the-other constitutes the very ability of a sign to be a sign, to stand for something else, and the very possibility for there even to be communication, shared meaning. Signs, that is, are given, offered to the other before they can even comprise a system, a code, a contract, a game. Speech is always said *to* someone before it has any particular content. There is a prior summoning in language — before the reciprocity of

exchange of information, or code, or convention. There is a primordial donation in response to a primordial command, or what he calls an "election by the Good."¹⁵

And there is an ongoing and continuous oscillation between this prior content-less realm, which Levinas now calls "saying" or *le dire*, and the realm of codes, systems, concrete meanings, contracts, representations, or what he calls *le dit* (the "said"). This oscillation between "the saying and the said," he affirms, is necessary to guarantee that the contracts and codes, the politics and philosophies, do not obliterate the ethical and revert into violent tyrannies.

But in these later writings the terms he uses to describe subjectivity and responsibility often become disturbing: trauma, wounding, hostage, obsession, persecution, sacrifice without reserve. In a highly charged description Levinas writes: "signification is witness or martyrdom. It is intelligibility before the light . . ." (*Otherwise* 77-78). Imagery of wounding now describes the way the other puts the self in question; it is a radical denuding and shattering of egoism, so that the self is now "like a stranger, hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's identity . . . it is always to empty oneself anew of oneself . . . like in a hemophiliac's hemorrhage" (92). I cannot help but hear in the voice behind this voice, and in these disturbing images of bleeding wounds the "witness" of the Holocaust survivor, even though that event is never explicitly evoked. And I would argue that in Levinas, the witness of the Holocaust enters into the "reason" of philosophy. At the same time, this rhetoric of witness is indirect for he does not explicitly invoke either his personal experiences or specific historical events within his philosophical work. The most profound signification of these events for him is not their specificity for any one nation or group. On a deeper level, this is consistent with his philosophy: witness is not "confession," a witness for and of the personal experiences of the self, but a testimony *for the other*.

So Levinas does "not make a graven image" or icon of these wounds as some kind of holy stigmata upon which we should fixate in horror. The task instead is to make these traumas revert into the foundation and guarantor of language and ethics. "Hebrew" reminds, calls to, founds "Greek" not by losing its specificity or being sublated (to use the Hegelian term) into the "universality" of Greek reason, but by being witness to the ethical relation to the other in a prophetic call to all human beings.

But it is also almost as if this notion of signification as martyrdom is a kind of secular or philosophical equivalent of the Jewish notion of *kiddush ha-shem* — the "sanctification of the name of God" that Jewish tradition ascribes to the death of a Jew murdered for his or her faith. As if Levinas is attempting to sanctify and redeem the deaths of those murdered in the Holocaust, that event which above all expressed hatred and intolerance for the other.¹⁶ And also as if he is making it impossible for the persecutors to

escape responsibility, to forget, deny their involvement, and making it impossible for any one of us, any reader of Levinas to escape ours.¹⁷

For he expands his notion of substitution to an extreme responsibility that makes even "the persecuted one liable to answer for the persecutor" (*Otherwise* 111). As if the very outrage of persecution itself inverted into a grounds of solidarity as expiation rather than violence. Once can see why this becomes an almost "unsayable" position. It also has strong Christian echoes and moves beyond Jewish tradition.¹⁸ In classical Jewish law, one is not to actively seek martyrdom; the only cases in which one must allow oneself to be killed are if one is ordered upon pain of death to commit adultery, idolatry, or murder. In these cases, one is required to choose death rather than commit any one of those three sins. In other cases, such as for self-defense, the Talmud says, "If one arises to kill you, arise and kill himself first." One does not always give one's life for the other.¹⁹

Yet for Levinas, finally, the "subject" so called and elected finally signifies all human beings — not just the Jews. And so, on the concluding page of *Otherwise Than Being* there are the following words: each individual of all the peoples "is virtually a chosen one, called to leave in his turn, or without awaiting his turn . . . the concept of the ego . . . to respond with responsibility: *me*, that is, *here I am for the others*, to lose his place radically . . ." (*Otherwise* 185).

Notes

A shorter version of this essay was first presented as a paper at a conference on "Covenants in Law in Literature" at Bar-Ilan University in Israel in honor of Professor Harold Fisch.

- 1 See, for example, Maimonides' discussion of the meaning of the trope "face" in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, part I section 37. Among the biblical significations Maimonides enumerates for "face" (*panim*) are "the presence and existence of a person," "the hearing of a voice without seeing any similitude," that is, the inability to comprehend God's true existence as such; and "attention or regard" for the other person.
- 2 See Rosenzweig's *Star*, 418–424, entitled "The Face of the Figure," and Cohen's explication of these passages in his essay "The Face of Truth in Rosenzweig, Levinas, and Jewish Mysticism." Rosenzweig notes that the face is composed of the most receptive organs in the body — nose, ears, eyes, mouth. In the inner sanctum of divine truth, the human catches sight of "none other than a countenance like his own. The Star of Redemption is become a countenance which glances at me and out of which I glance. Not because God is my mirror, but God's truth."

At the end of the *Star*, the shining of God's "face" signifies redemption and ultimate truth. "But for him whom he lets his visage shine upon, to him he also turns his visage. As he turns his visage to us, so may we recognize him" (418). Rosenzweig also uses "Face" or "Countenance" to signify human communion: "Nor is this brotherliness by any means identity of everything with the human countenance, but rather the harmony precisely of men of the most diverse

countenances. One thing is necessary, of course, but only one: that men have a countenance at all, that they see each other" (345). On the glance as gesture beyond word and deed related to dance and poetry, mutual recognition through processions, pageants and carnivals, Rosenzweig writes, "The power to dissolve all that is rigid already inheres in the glance. . . . Once an eye has glanced at us, it will glance at us as long as we live" (372).

- 3 A good introduction to these schools of criticism is Veese's *The New Historicism*.
- 4 See for example the oft-cited essay by de Man "Semiology and Rhetoric" in *Textual Strategies*, ed. J. Harari, and Derrida's "White Metaphor: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" in *Margins of Philosophy*. In Lacan, for example, the rereading of Freud via structuralist linguistics asserts that the "unconscious is structured like a language," and that an analyst needs to understand the rhetoric of tropes to interpret these structures. Brian Vickers in the concluding chapter of his *In Defense of Rhetoric* lucidly explains the distortions in many of these contemporary invocations of rhetoric. In modern thought, Vickers writes, rhetoric as a discipline has atrophied to "elocution alone, now detached from its expressive and persuasive functions, and brought down finally to handful of tropes" (*In Defense* 439). One sees this move, Vickers notes, in Vico, who in turn is the inspiration for Hayden White's tropological analysis of historical narratives; in Roman Jakobson's structural linguistics which further reduces the tropes to only two: metaphor and metonymy; and in de Man especially "whose actual knowledge of rhetoric as revealed in [his] essays is limited to a fundamentally misguided conception of the art, and to a few tropes, not always correctly understood. But this did not prevent him from making grand generalizations" (457).
- 5 Foss and Trapp write that Perelman's impetus for writing his masterwork was the problems he encountered in defining the nature of justice and reasoning about values, and the difficulty of resolving questions of value on rational grounds, that is, not being able to draw an "ought" from an "is." Along with his co-writer, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, he decided to investigate the ways authors in different fields actually used arguments to reason about values — from literary to political to philosophical texts and daily speech. They "rediscovered" the neglected heritage of Aristotle's "dialectical" as opposed to "analytic" modes of reasoning, that is, rhetoric as informal, non-demonstrative reasoning (102–3).

This jurists' perspective has much to add, I would argue, to current questions about the nature of interpretation, the relation of the literary to the political, and recent literary interpretations of rabbinic texts. Most of these attempts to relate literary criticism to rabbinic texts have no satisfactory way of linking up their dual functions of *halakhic*, legalistic deliberation, and *aggadic*, non-legal creative story telling. One of the few writers to bring attention to this issue is Gerald Bruns in his essay "Midrash and Allegory" in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*.

This problem is due in part to the identification of "Law" with oppression in much French and German post-structuralist literary theory (see Kristeva, Barthes, *et al.*), an identification which often goes back to a Protestant anti-nomianism. It is also due to the separation of literary criticism and theory from the kind of rhetorical theory which Perelman is proposing, a "new" rhetoric because it returns rhetoric to its ancient rational deliberative functions and away from its demotion to a "merely literary" analysis of style and tropes. Levinas and Perelman have shown me an important dimension to the literary approach to rabbinic hermeneutics that I neglected in my earlier book, *The Slayers of Moses* — the ethical and juridical. I address it in my forthcoming book *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Indiana UP, 1991) from which the present essay is taken.

In another article on "The New Rhetoric" as a mode of practical reasoning written in 1976, Perelman even cites the talmudic tradition as an example of the kind of deliberative rhetorical model he is propounding, in contrast to a Cartesian model where rational self-evidence and necessary truth make it impossible for two persons to come to opposite decisions about the same matter without one being wrong. In the Talmud, Perelman notes, "it is accepted that opposed positions can be equally reasonable; one of them does not have to be right." For instance, the schools of the sage Hillel and the schools of Shammai are in constant opposition, but in a famous passage, R. Akiva is told from above that "both are the words of the living God" (305).

The key point here is that there are rational grounds for multiple positions about truth, not that since all language is arbitrary — or all values are relative — that therefore there are multiple interpretations. Perelman's juridical rhetoric is also close to Levinas' defense in his Jewish writings of the *halakha*, the Jewish legal tradition which for Levinas is the embodiment and guarantor of the ethical relation. Both Perelman and Levinas are also inspired by the Kantian notion of practical versus theoretical reason.

- 6 In current literary theory, another set of dualisms is established. Those who dispute the position that all truth is socially constructed are often accused of being "essentialists"; those who disagree with the notion that the human person is constructed by and through an impersonal "Discourse" are labeled unconscious and uncritical ideologues of "the liberal humanist myth." These dualisms, in my view, have become a species of name-calling which often substitutes for rigorous argument. Literary theory today is itself in dire need of a "third way" beyond them.

Perelman's work preceded the advent of French structuralism and post-structuralism, but Perelman most likely would have viewed the notion of language as an impersonal system in which human selfhood and action are but anonymous functions as but another abdication of rational deliberative argument to distorted notions of reality — or as Levinas puts it, of "the primacy of formal theoretical reason." Levinas seeks a "third way" between the dualistic alternatives of classical ontology: being/autonomy/heteronomy.

Nor would the post-structuralist critique of structuralism alleviate this problem; proposing the arbitrariness of the sign and the instability of the structures of signification only replaces existentialist irrationality with linguistic irrationality. Nor does a cultural materialism which finds all structures marked by ideology, power, domination, and force provide grounds for the kind of reason which Perelman seeks.

- 7 I am grateful to my colleague Jeanne Fahnestock for introducing me to and helping to explicate Perelman's extraordinary work. *The New Rhetoric* is a lengthy and complex book and I only briefly touch upon it here. The central portion of the book is an extensive set of philosophical and technical analyses of the various techniques of argumentation, rhetorical strategies and tropes. Perelman also directly addresses the problem of rhetoric used deceptively to manipulate, of propaganda and ruse in his idea of the "universal audience" (section 7), his discussion of the "audience as a construction of the speaker" (section 4), and the "adaptation of the speaker to audience" (section 5). The speaker is not obligated to persuade an audience if that audience can only be persuaded by repugnant means. As Quintillian said, rhetoric is *scientia bene dicendi*: speaking well means also speaking what is ethically good (25).

Perelman's difficult and controversial idea of "the universal audience" is an hypothetical construct in the mind of the speaker of an ideal audience competent

to understand the argument and give assent; it plays a normative role in judging the convincing nature of argument. It does not refer "to an experimentally proven fact" (31): "Instead of believing in a universal audience analogous to the divine mind which can assent only to the 'truth,' we might with greater justification characterize each speaker by the image of the universal audience that he is trying to win over to his view. . . . Each individual, each culture, has its own conception of the universal audience" (33). In dialogue, for example, the interlocutor is regarded as the incarnation of the universal audience. Argument is protected from being purely manipulative and unethical by the interaction of universal and particular audience.

For an excellent analysis of the notion of the "universal audience," see Allen Scult, who defines it as a "metaphor which functions as an inventional tool" to help support Perelman's notion of a "responsible rhetoric which must be systematized in such a way as to make nonscientific discourse, which is at the core of our societal life, somehow rational . . . without recourse to 'absolute truth'" ("Perelman's Universal Audience" 176). "The universal audience is your rhetorical conscience" (179).

- 8 The debate over de Man surfaced a few years after his death when, in 1987, a set of his writings from 1940–42 for the collaborationist Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* was discovered. See the volume of these writings translated into English by Ortwin de Graef, *Wartime Journalism, 1939–1943*, ed. Werner Hamacher at al (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988) and the companion volume by the same editors, *Responses: On Paul DeMan's Wartime Journalism* (1989). For the extensive debate on this subject, see also the two special issues of *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 14 (Spring 1988) and vol. 15 (Summer 1989).
- 9 Perelman makes an important distinction between a "disinterested" or "objective spectator" and an "impartial" one when it comes to judging discussions that must lead to a decision. (One of the most frequently heard statements in current literary theory is that "everything is political," meaning that there is no possibility of disinterestedness, objectivity or impartiality). Perelman writes that "interference in a controversy whose outcome will affect a specific group may be made only by one who is a member of, or closely bound up with, the group in question": "being *impartial* is not being *objective*, it consists of belonging to the same group one is judging, without having previously decided in favor of any one of them" (60). Like Levinas, Perelman wants to preserve the possibility of "dissociating our beliefs from our interests and passions" (61).

Similarly, his interesting analysis of epideictic oratory reveals a fundamental relation of value to action. Epideictic oratory was classically defined by Aristotle as the rhetoric concerned with praise and blame (a eulogy, for example), the beautiful or ugly. Aristotle distinguished between epideictic and the two other forms of oratory: deliberative and legal oratory (counseling what is expedient; establishing what is best). Perelman points out that epideictic oratory — often considered merely ornamental or "purely literary" — cannot be separated from the functions of deliberative and legal oratory because epideictic oratory "strengthens the disposition toward action by increasing adherence to the values it lauds" (50); it thus establishes a sense of communion that is the very foundation for deliberative and legal discourse.

- 10 This "critical rationalism" is also a feature of many other major modern Jewish philosophers who stressed the rational and ethical character of Judaism (Hermann Cohen is the most outstanding example). Nathan Rotenstreich attributes this trend in part to the influence of Kant. Ethics could remain a realm unchallenged by Kant's critique of metaphysics and religion. But also, "The ethical interpretation

of Judaism makes possible a further, more radical interpretation, that the ethical teaching of Judaism may be meaningful and binding apart from religious attachment. Thus the ethical interpretation can be placed historically on the borderline of the religious attitude and the secular transformation of Judaism" (Rotenstreich, *Jewish Philosophy* 3-4).

- 11 While there is not space here to examine Rosenzweig's position in depth, Rosenzweig asserts that what he calls his "new thinking" is not theological in any classical sense, nor is it any form of apologetics:

If this is theology, it is, at any rate, no less new as theology than as philosophy. . . . Theology must not debase philosophy to play the part of a handmaid, yet the role of charwoman which philosophy has recently assigned to theology is just as humiliating. The true relationship of these two regenerated sciences is a sisterly one. . . . Theological problems must be translated into human terms, and human problems brought into the pale of theology. (in Glatzer, *Rosenzweig*, 201)

Or as he writes in the *Star*:

. . . The theologian whom philosophy requires for the sake of its scientific status is himself a theologian who requires philosophy — for the sake of his integrity. What was for philosophy a demand in the interests of objectivity, will turn out to be a demand in the interests of subjectivity for theology. They are dependent on each other and so generate jointly a new type, be it a philosopher or theologian, situated between theology and philosophy.

(106)

- 12 When asked by Richard Kearney whether his search for a non-site or *u-topos* other than that of Western metaphysics can be construed as a prophetic utopianism, Derrida answers by affirming a positive moment in deconstruction as a response to the call of alterity, and says that although he interrogates the classical ideas of *eschaton* or *telos*, "that does not mean I dismiss all forms of Messianic or prophetic eschatology. I think that all genuine questioning is summoned by a certain type of eschatology. . . ." Though he does not feel the kind of "hope" that would allow deconstruction to have a prophetic function — as "exodus and dissemination in the desert" it does have, he admits, certain "prophetic resonances," but as a search without hope for hope (*Dialogues* 118-19).
- 13 For Rosenzweig, God's turn towards humanity is an opening up and act of love which simultaneously is the command to the human person to turn and open up to the other — to love the neighbor. The neighbor to whom this love is also commanded is the turning of the human toward something else, to the world, and that is redemption. Rosenzweig also connects this receptive "Here I am" and the moment of revelation with Jewish law whose foundation is love as command. That is, this summons to hear is itself the preface to every commandment, and especially of the commandment which for Rosenzweig is the essence and highest of all the other commandments, to "love God with all your heart, soul, and might."

In an essay on Rosenzweig, Levinas writes that

it is very curious to note what is produced in response to God's love and how revelation is prolonged. God's love for selfhood is, *ipso facto*, a commandment to love. Rosenzweig thinks that one can command love . . . contrary to what Kant thought. One can command love, but it is love which

commands love. And it commands in the now of its love, so that the commandment to love is repeated and renewed indefinitely in the repetition and renewal of the very love which commands love.

Consequently, the Judaism in which revelation is inseparable from commandment in no wise signifies the yoke of the Law, but precisely love. The fact that Judaism was woven from commandments attests to the renewal, at all instants of God's love for man... the eminent role of the mitzvah in Judaism does not signify a moral formalism but the loving presence of divine love eternally renewed... Two typically Jewish ideas have appeared: the idea of commandment, as essential to the relation of love... and the idea of the redemptive man and not a redemptive God. Even though the redemption comes from God, it has an absolute need of this intermediary man.

(“Entre” 129)

- 14 See Levinas' important essay “God and Philosophy” (1973) in his *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Here he attempts to clarify the relationship between philosophy and religion, and define his notion of a religion that exceeds not only theology but also is not even founded on “religious experience” or faith and the loss of faith. The key question of this essay is “Can God be expressed in a rational discourse which would neither be ontology or faith? — in a way beyond the inadequate alternative of “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” versus “the God of the philosophers” (155). He traces the connections between Western philosophy and Western spirituality which share a notion of truth defined as manifestation of being, and he posits another knowing, a “knowing otherwise” where consciousness is conscience and insomnia not enlightenment and affectivity. This knowing otherwise is reflected in a religious discourse in which God does not signify to begin with as a theme, or object of a dogma. (In his Jewish writings, his talmudic lecture “The Temptation of Temptation” in *Quatre lectures talmudiques* defines the meaning of the revelation at Sinai just in these terms — as a “doing before hearing,” an acceptance of an obligation prior to any “knowledge of its content,” a non-naïve mode of knowing otherwise.)

Nevertheless, Levinas' philosophical language strongly shadows, evokes, and echoes traditional Jewish categories. To what extent we should accept his assertions that he has used no theological traditions as a starting point is another issue for which I have no space here.

- 15 For Levinas, the election or calling or displacement of the subject (as Abraham was elected, called, displaced) to undecidable responsibility and sacrifice for the other means that the subject is “unique” not because of any particular attributes of the ego, nor because it is loved by God, but by very virtue of this undecidable assignation (*Otherwise*, 115). These terms, nevertheless, again seem not only to echo but be founded on classical Jewish descriptions of the covenantal call.

In a sense, Levinas' philosophy and language theory is a kind of phenomenological translation of the covenantal idea. Harold Fisch has similarly devoted much of his career to tracing the covenantal idea in Western literature. In chapter four of his recent book *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*, Fisch eloquently describes the nature of the biblical prophetic call and contract which underlies the Scripture's notion of language as summons, bond, obligation, witness, judgment — and its model for the relational contract between reader and writer, text and interpreter, God and Israel. See especially also here his gloss on the meaning of the *Shema*, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deut. 6:4): “To accept the role of ‘hearer’ in the sense understood by

- 'Hear O Israel' is to accept an almost overpowering responsibility. It is not a simple act of response that is required of us as though we were readers of a novel called upon to assist in the creating of a fictional illusion; rather we are called upon to commit ourselves, to accept an obligation. For the word *shema* implies not only reading but also obeying; the text seizes us even against our will" (49).
- 16 In an epigraph, Levinas dedicates *Otherwise Than Being* to the memory of those killed by Nazis, both those "closest" among the six million Jews, and the "millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism."
 - 17 In the recent Marcel Ophels film about the trial of Klaus Barbie, *Hotel Terminus*, one of the most chilling moments comes when Barbie himself after his arrest says: "I have forgotten everything. If they haven't that's their problem."
 - 18 Andrius Valevicius is quite right to point out in these Dostoevskian and Tolstoyan accents, Levinas' Russian background and the connection of even his most mature philosophy to Slavic as well as Jewish thought. See his twelfth chapter, "From East to West: Levinas and Russian Thought" (*From the Other to the Totally Other*) 146–55.
 - 19 There is another similar famous passage from a talmudic discussion about the meaning of Lev. 25:36, the directive not to take interest when one lends money to sustain "your brother who has become poor" but "fear your God; that thy brother may live with you." What is the meaning of "that thy brother may live with you"?

That is what Ben-Patura expounded: Two men are journeying through the desert, and one of them has a single pitcher of water. If one of them drinks it, he (alone) will get back to civilization. But if both of them drink it, both of them will die. Ben Patura taught that they should both drink and die, as it said "That your brother may live with you." Said Rabbi Akiba to him: "That thy brother may live with you." Your own life comes before the life of your fellowman. (*Sifra, Behar* 5:3; p. 109c (ed. Weiss); cf. *B. Metzia* 62a)

This is the same R. Akiba who also propounded that the fundamental principle of the Torah was "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." See discussion of these issues in relation to Levinas by Abner Weiss, in Fox, *Modern Jewish Ethics* 139–152. See also David Roskies' compendium of Jewish responses to catastrophe, *The Literature of Destruction* and his *Against the Apocalypse* for the typology of the historical Jewish responses to suffering.

But as Robert Gibbs writes, Levinas' work would also require a Christian thinker to recast Christology for

Is not the other in the me, the other person, and not the absolute You of God? . . . Is not the truth of incarnation that we are incarnate, vulnerable in our naked skin? That we are persecuted and so expiation for others, and not that some divinity is expiation for us? I make expiation and suffer for him: not "You or even He make expiation for me" . . . but then perhaps we would no longer need to worry whether it was Jewish or Christian."

("Substitution" 14)

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FROM EROS TO MATERNITY

Love, death, and “the feminine” in the
philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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Plato's *Phaedo* is often read as an “ode to death,” with the philosopher's task being to live his (or her, but in this case his) life such that death will be welcome. The soul will be liberated and the body will no longer be a hindrance to the knowledge the soul desires. This view, though transformed in a variety of ways, culminates in Martin Heidegger's philosophy (especially in *Sein und Zeit*), where being-toward-death (namely, my own death) is the anxiety that shapes my life.

In addition to this view of death, Plato's *Phaedo* also has an underlying current that is often overlooked. At the beginning of this poem about death, Socrates expels his wife, Xanthippe, from the room. She leaves, beating her chest in an emotional outburst that appears to make the rest of the men uncomfortable. The excess of the emotive is suppressed and quite literally sent away. It is clear in this dialogue that “womanly” behavior will not be tolerated.

The explicit theme of death and knowledge that permeates the Western philosophical tradition is accompanied by an implicit masculine tenor. From Plato to Heidegger, we have a view of death, life, and philosophy that still has not gotten us any closer to the other person. Human subjectivity has been defined in terms of freedom, independence, and knowledge.¹ Western philosophy is stuck, running in place and gnashing at the same tired view it has had for over two thousand years.

Emmanuel Levinas concedes Heidegger's point that we cannot know the other person's death and that our deaths are our own. But Levinas does not concede that the dialectic of death can only be understood in terms of being and nothingness, nor does he concede that death is only about

knowing what death is. He replaces the concern for my own death with the concern for the other's death, thus subjectivity is transformed from one who is free to one who is always already obligated. In so doing, human subjectivity is always already inter-subjective and always already ethically accountable.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in his endeavor to shift the focus of philosophy from my own death and my quest for knowledge to the death of the other and the responsibility for the other, Levinas also inverts the tenor of the discussion from the masculine to the feminine. The relationship between ethics and ontology that characterizes his project can also be cast as a tension between the "feminine" and the "masculine," between passivity and virility. According to Levinas, philosophy's history as a discipline gave priority to the ontological over the ethical, and the relationship we have to our own death had priority over the ethical relationship we have to the other. This oversight parallels his work insofar as the work of the "feminine" in his project has been underestimated. As a result, commentators either condemned him for the sexism in his use of the "feminine," or they overlooked the "feminine" as an insignificant, if unfortunate, trope.² Ultimately, the significance of this inversion for how we understand philosophy and what it means to be human is also overlooked.

But Levinas's conception of the other needs to be distinguished from the conception of the other found in the Western philosophical tradition. On his account, unlike Hegel's and those who follow him, e.g., Sartre, the "other" is not the antagonistic other, nor is the other the non-subject to my subjectivity. Rather, for Levinas, the other is the one to whom I am most responsible. Thus, contrary to the tradition, which has often cast woman as "Other," and that other was to be disparaged, the other in Levinas's philosophy is privileged. For example, Simone de Beauvoir's criticism of Levinas's conception of the "feminine" other in a footnote to the introduction of *The Second Sex* suggests that she is unaware of the priority the "other" holds in Levinas's philosophy.

But even when the priority of the "other" is recognized, Levinas's philosophy does not escape additional concerns. In "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," Irigaray asks, "[w]ho is the other, the Other [*l'autre, autrui*], etc.? How can the other be defined? Levinas speaks of "the Other" [*autrui*], of "respect for the Other" [*respect d'autrui*], of the "face of the Other" [*visage d'autrui*], etc. . . . Who is the other, if sexual difference is not recognized or known?"³ And in "Choreographies," Jacques Derrida's interview with Christine McDonald, Derrida asks, "What kind of an ethics would there be if belonging to one sex or another became its law or privilege? What if the universality of moral laws were modeled on or limited according to the sexes? What if their universality were not unconditional, without sexual condition in particular?"⁴ The questions posed by both Derrida and Irigaray are directed at what is problematic in Levinas's ethical analysis. Both

questioners point to what would be disturbing in an ethics that discriminates on the basis of sexual difference—either by an exclusion of it or an emphasis on it. Although both signal what is problematic in Levinas's analysis, a broader understanding of his work may nonetheless help us reconcile an ethics marked by sexual difference.⁵

Throughout Levinas's writings, we see the way sexual difference plays a fundamental role in his project. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas characterized "the feminine" as *Eros*; in *Totality and Infinity*, he characterized it as the dwelling; and finally, in *Otherwise than Being*, he characterized it as maternity. If we believe Levinas's characterizations simply revitalize traditional views of women that reinforce dangerous stereotypes, then each of these characterizations can be understood negatively. This essay demonstrates that Levinas's characterization of "the feminine" can be viewed as positively inflected. My view is that Levinas's characterization of "the feminine" can be set against the glorification of both masculinity and virility (terms that are synonymous for Levinas) that is all too common in the history of Western philosophy

"The feminine," characterized in Levinas's writings, demonstrates a shift from the priority of death to the priority of life, where life is linked to responsibility for the other. Levinas's use of sexual difference in his project is tied to his wish that we shift our focus away from the virile. Thus, my aim in this essay is to demonstrate that Levinas's project, either in spite of or because of his characterization of "the feminine," has value for feminist concerns. In the first part of this paper I address the issue of sexual difference and the role it plays in Levinas's project. I then turn to Levinas's discussion of erotic love in *Totality and Infinity*. And finally, I turn to the mature characterization of "the feminine" as maternity in order to examine the implications that this view of "the feminine" has for women.⁶

Alterity in the Garden of Eden

In his talmudic reading, "And God Created Woman," Levinas examines the two stories of creation in the Hebrew Bible: the first is Genesis 1:27, which reads, "He created him; male and female. He created them"; and the second is Genesis 2:21–23, which describes the creation of Adam and Eve.⁷ Levinas begins his discussion of the passage from Genesis 1:27 with a question about the Hebrew. In the Hebrew text, the word *vayitzer* ["made"] is written with two *yods*, but when it is used to indicate the creation of other things, for example, animals, it is written with only one *yod*. One rabbi speculates that this discrepancy designates the difference in the types of creations: man is not the same creation as other things God made. Another interpretation suggests that *yetzer* indicates inclination; thus, man was created with two inclinations so as to demonstrate that man was created with both good and evil. According to Levinas, this interpretation cannot be correct since *yetzer*

means *creature*, not *inclination*.⁸ And he cites Isaiah 29:16 as his evidence. But it is Levinas's final interpretation that concerns me presently.⁹

This interpretation suggests that the two *yods* indicate the dual sexual dimension of humanity itself. Midrash indicates that "even Adam's physical creation was twofold, male and female in one body. In front 'Adam' was a man, but attached to 'Adam' in back was a woman."¹⁰ Rabbi Jeremiah b. Leazar tells us that "When the Holy One blessed be He, created Adam, He created him an hermaphrodite [bi-sexual]."¹¹ And Rabbi Samuel b. Nahman said, "When the Lord created Adam he created him double faced."¹² Here Levinas indicates a possible explanation of the odd spelling with two *yods*. For Levinas, this line suggests a creation with two faces, a being who is open and exposed, a being who indicates the end of interiority, the end of the subject (GCW 167/DCF 132). This passage also suggests to Levinas that woman is not yet an issue. The "feminine" face does not appear until later, and, contrary to how this verse is normally understood, woman is not created from man. Rather, woman and man are created from what is human (GCW 168/DCF 132). Thus, according to Levinas, who thinks of sexual difference as secondary to the primary status of merely being human, the face is not marked, even by sexed characteristics.

Derrida focuses on this point, since it is this claim that Levinas gives as his defense against the problem of an ethics marked by sexual difference. Derrida correctly reminds us that that there are now "two" created from what is/was "one."¹³ There are two beings created from what was/is already human. In spite of the force of the arguments offered for this position, I disagree that this interpretation demonstrates that sexual difference is secondary to what is human. And I challenge Levinas's notion that the distinction between the creation of humanity and the creation of sexual difference that emerges from humanity are signs of Levinas's own equity with regard to the sexes.

With consideration to the first point, that sexual difference emerged out of the creation of humanity, the conclusion actually appears to be precisely the opposite. The phrase reads, "[God] created him; male and female." Both the phrase and the midrashim on this phrase indicate that the birth of sexual differences occurred *at the same moment* as the creation of what is human. If what is human is created simultaneously with male and female, how can we distinguish priority, ontological or otherwise? Thus, if humanity is created as male *and* female, humanity is *always already* marked by sexual difference. Does this not undermine any attempt Levinas might make to claim that it is the relationship to woman as woman that is secondary? This concept of sexual difference views our sexuality as if it were merely an accident of our existence rather than an inextricable feature of who we are.

The second version of the creation of woman from man, the fashioning of the "man's" rib into woman, projects a more complex understanding of this act than traditionally thought. According to Levinas, the contribution of

the rib to the creation of the face of another exemplifies the “for the other” since it indicates the loss of one’s skin to another. I would add that it is a “for the not-yet” other, since it is in the giving of the skin/rib that the other first comes into existence. Further, the commentary on this story emphasizes that God creates the woman from man’s rib and not vice versa. The relationship is not interchangeable. And so Levinas asks, does this non-interchangeable relation not mark the difference between the sexes? (GCW 168/DCF 133). Nonetheless, Levinas wants to insist that while woman is not herself secondary, the relationship to woman, as woman, is secondary. And he underscores this point when he tells us that “[f]undamental are the tasks that man accomplishes as a human being and that woman accomplishes as a human being. They have other things to do besides cooing, and, moreover, something else to do and more, than to limit themselves to the relations that are established because of the differences in sex” (GCW 169/DCF 135). The sexual relation is incidental to the human: “culture is not determined by the libido” (GCW 172/DCF 140). And yet, even here, Levinas reiterates comments he makes in both “Judaism and the Feminine” and *Totality and Infinity*. These comments do not simply align the woman with home life and the man with his role in civil society. They also underscore the indispensability of the role of the woman.

Thus, in spite of Levinas’s insistence that we should understand sexual difference as secondary to what is human, he nonetheless acknowledges and favors the position of the male in the order of creation of sexual difference. So on the one hand, Levinas wishes to claim that the presence of the creature prior to sexual difference indicates that there is a priority to what is human in the relationship between the sexes. Yet, on the other hand, the fact that woman is *created from* man’s rib indicates, in the order of the creation of the sexes, that woman is created second. And Levinas not only does not dispute this point, but he also offers a justification for it (GCW 174–177/DCF 143–148).

Thus, Derrida’s worry that there is still a privileging of male over female has warrant. Derrida claims that Levinas implicitly assumes male neutrality in the story of the creation of humanity. But this implicit privilege results from the attempt to whitewash the secondariness of woman: rather than simply say that woman is secondary to man, Levinas rephrases the point so that we understand him to be saying that sexual difference is secondary to what is human. And Levinas cites Rav Abbahu, who claims that God originally wanted two beings, two equal beings—not man issuing from woman or woman issuing from man. He wanted two separate, equal beings. But this equality could not be possible, for in his opinion there would be war. He suggests that two equalities would fight to establish a hierarchy. To create a world that would not self-destruct, he had to subordinate them one to the other. There had to be a difference that did not compromise equity and did not affect justice as it related to human beings. Sexual difference,

then, where one sex has privilege over the other, was created in order to prevent a war.¹⁴ Of course we can ask how men's power over women does not affect the justice of human beings. Thus, in spite of this attempt to "save" equity, the hierarchy that resulted from the division between the sexes, and the interpretation of the order of the creation of man [male] and woman [female], i.e., the "fact" that woman is created from man, left open the possibility of reading this relationship as a priority of male over female, even if this priority was "created" for political reasons in the narrative.

In *Time and the Other*, we see Levinas's illustration of the need for "the feminine" as distinct from the male, in order to provide the first experience of alterity and possibility of a relationship to another. In this book, Levinas tells us that "the feminine"—radical alterity—accomplishes the break in Parmenidean unity; it breaks the totality. Sexual difference provides the condition for the possibility of reality as multiple. In contrast to Aristophanes's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, Levinas insists that sexual difference is not the result of a duality of two complementary terms, "for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole" (TO 86/TA 78). Love, according to Levinas, is not to be posited as a previously existing fusion.¹⁵ Levinas reaffirms this point in "Judaism and the Feminine,"¹⁶ when he says that "if woman completes man, she does not complete him as a part completes another into a whole but, as it were, as two totalities complete one another—which is, after all, the miracle of social relations" (DF 35/DL 58). Rather than seeing the separation of the two as a punishment, as is the case in Plato's Aristophanes's speech, Levinas sees the separation as "worth more than the initial union."¹⁷ So Levinas takes issue with Aristophanes's view that the initial fusion is better than the separation that results from it. Aristophanes's view holds that love is the result of a lack that can be, or could have been, sated merely by finding, or having been joined to, one's complementary part. For Levinas, love is both need and desire, but neither of these can be simply fulfilled. There is always an alterity in the other that eludes me. It can never be completely joined with me. And it is only in a relation of separation that I can have a relation with absolute alterity.

So if we return to the biblical verse, "he created him, male and female; he created them," we can observe how two beings might always have been present. There was not a previously existing whole or a fusion. Instead, there were always two beings who were attached as one; two beings who from the beginning were marked by their relation to sexuality.

Levinas on love, or why Eros is not ethics

Recalling the earlier discussion from *Time and the Other*, we see that Levinas underscores this same theme of Eros and the "feminine" in *Existence and Existents* when he says, "the plane of *Eros* allows us to see that the other par excellence is the feminine" (EE 85). The same two themes are reinforced in

both writings: (1) separation and individuation are not punishments, but instead are the very means by which we can have a relationship to and with the other; and (2) "the feminine" is the first experience of alterity, one that makes possible the experience of any other. What, then, is the connection between eros and love? Levinas does not state the relationship explicitly. But one can grasp the connection by reading his books and essays with the theme of "the feminine" in mind. As I mentioned earlier, Levinas initially characterizes "the feminine" as *eros*. When we see "the feminine" fifteen years later in the first part of *Totality and Infinity*, he has characterized "the feminine" in terms of the dwelling—with the qualities of hospitality, welcoming, and generosity.¹⁸ But towards the end of the book, "the feminine" reappears in a discussion of love in the section titled, "The Phenomenology of Eros."

Levinas returns to the reading of the Aristophanes myth he gives in *Time and the Other*. Although he still disagrees with the implication of fusion signaled by the myth, Levinas does find compelling the ambiguous notion of love as a relation in which there is a return to the self, but he also views love as a relation in which the self is transcended. The face of the other, of the beloved, reveals within it what is not yet. The ambiguity of love lies, finally, in the possibility of the other appearing as an object of need, and yet, still retaining its alterity. Levinas sees the love relation as ambiguous precisely because the ethical does not disappear. Rather, the face of the other is *hidden* by the erotic moment in love.

Levinas's discussion in the "Phenomenology of the Eros" follows Rosenzweig's discussion of love found in *The Star of Redemption*.¹⁹ Both of these discussions are derivative of the biblical poem *The Song of Songs*. In Rosenzweig and Levinas, one important detail should not be overlooked: the two people in the relationship alternate positions between lover and beloved. In his discussion, Levinas alternates pronouns, and the "feminine" is not the only one to occupy the position of the beloved. Finally, if one looks closely at Rosenzweig's reading, one begins to see why it is important that the "masculine," or the male, embody the position of lover. It is not, as some might think, for the purposes of being active and remaining in control. Rather, it is precisely the opposite. To be in the position of the lover is, according to Rosenzweig, precisely to be able to show vulnerability and dependence. The lover must approach the beloved and lay himself out to her without knowing if she will return those feelings. For Rosenzweig, this act is precisely an act that counters the view of subjectivity as autonomous and independent, a view found in the history of Western philosophy. Because Levinas's stance on subjectivity counters this tradition as well, it is not surprising that he would adopt Rosenzweig's position specifically on this point.

Levinas's view of love has been criticized by many commentators, most notably by Luce Irigaray.²⁰ Though indebted to Levinas for the way his

ethics influenced her own work, Irigaray claims that Levinas's ethics, as radical as it may be, remains blind to its faults.²¹ Irigaray's critique takes into account two primary points: (1) She reads Levinas as saying that voluptuousness can only be fulfilled in the marriage bed where sexuality would be "purified" by the intent to produce a child, and (2) she claims that Levinas has excluded women from any relation to God.²² Irigaray's critique is both insightful and significant, but I also think she misses some important elements of Levinas's discussion, elements that would alter the way Levinas's discussion of love appears.

Irigaray is correct, in my view, to claim that the other cannot be regarded outside of terms of sexual difference.²³ However, I am less inclined than Irigaray is to say that Levinas is unsuspecting of what he is doing, even though he does claim to want an ethics that will be neutral with regard to sexual difference. The problematic account of the "feminine" and its relation to ethics arises precisely because Levinas does take account of sexual difference. Moreover, Irigaray is mistaken when she assumes the Beloved is always the woman.

If one takes seriously this relationship between Levinas and Rosenzweig, some of Irigaray's worries should begin to dissipate. Envisioning an apparent absence of the ethical from the erotic does not represent an accurate reading. Levinas states that the erotic covers over the face of the other, not that the face of the other is absent. The point Levinas appears to be making is that the erotic relation, when one is engaged in eros itself, is different from the ethical relation. The erotic is not asymmetrical or serious; rather it is fun-loving, consuming, and light. It is precisely this blur between the two that makes love so complex, so interesting, and potentially so dangerous. If we understand Levinas's ethics as asymmetrical, and if we see the merits of defining ethics as such, then we need to be very careful if we want the erotic to be ethical *in Levinas's terms*. I argue that Levinas sees precisely what is at stake in both eros and ethics, and it is for this reason that Levinas is not an ascetic thinker. I do not mean to imply that Levinas's philosophical thought holds that lovers have no responsibility to each other. Rather, Levinas is describing the erotic experience—not the relationship itself. In eros, reciprocity is—and should be—expected. Love is consuming and silly, and often wild and animal-like. It is precisely in love that we forget ourselves, not ourselves as the ego, but the converse. We forget ourselves as the ethical *I*.

The future of love, understood as fecundity, is not meant to redeem love or sexuality. According to Levinas, whose view is similar to Rosenzweig's, love aims at a future. But this claim is meant to be descriptive of love; it is not meant to be normative. Thus, on the one hand, love seeks to be in the moment, to make one live life to the fullest now. And on the other hand, it also seeks to be eternal; it wishes to exist forever in the other. So in Levinas's account, the birth of the child is the outcome of the eternity that is sought. But Levinas's connection between love and fecundity should not be

interpreted to mean that he thinks every sexual act *ought* to *end* necessarily in maternity, or even be *intended* to *end* in maternity. We must be careful to avoid a logic that reverses the necessary relation between sexuality and birth. Factually, the birth of a child—or pregnancy—requires sexuality (traditionally), while sexuality does not require birth. In terms of his ethical analysis, however, Levinas does give priority to sexual activity that ends in fecundity. Thus, we have two views of sexuality in Levinas's writings: (1) the one that gives priority to an erotic love that produces a child, and (2) the one in which he acknowledges and affirms a sexuality that intends pleasure for its own sake. Additionally, his remarks about the sexuality that we find in Judaism further complicate the relationship sexuality has to fecundity. And finally, the various ways in which fecundity happens, for example through adoption and teaching, introduce possible paths to go beyond Levinas's own analysis.

Fecundity—in all its manifestations—is how love achieves a victory over death; it extends beyond death. But if one accepts the relationship loosely, then one realizes that the outcome does not have to be the physical birth of a child. The responsibility to the future and the way one makes oneself immortal can occur through adoption, teaching, and caring for the next generation.²⁴ The family may provide the initial model for Levinas, but certainly one can see teachers as the cornerstone to any community—a point not lost on Judaism itself. Finally, Levinas's view of love is intended to be something contra Christian *agapē* in which one loves everyone and therefore no one, and which is not bodily, sexual, or of the material world. In light of this point, it would make sense that Levinas sees the next generation as an outcome of love. Not so that sex is redeemed, but because sex and birth are part of the bodily processes that he is trying to underscore. Thus, Levinas begins his discussion of the “feminine” in *Totality and Infinity* by using terms such as *welcoming*, *hospitality*, and *generosity*. At the beginning of this book, the “feminine” provides the transcendental condition for the partner in the dwelling to enter the ethical relation. The discussion of love, which comes after the discussion of the ethical relation, emphasizes the materiality of being human, in this case seen in love, sexuality, and children. These two discussions together demonstrate why his discussion of maternity and the materiality of the body found in *Otherwise than Being* would follow the discussion found in *Totality and Infinity*.

Maternal responsibility

In Genesis 21:12, God says to Abraham, “Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says.” This statement is made with reference to Sarah's wish that Hagar and Ishmael, Hagar's child by Abraham, be cast out into the wilderness. At first glance, Sarah does not appear to be particularly sympathetic to the other woman and her child. In fact, her decision to expel them from her

house appears to be cold and callous. However, when we take a closer look at the events leading up to Sarah's choice, what appears to be an unsympathetic reaction turns out to be an exemplary response by a mother who sees what others cannot see.

Avivah Zornberg illuminates what Sarah sees and what we do not see.²⁵ We may be initially sympathetic to the plight of Hagar and Ishmael. However, according to Zornberg, Sarah senses that Abel's fate—the outcome of two brothers whose relationship ends in the murder of one by the other—will fall to Isaac. In this case, it is Isaac who is vulnerable to the games of Ishmael. According to Zornberg, "Rashi cites the midrash that presents the game the boys are playing as a kind of William Tell game, with Ishmael shooting arrows at Isaac and then claiming, 'But I am only playing.'"²⁶ Ishmael's injured innocence does not fool Sarah, and she foresees that there will be a struggle to the death. Regardless of Ishmael's own motivations—for example, choice or non-choice in the matter of his character and actions—Sarah's responsibility is to protect her only son. She sees what Abraham cannot. Rashi traces her ability to see this threat not simply to the fact that she is a woman, but also because she is his mother.

Although Zornberg's reliance on Rashi is compelling, Sarah's choice is not unproblematic. Sarah's decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the house is, to say the least, troubling. It certainly undermines any claims that women naturally treat others better than men do. Zornberg's and Rashi's need to justify Sarah's actions within the context of motherhood demonstrates their own uneasiness with Sarah's dilemma and the choice that she makes. But the problematic nature of her choice is precisely what makes it noteworthy in the context of Levinas's discussion of maternity. Sarah's choice raises questions about a mother's love for her child and the choices she may have to make to protect that child. She exemplifies Levinas's description of the relationship of ethics to politics because her actions raise questions about who counts as the Other and when.

In a note to his essay "No Identity," Levinas confides, "we are thinking of the Biblical term '*Rakhamin*', which is translated as mercy, but contains a reference to the word '*Rekhem*,' uterus; it is a mercy that is like an emotion of the maternal entrails."²⁷ And in the talmudic reading "Damages Due to Fire,"²⁸ Levinas elaborates on this discussion of mercy. He asks, "What is the meaning of the word Merciful (*Rakhmana*)"? And he answers,

It means the Torah itself or the Eternal One who is defined by Mercy. But this translation is altogether inadequate. *Rakhamim* (Mercy), which the Aramaic term *Rakhmana* evokes, goes back to the word *Rekhem*, which means uterus. *Rakhamim* is the relation of the uterus to the other, whose gestation takes place within it. *Rakhamim* is maternity itself. God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in the depth of this mercy. This maternal element in divine

paternity is very remarkable, as is in judaism the notion of a "virility" to which limits must be set and whose partial renouncement may be symbolized by circumcision.

(DDF 183/DCPF 158)

For Levinas, maternity is not simply a metaphor derived from physical proximity between mother and child, though certainly he does not overlook the immediacy of the relationship. For Levinas, mercy [*rahamim*] is the ethical response to the other and it derives from the Hebrew word for uterus [*rekhem*]. Thus we see a similarity between this derivation and the central themes of *Otherwise than Being*—namely, the gestation of the other in the same. And we see an implied contrast with the Greek word for uterus—*hyster*—from which we [English-speaking people] derive our word for *hysterectomy*. By the Greeks, and similarly by us until very recently, the uterus was believed to be the site of the emotions. Thus, if a woman was thought to be "crazy" (excessively emotional), the solution was to remove her uterus. But as indicated by the conclusion to the passage above, Levinas suggests a tempering of virility—both literally and metaphorically—through circumcision. Not only does Levinas believe that mercy in the form of the womb—"the feminine"—is good, but he also suggests by his comments that men should temper their own virile inclinations. In fact, it is significant that when he talks about the responsibility and the maternal body he uses the French word *comme* [as, or like]—responsibility is *like* the maternal body. Thus, while Levinas's focus on the womb leaves little doubt that he means maternity as it applies to women—gestation and birth—the image is nonetheless meant to be instructive.

But even this mature characterization of "the feminine" does not escape its critics. In her essay "Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Levinas and Plato,"²⁹ Stella Sanford explores the following two questions regarding Levinas's conception of maternity: (1) What is the maternity of which Levinas makes use and is this conception metaphorical? and (2) What are the implications of his conception of maternity, regardless of what we decide about its meaning? Sanford rehearses a few of the common perspectives on Levinas's use of this term. For example, Monique Schneider sees Levinas's use of maternity as a welcome reversal of the "matricidal impulses of Western thought visible already in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and in Athena's avowal of her purely masculine parentage,"³⁰ while Tina Chanter and Catherine Chaliel remain critical of Levinas's introduction of maternity.³¹ Although these perspectives concern Sanford, it is John Llewelyn's reading of maternity that most interests her.

Llewelyn advances the interpretation that maternity is a corrective to the discussions of "the feminine" and the emphasis on paternity found in Levinas's earlier books. For Llewelyn, offering a corrective is not contingent on whether Levinas was aware he was characterizing "the feminine"

negatively. If Levinas is criticizing virility, then maybe the emphasis on the father at the end of *Totality and Infinity* is not helpful to his project. Maternity might be more effective for a number of reasons, but among them, it can signify for both male and female. Sandford summarizes the discussion of maternity in two points: First, the maternal is not intended to designate something exclusively female. Although we have biological understanding of maternity, maternity can also refer to the aspect of nurturance and care involved in the biological process. This aspect of maternity need not remain exclusively female. Second, in spite of the previous point that states how the care aspect of maternity exceeds the biological necessity of the female body, the commentators whom she discusses share the belief that maternity does in fact refer only to "the feminine."

Thus, Sandford wants to know if there can be a different genealogy that "gives birth" to a different possibility concerning maternity. Can a conception of maternity yield something that includes men and also allows women to be something other than mothers? Because Sandford assumes that Levinas's view of eros has its roots in a Platonic conception of eros, she compares his view of maternity to the one found in Plato's *Symposium*. Sandford's reminder of a question that emerges from this Platonic dialogue is helpful: Who is giving birth and to what? Citing Adriana Cavarero, Sandford writes, "The pregnant birth-giving male, like the male who practices midwifery, stands as the emblematic figure of true philosophy."³² When men give birth, it is to the abstraction of ideas.

Notwithstanding whatever similarity or debt Levinas's view of eros might have to Plato's, it is apparent that his conception of maternity is not indebted to Plato. Although Levinas certainly does not want to dispense with philosophy, he is nonetheless critical of that which philosophy has traditionally offered in the realm of ethics. Thus even if maternity is employed as a metaphor, the image Levinas has in mind, contrary to what others have argued, is not Greek. In fact, Levinas's own references to Isaiah indicate that he draws the image of maternity from the Hebrew Bible.

Throughout Isaiah, the narrator refers to the image of the womb and the experience of birth—the most intimate bond between mother and child. In Isaiah 49:15, for example, the prophet asks, "Can a woman forget her baby, forget to have compassion [*merachem*] on the child of her womb? Can a woman forget her sucking child?" Isaiah answers, "Though she might forget, I never could forget you." Isaiah's answer indicates that there is a bond stronger than the mother-child bond, namely the bond between God and God's people. However, the strength of the bond between God and God's people is described in terms of the bond between a mother and a child. His question and its answer derive their force precisely from the image of the mother-child relation. Isaiah's question is intended to present this bond as the strongest one possible between two humans. And this bond is surpassed only by a relationship with God. Thus, Levinas develops his notion of

maternity as the ethical relation *par excellence* in light of this image of the mother-child bond. A woman could conceivably abandon her child, and certainly this happens. But when it happens, it nonetheless jars our sensibility—precisely because we also understand the bond as Isaiah does. The image of maternity, when used as a metaphor, derives its meaning and its power as a metaphor precisely because of how we understand the relationship in its empirical instantiation.

Concerned about the relationship between the figure of “the feminine” and ethics in Levinas’s work, Catherine Chalier argues that “maternity is the very pattern of substitution. . . . It has not chosen the Good but the Good has elected it. It is the very contrary of the *conatus*.”³³ In a similar way to which Levinas views maternity, Chalier believes that “maternity is the ultimate meaning of “the feminine,” the very metaphor of subjectivity.”³⁴ Finally, Chalier tells us that “we have to encounter this failure in the virility of being in order to understand the meaning of the Other. The maternal body knows in its flesh and blood what subjectivity means.”³⁵ In Chalier’s view, the maternal exemplifies that which is held hostage and gives itself over to the other completely. The maternal body is unselfish. The mother has no sooner taken in food than her body transports that food to the fetus inside her. This is why Chalier echoes Levinas’s point that the body in maternity “suffers for the other, it is ‘the body as passivity and renunciation, a pure undergoing.’” Chalier’s essay emphasizes a feminization of the virile, as does Levinas’s passage on *rakhamim*. Thus, recalling the description of Abraham’s actions in the Binding of Isaac and the recommendation of both Chalier and Levinas, one might say that Abraham needed to be feminized.³⁶

In *The Feminine and the Sacred*³⁷, Julia Kristeva refers to the experience of the “face-to-face with [the] emergence of the other” as “alchemy.”³⁸ She claims that outside motherhood, no situations exist in human experience that so radically and so simply bring us to that experience. She continues by adding that “the father, in his own, less immediate way, is led to the same alchemy; but to get there he must identify with the process of delivery and birth, hence with the maternal experience, that is, the father must himself become maternal and feminine, before adding his own role as indispensable and radical distance.”³⁹ Because the psychoanalytic tradition influences Kristeva’s thought, she concludes that the father figures as the third who brings the mother and child into the phallic world. This is how the call of language is generated.

Much can be made of her last claim, and certainly one would have to accept the assumptions of psychoanalysis in order to accept her final conclusion.⁴⁰ However, I am less interested in disputing issues in psychoanalysis than I am in highlighting Kristeva’s sensitivity to the simultaneously singular and peculiar nature of the maternal. Her insight helps to disclose an important shift in Levinas’s own thinking in both the description of “the

feminine" and the conception of the ethical from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. The formulation of the "child who is me, but not me" in *Totality and Infinity* was spoken from the standpoint of Levinas, the father. The father-child is the ethical relation *par excellence*. In *Otherwise than Being*, "the feminine" and the ethical are transformed into the figure of maternity, the "gestation of the other in the same." The formulation of the "child who is me, but not me" is now understood in terms of the *mother* and the child. And if we remember that "the feminine" is the interruption of the virile, an insertion of "the feminine" into the virile, we can see Kristeva's point, which is similar to Levinas's: the father, the masculine, can get to the experience of the other, but only by first becoming feminine.

Nonetheless, the image of maternity as the paradigm of the ethical relation is not without its problems. Tina Chanter rightly points out that Levinas's ethics cannot ignore the very real historical events that have demanded and then exploited the sacrifices women make for men;⁴¹ nor can Levinas ignore the very real risk women take in pregnancy and childbirth.⁴² Additionally, Chanter raises the concern that the discussion of maternity takes place in the absence of any related discussion of eros.⁴³ The conception of eros that precedes the discussion of paternity in *Totality and Infinity* drops out of Levinas's analysis, as the discussion of paternity is exchanged for the discussion of maternity. We are thus left with an image of maternity that appears cleansed of erotic pleasure.⁴⁴ Maternity, sanitized of eros, begins to look like the Madonna often desired: not only would childbirth be necessary to redeem any act of sex, but the real desire would be for children to be born without *women* having to have sex at all. And in Chanter's view, this move away from eros indicates a move farther away from "the feminine."⁴⁵

In light of Chanter's concerns, I suggest that the eros of *Totality and Infinity* is not separate from the responsibility of maternity. I realize that Levinas's discussion of fecundity cannot be equated with Levinas's reference to maternity. Nonetheless, there is enough similarity that referring to the two discussions in tandem is not completely unwarranted. In fact, it is precisely because Levinas makes reference to the erotic act that precedes fecundity that we can certainly assume someone had to be pregnant in order for the birth of the son to occur. And Irigaray's concern raised in "The Fecundity of the Caress," that Levinas joins reproduction and eros, supports my assumption.

Like Chanter, I also would worry if Levinas promoted such a position. However, I do not think he is suggesting that eros be absent from maternity. Rather, his discussion of maternity in *Otherwise than Being* centers on the efficacy of the image of maternity to express the ethical relation. We see in *Totality and Infinity* that he wished to separate the experience of the erotic from the ethical. This does not mean that the ethical and the erotic never intersect. In fact, we know that the ethical is an interruption of eros. If we read *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* together, we can see that

Levinas has not abandoned eros. In *Totality and Infinity*, the erotic—the play between the lovers—is prior to the ethical—the birth of the child. In *Otherwise than Being*, the discussion of maternity is not a discussion of what led to the maternal body. The discussion focuses on the maternal body as such. And for Levinas, the maternal body illuminates what he means by the ethical relation.

The maternal body is the example of the ethical relation *par excellence*. If this is the case, then Levinas has not moved farther away from “the feminine”; he has moved closer to it. “The feminine” in the earlier writings sat on the margins of the system. Levinas describes “the feminine” as that which provided the first experience of alterity and inaugurated the ethical relation, only to be excluded from participation in the ethical relation. But “the feminine,” now understood as maternity, is central to the ethical relation. The maternal body is responsibility—a responsibility the *pregnant* woman does not choose. Her body simply responds to the needs and vulnerability of the fetus.

Thus we can see why Tina Chanter asks if “the feminine” understood as maternity is now absent of eros. This question alerts us to the potential problems we face when we cast women in the paradigmatic role of responsibility. Does this now mean that “the feminine,” or women, must be endlessly self-sacrificing? Additionally, does this mean that the playfulness and enjoyment of eros is now absent from women’s lives? I would pose the question differently. What if responsibility were not the only aspect of maternity? I suggest that maternity also displays a *jouissance* or a *joie de vivre*. We find this other dimension of maternity in the biblical figure of Sarah, just as we see in her earlier the exemplification of maternal responsibility.

Sarah’s laughter, or maternity revisited

Rachel Adler calls attention to Sarah’s laughter and tells us that in order to construct a “feminist theology/ethics of sexuality, we should first retrieve the meaning of Sarah’s laughter.”⁴⁶ My concern lies elsewhere, but I would say that in order to address the charge that Levinas’s account yields a “sexless mother” and a joyless maternity, we also should turn to the issue of the laughter. What is particularly striking about Sarah’s laughter is the context in which we find it. Sarah has just been told that she will give birth to a child, and that the many nations will come from a child to whom she will give birth. Upon hearing this news, Sarah laughs. And her laughter is not just that she, at the age of ninety, will give birth to a child. She also understands what it will mean to give birth to the child: she must first conceive the child. But as Adler observes, to conceive a child, Sarah realizes that at the age of ninety, “[she and] ‘the old man are going to do it again!’ The picture of their fragile bodies shaken by fierce young pleasures evokes from her a bawdy and delighted guffaw.”⁴⁷ Sarah’s thought moves from having

the child to the pleasures involved in conceiving the child. So Sarah laughs and the angel asks why. The angel only understands destiny and cannot relate to the human mechanics by which this destiny is to be accomplished. Sarah's laughter *is* and is about eros. According to Adler, laughter is erotic, spontaneous, and anarchic, a powerful disturber of plans and no respecter of persons.⁴⁸

Thus, laughter interrupts and it does not matter who it is who laughs. The angel who brings the message to Sarah is serious; Sarah, who receives the message, is incredulous, and so she laughs! As Adler comments, the traditional focus on Sarah's laughter in this story centers on the idea that Sarah is incredulous at the possibility of conceiving. These commentaries conveniently overlook Sarah's reference to *ednah*—sexual pleasure. So Sarah gives birth to a son and says, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (Genesis 21:6). More interesting is the fact that Sarah not only laughs, but even names her child "Isaac" [*Yitzhak*], meaning "one who laughs." Her child becomes the embodiment of the sexual pleasure Sarah experienced with Abraham. Zornberg adds to this discussion by commenting that Abraham and Sarah "represent the dialectics of laughter."⁴⁹ With Isaac, the age of laughter begins.⁵⁰ And with Isaac, Sarah's motherhood is also tested. She is not aware that her husband has been asked to take her son to Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice.

The biblical story ignores her completely, and the very next chapter, *Chayye Sarah*—Life of Sarah—opens with Sarah's death. We can only surmise what might have happened. Isaac returned and told his mother that Abraham intended to sacrifice him and then stopped. Maybe he was rendered speechless and told his mother nothing.⁵¹

Rashi's gloss on the midrash has Sarah hearing the news from Isaac: "Sarah's death was consequent to the Binding of Isaac, because upon [hearing] the news of the *Akedah*—that her son had been readied for slaughter and had almost been slaughtered—her soul took flight and she died."⁵² In other words, merely hearing the possibility is enough to kill her. We see in this interpretation of Sarah's death a belief that a mother's love is so strong that she would die from the heartbreak of his tragedy.

According to Zornberg,

[Sarah] dies not simply because she cannot endure to the end of the story: that would constitute a relatively primitive tragic irony. She dies of the truth of *kime'at shelo nishhat*—of that hair's breadth that separates death from life. . . . No one deceives her, Isaac lives and tells his story, she questions him, she screams six *Teki'ah* notes [Shofar notes] and she dies *before she can finish them*. The profundity of her anguish is suggested in every detail. Her perception of moral vertigo is displaced onto Isaac's *kime'at shelo nishhat* experience. Sarah dies because she sees in Isaac's life what might have happened.⁵³

Upon hearing what was to transpire on Mt. Moriah, Sarah dies, and her grief does not merely tell us of a mother's love, although it does tell us that. It also tells us about what is not in our control, the sacrifices that are made beyond our control. Sarah dies, one might say, in place of Isaac. But nothing demanded that she die. Rather, her love for Isaac and the incomprehensibility of how fragile life is, of how she almost lost him, is enough to kill her. Her death does not indicate a normative component showing that a mother ought to sacrifice her life. Rather, it indicates the risk one takes precisely when one loves and cares for another.

What we see as a common thread in all of the midrashim on Sarah's life and death is something unique in her relationship to Isaac as his mother. She sees immediately that something was done to him: she knows. She dies from heartbreak. Or she dies from the mere possibility that her son was to have been killed. We thus perhaps can see the connection between these different aspects of mothering: the one who laughs, whose sexual pleasure willingly conceives a child, and the one who would grieve so fiercely she would die. Sarah's very conceiving of Isaac is not divorced from sexual pleasure. It is Sarah's conception of Isaac that inaugurates "the age of laughter."

Returning to the introduction of this paper, we recall that Plato's *Phaedo* is often read as an "ode to death": the philosopher's task is to live life such that one will not fear death. Socrates takes the task one step further. For him, the task is to welcome death. The soul will be liberated and the body will no longer be a hindrance to the knowledge the soul desires. In addition to holding this view of death, Plato's *Phaedo* also expresses an underlying, often overlooked theme. We recall that Socrates expels his wife, Xanthippe, from the room, and as she leaves she beats her chest in an emotional outburst that appears to make the rest of the men uncomfortable. As I mentioned previously, *Chayye Sarah* opens with Sarah's death and in the first few verses we see Abraham not simply mourning her death, but profoundly grieving for her. The image drawn in the Bible is poignant, for it suggests a man who has been weeping with sorrow. It is an even more striking image when we view it in contrast to the dismissal of those who would weep at Socrates's death, those who were too "woman-like." For Levinas, the death of the other, contrary to what Heidegger says, cannot be excluded from the analysis of our relation to death. Should not an analysis of death that does not to allow us to weep for the other be suspect? And should this analysis not be suspect especially if it indicates the feminine element interrupting and transforming the virile?

Levinas's ethics is a response to the extreme violence he sees throughout the history of Western philosophy and which, he thinks, culminates in the *Shoah*. Hence, his ethics takes a strong position on what our responsibility is so that we cannot ignore what it means to be ethical beings, humans in relationship with others. Levinas does not mean to imply that women should

become mothers. Rather, Levinas intends to say something more fundamental than that: the initial ethical relation is one we can all understand through the intimacy evoked by the image of mother and child. And the image of maternity disrupts the virile model given to us in the philosophical tradition. If Levinas's philosophy has a specific audience in mind, that audience consists of those who embody virility, those who rationalize, thematize, and totalize. Levinas's use of "the feminine" not only teaches us a great deal about responsibility via the image of maternity. It also teaches us a great deal about maternity, by using this image to express his conception of responsibility. Levinas's image of the ethical—the possibility of "dying for"—reveals the deep and profound unwilled caring for others that subverts the nihilist view of ethics. Profound care for the other is not only possible. It also gives meaning to life. Thus, Levinas's project does offer something of use to feminists, but it will not offer it to us easily and it will not be found by applying a straightforward reading of his work motivated by a typical set of feminist concerns. Levinas's work may offer us the opportunity to see feminist concerns in a different light and to see a wider range of what those concerns might be.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes, "Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun" (TI 112/84). I would add to that series, experiencing the erotic and having children. Maternity—the ethical relation *par excellence*—unites enjoyment and responsibility. Like Rosenzweig, Levinas gives us a philosophy of hope, a philosophy that does not claim that death marks our end, but rather frames the issue of responsibility in terms of a future, a future beyond death, a victory over death.

Notes

- 1 Levinas uses *autre* to designate otherness and *autrui* to designate the human other. These have been translated into English as *other* and *Other* respectively. For ease of reading, I do not use the capital letter unless I am quoting directly. Instead, I use the context of the discussion to indicate when I am referring to the other person.
- 2 The most famous criticisms come from the work of Luce Irigaray. See for example, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 178–89 (hereafter cited as QE followed by the page number), and "The Fecundity of the Caress," in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993). Those who avoid talking about "the feminine" are too numerous to name, since this avoidance encompasses most of Levinas scholarship.
- 3 Irigaray, "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas." Irigaray is responding to Levinas's work in *Time and the Other* (*Le Temps et l'autre* [Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979; first edition 1947], English: *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987], hereafter cited as TO/TA followed by the respective page numbers), and *Totality and Infinity* (*Totalité et*

- infini: Essai sur l'exteriorité* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971; first edition 1961]; English: *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969], hereafter cited as TI followed by the English and then the French page numbers).
- 4 "Choreographies," an interview between Jacques Derrida and Christine V. McDonald, trans. Christine V. McDonald, *Diacritics* (Summer 1982): 73.
- 5 Derrida's questions arise out of a discussion of "woman's place" and, in particular, the place as defined in the biblical books of Genesis and Job.
- 6 A longer, expanded version of this argument appears in my book, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003). See especially Chapters 3–6 and 9–10.
- 7 Emmanuel Levinas, "And God Created Woman," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 161–77. Originally published in French as "Et Dieu créa la femme," in *Du sacré au saint: Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), 122–48. Hereafter cited as GCW/DCF followed by their respective page numbers.
- 8 These are Levinas's words. It was noted to me that Levinas may have made a mistake with the Hebrew, since it is *yetzur* not *yetzer* that means creature. Thanks to Hava Tirosh-Samuelson for pointing this out to me.
- 9 The citation Levinas gives in his text, Isaiah 29:6, appears to be a misprint.
- 10 *The Midrash Says: The Book of Beraishis*, ed. Rabbi Moshe Weissman (Brooklyn: Benei Yakov Publications, 1980), 33.
- 11 According to the Rabbis, the interpretation of the duality as hermaphrodite rather than androgyny is significant since it emphasizes the creation of two bodies in one rather than one being with ambiguous or dual genitalia. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis, vol. I, trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 54. Although the rabbis also conjecture that the taking of the rib indicates that woman is a separate creation, the taking of the rib could be interpreted as merely the separation of the two bodies. The rabbis use the term *bi-sexual*, but not to indicate dual sexual orientation. Rather, I presume, they wish to indicate the presence of two sexes within one being. However, there is debate as to whether God took a rib or a side. If it had been a side, this would support the position that the bodies were independent but attached. Finally, another Midrash interprets the creation of woman this way: "While Adam slept, Hashem severed the female body that was attached to Adam's back and replaced the missing part with flesh" (*The Midrash Says*, 38).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 In "Judaism and the Feminine," Levinas cites one interpretation that claims there were "two distinct acts of creation . . . necessary for Adam—the one for the man in Adam, the second for the woman" and that this interpretation affirms a rabbinic text (*Difficult Freedom*, 34).
- 14 See also Daniel Boyarin's essay. Boyarin cites a passage from Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), where she criticizes the explanation Robert Alter gives for this change. Alter claims that the original version, which presents the sexes equally, was altered when the narrators, living in a society where there was no gender equity, had to account for the disparity. Thus, the version that presents the creation of the sexes unequally was introduced.
- 15 For another detailed discussion of this idea see Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Fordham University Press), 116–17.
- 16 In *Difficult Freedom*.

- 17 Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 116–17.
- 18 I give a full treatment of “the feminine” in *Totality and Infinity* in my article, “Re-inhabiting the House of Ruth: The Work of the Feminine in *Totality and Infinity*,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001).
- 19 We only need to recall Levinas’s note in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, where he tells us that Rosenzweig’s work is so much a part of this book that it would be impossible to reference it.
- 20 Luce Irigaray, “The Fecundity of the Caress,” in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell, 1993). Hereafter cited as FC followed by the page number.
- 21 For a detailed discussion of the relationship with and the debt to Levinas that Irigaray has, see Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: London, 1995).
- 22 One theme in Judaism claims that women are not required to study Torah because they are already ethical; they are already closer to God. See Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970), 326. One can see both the positive and negative in this view. Historically, women have been denied both rights and privileges because they [women] were thought to be more moral. Ironically, women were initially denied the U.S. vote because politics was deemed too dirty for them to touch; women then acquired the vote because it was thought their moral character would improve the lot of politics. Unfortunately, the non-requirement to study Torah was transformed into a prohibition. One cannot help but wonder how the view that holds women to be more ethical than men and closer than men to God informs Levinas’s analysis. For a similar claim regarding women and the ethical, see Catherine Chaliel, “Exteriority and the ‘Feminine’ in *Faces and the ‘feminine’*,” trans. Bettina Bergo, in *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Tina Chanter (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001).
- 23 And Derrida is correct that Levinas left us little choice but to think the other as not woman—or at least not a woman anchored to a home and a man. See Jacques Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 19–48, an essay devoted primarily to a discussion of *Otherwise than Being*, although it also comments on this problem in *Totality and Infinity*.
- 24 See Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Levinas and Rosenzweig* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 238.
- 25 Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Image/Doubleday, 1995) 134–35.
- 26 Zornberg, 135.
- 27 Levinas, “No Identity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 147, n. 6.
- 28 In *Nine Talmudic Readings*.
- 29 Stella Sandford, “Masculine Mothers? Maternity in Levinas and Plato,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Levinas*, 180–201.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 185.
- 31 See Chanter’s *Ethics of Eros* (London: Routledge, 1995) and most recently *Time, Death, and the Feminine* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001). See Chaliel, *Figures du féminin* (Paris: La Nuit surveillée, Collection Questions, 1982) and “Ethics and the Feminine,” in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

- 32 Sandford, "Masculine Mothers?" 195. See 202, n. 49 and n. 60.
- 33 Catherine Chaliel, "Ethics and the Feminine," in *Re-reading Levinas*, 119–29. Similar to my interpretation of Ruth, Chaliel also offers us the biblical character of Rebecca, whose excessive fulfillment of "the feminine" moves her from beyond the ethical to the very example of the ethical itself. Levinas also cites this very story as an example of the ethical at the beginning of his essay, "The Bible and the Greeks," in *In the Time of the Nations*.
- 34 For an interesting discussion of Chaliel's view, see Richard Cohen's comments in *Elevations*, p. 96. As my discussion indicates, I disagree with Cohen's claim that maternity is simply a condition of ethics rather than naming the ethical relationship itself.
- 35 Chaliel, "Ethics and the Feminine," 126–27.
- 36 See Daniel Boyarin's work, for example his fine essay "Justify My Love," in *Judaism since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (New York: Routledge, 1997), 131–37. See also Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 37 Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
- 38 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 For example, if we view Levinas's analysis through Kristeva's lens, it is the father who moves the child *away* from the ethical and toward the political. The maternal, then, is the exemplary paradigm of the ethical.
- 41 See Chanter's introduction to *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*, 26 n. 10 and Chanter's discussion in *Time, Death, and the Feminine*.
- 42 Although we commonly speak of a woman who died in childbirth, people often forget that pregnancy itself produces its own risk to a woman's health and life.
- 43 It is worth noting the opposing positions with regard to the relationship between eros and "the feminine." On the one hand, Irigaray is concerned that, in *Totality and Infinity*, fecundity is connected to eros, thus claiming that Levinas's analysis implies that the only "good" sexual encounter is one that intends to produce a child. On the other hand, Chanter is concerned that eros drops from the discussion when maternity enters it in *Otherwise than Being*, suggesting that Levinas offers a conception of maternity that is absent of eros. I do find it interesting that Levinas is unable to give us a relationship between eros and childbearing that is satisfactory to feminist theorists, even when he is thought to be offering opposite accounts of this relationship. Regardless of the outcome to these questions with regard to Levinas's project, these concerns highlight a larger question: "How are we to think of the relationships between motherhood and feminism, sexuality and childbirth, women and responsibility?"
- 44 See Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, which is excellent on the topic of "the feminine." In particular, see Chapter 5, 197–207.
- 45 See Chanter's Preface to *Ethics of Eros*.
- 46 Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) 107. For another interesting discussion, see the chapter on Sarah, "Du rire à la naissance," in Catherine Chaliel, *Les Matriarches: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel et Léa* (Paris: Cerf, 2000).
- 47 Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 105.
- 48 Adler tells us that "laughter," from the Hebrew root *tzahak*, is sometimes associated with biblical sex. The king of the Philistines sees Isaac *mitzahak*, "playing" with his wife (Gen.8). Potiphar's wife accuses, "That Hebrew slave, whom you brought into our house came to me *l'tzahak bi* [to dally with me]" (Gen. 39:17).

Its use in Exodus 32:6 in connection with the feast for the Golden Calf where the people "sat down to eat and drink and then rose *l'tzahek*, to make merry" leads the classical commentators to envision an orgy. Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, 106.

49 Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, 113.

50 Ibid., 112.

51 See *Midrash Genesis Rabbah*, LVIII 5.

52 *Ariel Chumash*, Rashi Chayye Sarah 23:2.

53 Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, 127–28.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

Levinas' reading of Buber

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It's difficult to identify with any precision the points at which Emmanuel Levinas' thought has been "influenced" by Martin Buber's, in part because the very notion of influences remains curiously unanalyzed in contemporary philosophy and in part because Buber's thought doesn't so much touch Levinas' as it pervades it. While it may be more a question of a shared problematic than of any doctrinal indebtedness, even Levinas' understanding of the nature of unassimilated Jewish thought apparently reflects Buber's ideas. Levinas prefers to call it "thought," rather than "philosophy," because "the intellectual life of Judaism remaining Jewish is not presented, and does not judge itself, starting from principles"; moreover, Jewish thought isn't constrained "within the limits of a *soul conversing with itself*," but is "eminently a *dialogue with the other than self*."¹ My limited purpose in this paper is to make note of some similarities and dissimilarities in their approach to the problem of the other; rather than with influences, then, I shall primarily be concerned with concordances (and discordances). Assuming the reader's familiarity with Buber's work, I shall first present, though rather schematically, Levinas' description of the encounter with the other, since inter-subjectivity is a theme as central to his thought as it is to Buber's. I shall then examine Levinas' critique of Buber's ideas about meeting the other. (It might be more appropriate at the outset to speak of this critique as a "critical appreciation," since Levinas diplomatically says that his work doesn't have "the ridiculous pretention of 'correcting' Buber on these points.")² Finally, I shall make a few remarks on Levinas' position.

The problems posed by the other's appearance (that is, the problem of the other's apparently subjective existence, and the problem of one's relation to him) have dominated modern and contemporary thought.³ In this context,

Buber and Levinas, Western Jews, have accepted the descriptive ethic of contemporary philosophy; what they have elaborated, however, is an ethical description of one person's relation to another. As Jews, they have refused the "totalitarian," manipulative language in which Greeks (even such Greeks as Husserl and Heidegger) have reduced the other to a moment of knowledge; as Westerners, they have reflected philosophically upon the inter-subjective experience.

The other as "constituted" in Husserl's *Cartesianische Meditationen* is silent. *Alter ego*, he doesn't contest the *ego* and he doesn't initiate a dialogue — rather, he occasions a monological, or "egological," discourse.⁴ The situation is very different for Buber and Levinas. In Buber's well-known view, the other *can* be spoken *of* as an object, but he *should* be spoken *to* as a person. For Levinas, the other does not disclose himself, but expresses himself; "the absolute experience" of the other's appearance "is not disclosure, but revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses. . . ."⁵ The other addresses himself to me, and his word, "You shall not commit murder," opens the dialogical encounter. In Saussurian terms, the other's *parole* addressed to me is the production, or the active producing, of the *language* that will give us a world in common — so that precisely the word of the other who will not be reduced to a moment of thought makes the-oretic language possible.⁶

In one of the most pregnant passages of *Totalité et infini*, Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter with the other:⁷

the face which the Other turns to me is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face. To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible, both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face. Less, for the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. The being that presents himself in the face comes from a dimension of height, a dimension of transcendence whereby he can present himself as a stranger without opposing me as obstacle or enemy. More, for my position as I consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.⁸

Three themes crucial to an understanding of Levinas' thought are suggested in this passage. First, the relationship that obtains between the self and the other is not (and *a fortiori* not primarily) a cognitive relationship, not one, that is, in which the other is known, reduced and objectified in my representation. Nor is it a conflictual relationship; the other doesn't limit me, but questions me.⁹ The encounter is, then, an ethical experience, in which one "posits" oneself as morally responsible to the other.

Secondly, the relationship produces itself in what Levinas has elsewhere called a "curvature in space".¹⁰ In this face-to-face meeting, the other approaches me from a dimension of height. His is the dimension of the Very High,¹¹ the transcendent; the other is other in an eminent sense. And I'm less than he: his face "summons me to my obligations and judges me," and before him I discover myself unjust.

Thirdly, by an inversion which is not dialectical (Levinas' understanding of this encounter is thoroughly antithetical to Hegel's view of mastery and slavery), the other is also less than me: he's the destitute one, "the stranger, the widow, the orphan," who invokes my strength even as he recalls me to my ethical obligations.

This other who presents (and absents) himself in the nudity of his face, this other who makes me aware of my injustice, comes to me as the transcendent and orients me toward the infinite; for Levinas, the ethical experience of the other *qua* other (eminently other, totally other) is a metaphysical experience. This, in two senses. The appearance and withdrawal of the other — his "trace" in the epiphany of his face — announces the infinite. So his appearance is revelation, and the "dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."¹² And the judgment I see in his face, the accusation which questions my freedom and makes me, free consciousness, conscious of my freedom as an injustice, awakens in me the desire for the infinite.¹³ Metaphysical desire.¹⁴ Moreover, in this second sense, the other, in bringing me to an awareness of my personal responsibility, creates me as a responsible person. Creation is an election, the invocation by which the transcendent, signalled in the epiphany of the other's face, calls upon me or "appeals" to me as an individual, moral being, responsible for my response itself.¹⁵

With this sketchy introduction to Levinas' thought, we may turn to his critique of Buber's. He scores Buber's description of inter-subjectivity on three points, namely, its reciprocity, its formality, and its exclusiveness. In the first place, one might ask (he suggests) if the very *tutoiement* of the I-Thou relationship doesn't put the other in a reciprocal position, and *if this reciprocity is original*.¹⁶ For Levinas, one's relationship with another isn't reciprocal, but asymmetrical, and one is always already obligated to the other.¹⁷

In Levinas' thought, this "pre-original," asymmetrical obligation defines election and Messianism, and distinguishes Jewish consciousness from the Western spirit (for which Levinas proposes a definition: "the refusal of all adherence without an act of adhesion").¹⁸ Since I'm always already obligated to the other who, though he appears from a dimension of height, is impoverished, a widow, an orphan, a stranger, I'm infinitely more demanding with regard to myself than to him. Ethical reciprocity is, for Levinas, a structure founded upon an original inequality; in order for reciprocity, or equality, to make its entry into the world, it's necessary for some persons to expect more of themselves than they do of others, and in this sense to set

themselves apart from the rest of mankind. Or, rather, to be set apart, precisely because one is always already involved, or because the original obligation to the other (which one might thus call pre-original) is prior to any decision taken for or against him. This is the meaning of election, and Messianism, a calling (back) to moral responsibility, is a "personal vocation of [all] men."¹⁹ Moreover, in Levinas' view, this preoccupation with human relationships distinguishes Judaism from Christianity, which is more immediately concerned with individual salvation. In the same words, "Moses and the prophets do not concern themselves with the immortality of the soul, but with the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger."²⁰

In explicit contrast to Buber, then, what Levinas proposes is to accord the other an ethical, if not an experiential, priority. However, there is a certain ambiguity on this point. Levinas clearly objects to the original reciprocity of the I-Thou relation in *Totalité et infini*, but elsewhere he presents Buber's idea of dialogue precisely as "a dialogue which, if I may say so, makes one 'enter into dialogue.' It's what Plato was always seeking: if you speak to me I can convince you, but how can I oblige you to enter into dialogue?"²¹ A sort of pre-original obligation would, apparently, figure in Buber's notion of the dialogical relation (or at least in the use Levinas makes of it here).

Introducing a second critical point, Levinas objects that the I-Thou relationship conserves a formal character. A disdainful spiritualism, it can unite man to things as well as to other persons.²² "Too often we stay, with Buber, at the affirmation of a purely formal encounter, even if the word responsibility is added to it."²³ And

one must not hold to this formalism, a bit romantic, of a too-vague spiritualism. *We think that the formalism of the encounter is foreign to the Jewish spirit.* [My emphasis.] Buber rises violently against the Heideggerian notion of *Fürsorge* which, for the German philosopher, would be access to the Other. It's certainly not from Heidegger that one should take lessons on love of man or of social justice. But *Fürsorge* as response to an essential denuding accedes to the alterity of the Other. It takes into account this dimension of height and of misery by which the very epiphany of the Other is made. Misery and poverty are not properties of the Other, but the modes of his apparition, his way of concerning me, his mode of proximity. One might ask himself if to clothe those who are naked and to nourish those who are hungry do not bring us closer to the neighbor than the ether in which Buber's Encounter is sometimes maintained.²⁴

Forceful language. It seems to me that Buber's care for the other informs all his thought, however "ethereal" his writing may be. However, I shall return to the question of social justice and the Jewish spirit; for the moment,

let's consider Levinas' objections to Buber's seeing "It" as "Thou." Affirming that "relation is mutual," Buber does indeed entertain, and even promote, the possibility of one's adopting an "existential," as opposed to a "scientific," attitude toward things. Perhaps the most familiar example appears early in *I and Thou*, where he writes of a tree which is "bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it . . ." ²⁵ I cannot agree, however, that Levinas is justified in scoring such ideas for their "formality" ("relation is mutual") or for their "spirituality" (the tree "has to do with me"). Buber's intention is to interpret human reality — man's "relatedness," or presence to the natural world as well as to other persons. Conrad Bonifazi notes that from this perspective the dialogical "turning" toward the other "not only represents a man's intention of establishing a living mutual relationship between himself and the particular person with whom he has to do, but also contains an attitude of openness to nature, an ability to 'experience the other side.' And this companionship of creation is an essential element in the life of dialogue; it belongs to authentic human existence." ²⁶

In this context, it should be recalled that Levinas has elsewhere critized Heidegger for his practical, "Greek" attitude toward nature: "For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who summarizes [*résume*] an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges." ²⁷ And he insists that the existence of things isn't exhausted by their *Zeughaftigkeit*. Their existence can be grasped, but it can't be fully appreciated by the "utilitarian schematism that delineates them as having the existence of hammers, needles or machines." However, Levinas' own notions of separation, enjoyment [*jouissance*], "living of" things [*vivre de . . .*], habitation, labor and possession would themselves merit a close and critical reading. For instance, objects (he continues) are "always in a certain measure — and even the hammers, needles, and machines are — objects of enjoyment." ²⁸ "Things are referred to [*se réfèrent à*] my enjoyment." ²⁹ I'm not persuaded that this attitude toward the world is significantly more respectful and less "utilitarian" than Heidegger's. And in this larger cadre, Buber's I-Thou relation to things seems rather less ridiculous (less pathetic, less primitive).

Finally, Levinas objects to the exclusiveness of the couple I-Thou "sufficing unto itself and forgetful of the universe." ³⁰ Buber's I-Thou would be rapport not of justice but of love, a relation not with the interlocutor but with "feminine alterity." ³¹ Jacques Derrida remarks that "there is in Levinas' thought, despite the protest against neutrality, a need for the third, for the universal witness, for the face of the world which guards us against the 'disdainful spiritualism' of the I-Thou." But hasn't Buber specified, he demands, "that the I-Thou rapport was neither a preference nor an exclusive [relation], being anterior to all these empirical and eventual modifications? Founded in the absolute I-Thou which turns us toward God, it opens on the contrary the possibility of every rapport with the other." ³²

While it isn't by any means clear that a "third person" plays the role of a universal witness in Levinas' thought — he is profoundly opposed to constructing any such "totality" — this turning toward the transcendent other marks, in fact, an aspect of human reality which Buber and he have *both* recognized. In his Postscript to *I and Thou*, for instance, Buber indicates that one person's relation to another doesn't exclude God any more than one's relation to God excludes others: the person who turns to God "need not turn away from any other *I-Thou* relation; but he properly brings them to him, and lets them be fulfilled 'in the face of God.'"³³ And in Levinas' recent works the trace of the third person who is "beyond being" orients me toward others. His notion of illeity explicitly involves this orientation:

Exclusive of the "you" and of the thematization of the object, illeity — neologism formed upon *il* or *ille* — indicates a way of concerning me without entering into *conjunction* with me. It is, certainly, necessary to indicate the element in which this *concerning* happens. If the relation with illeity were a relation of consciousness [that is, cognitive], "he" [*il*] would designate a theme, as the "you" probably indicates one in Buber's I-Thou relationship. For Buber has never exposed positively the spiritual element in which the I-Thou relation is produced.[!] The illeity of the beyond being is the fact that his coming toward me is a departure which leaves me to accomplish a movement toward the neighbor. . . .³⁴

In addition, Levinas recognizes another more concrete sense in which my relationship with another individual properly gives on to other relationships with other persons. Love demands justice, and "my relation with the neighbor could not remain exterior to the relations which this neighbor entertains with third parties. The third party [that is, my neighbor's neighbor] is also my neighbor."³⁵ And these two senses in which Levinas calls upon the third person beyond the immediate I-Thou are reconciled in his Judaism: "That the rapport with the divine traverses the rapport with men and coincides with social justice, *voilà* the whole spirit of the Jewish Bible."³⁶

It is evident that Levinas' three objections to Buber's description of the I-Thou relationship (his objections to its original reciprocity, its formalism, and its supposed exclusiveness) are motivated by what he perceives as Buber's *practical* indifference to others. If my interpretation is correct, he apparently sees Buber's alleged insensitivity to questions of social justice as a betrayal of the Jewish spirit and mission. This critique rests not only upon a certain reading of Buber's work, but also upon a certain reading of Jewish history.³⁷ To determine whether or not, or to what extent, these readings are justified lies beyond the scope of this essay. It appears, though, that Levinas' relationship to Buber is more thoroughly and more profoundly "dialogical" than his polite remarks in *Totalité et infini* would indicate.

References

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, "La Pensée de Martin Buber et le Judaïsme contemporain," in *Martin Buber, l'homme et le philosophe*. Brussels, Editions de l'Institut de Sociologie, 1968, p. 43. Levinas' emphasis.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini; Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, 1965, pp. 40–41. (Henceforth "TI".)
- 3 Jan De Greef underlines the fact that for Levinas the "problem of the *alter ego* is not to doubt the interlocutor, even to assure oneself of his existence, but to have access to his alterity. Levinas thinks that access as access to exteriority rather than as access to the interiority of the *alter ego*." See "Le Concept de pouvoir éthique chez Levinas," in the *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 68 (1970), p. 509, fn. 5.
- 4 Levinas outlines a critique of the Husserlian constitution of the alter ego in TI, p. 39, and in his Preface to Theodore F. Geraets' *Vers une nouvelle philosophie transcendantale: La gènese de la philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty jusqu'à la Phénoménologie de la perception*. La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1971, pp. xii–xiii.
- 5 TI, p. 37.
- 6 That the ethical word does make totalizing language possible is a point of tension in Levinas' thought. Language makes of the world a gift; in conversation, I offer the world (defined, objectified, thematized, represented) to the other, and he to me. The generalizing or universalistic operations of language are accomplished in view of the other, that is, *before* him and *for* him. Levinas writes that "generalization is a universalization — but universalization is not the entry of a sensible thing into a *no man's land* of the ideal . . . but is the offering of the world to the Other." TI, pp. 148–149. "No man's land" is in English in the original.
- 7 Levinas insists that the relation of which he writes is a face-to-face and not a *Mitsein*. See "Le Temps et l'autre," in *Cahiers du Collège Philosophique*. Paris, Artaud, 1948, pp. 127–128; TI, p. 53 and p. 188.
- 8 TI, p. 190.
- 9 See TI, p. 13: "A putting into question of the Same — which cannot be done in the egoistic spontaneity of the Same — is done by the Other. One calls this putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other the ethical . . ."
- 10 See TI, p. 59 and p. 267.
- 11 See TI, p. 4, where Levinas mentions this dimension of height in connection with the notion of metaphysical desire: "For Desire, that alterity, inadequate to the idea, has a sense. It is meant as the alterity of the Other and as that of the Very High . . ."
- 12 TI, p. 50.
- 13 Levinas summarizes this latter movement as one which can't be summarized, thus: "The life of freedom discovering itself unjust, the life of freedom in heteronomy consists for freedom in an infinite movement of putting itself always more in question. And thus is hollowed out the very depth of interiority. The increase in demand which I have with regard to myself aggravates the judgment which is borne upon me, that is, my responsibility. And the aggravation of my responsibility increases these demands. In this movement, my freedom does not have the last word, I never rediscover my solitude, or, if you wish, moral

- conscience is essentially unsatisfied, or if you wish again, always Desire." See "La Philosophie et l'idée de l'infini," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris, Vrin, 1967, pp. 176–177.
- 14 See TI, pp. 3–5 and *passim*.
 - 15 On Levinas' notion of creation, see TI, p. 50, 57, 61, and 269 *seq.*, and J. Plat, "De Mens en de Oneindige Ander bij Emmanuel Levinas," in the *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, 26 (1964), pp. 457–499; French summary, pp. 499–500.
 - 16 TI, p. 40.
 - 17 Thus Levinas' critique differs from Rosenstock-Huessy's: "the correct, truly 'existential' sequence," the latter writes, "is not *I-Thou* but *Thou-I* . . . Buber's *I-Thou* carries either the implication of a parity between the *I* and the *Thou*, or still worse, the implication that the *I* precedes the *Thou* in human experience . . ." See *Judaism despite Christianity: The "Letters on Christianity and Judaism" between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig*. New York, Schocken, 1971, pp. 69–70. It's dubious that Rosenstock-Huessy's critique is justified; Buber asserts that "Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*." See *I and Thou* (Second Edition). New York, Scribner's, 1958, p. 28.
 - 18 "Pièces d'identité," in *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme*. Paris, Albin Michel, 1963, p. 74. See also "Textes messianiques," in *ibid.*, p. 105.
 - 19 "Textes messianiques," *op. cit.*, pp. 119–120.
 - 20 "Une religion d'adultes," in *Difficile liberté, op. cit.*, p. 36.
 - 21 "La Pensée de Martin Buber . . .," *op. cit.*, pp. 54–55. See also "Liberté et commandement," in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 58 (1953), pp. 266–267, where Levinas develops the notion of a "discourse before discourse."
 - 22 TI, p. 40.
 - 23 "La Pensée de Martin Buber . . .," *op. cit.*, p. 56.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
 - 25 *I and Thou, op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.
 - 26 Conrad Bonifazi, *A Theology of Things: A Study of Man in his Physical Environment*. Philadelphia and New York, Lippincott, 1967, p. 55.
 - 27 "Une religion d'adultes," *op. cit.*, p. 40; see also TI, p. 17 and p. 49.
 - 28 TI, p. 82.
 - 29 TI, p. 106.
 - 30 TI, pp. 187–188.
 - 31 TI, p. 129.
 - 32 Jacques Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique; Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas," in *L'Ecriture et la différence*. Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1967, p. 156, fn. 1.
 - 33 *I and Thou, op. cit.*, p. 136.
 - 34 "Au-delà de l'essence," in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 75 (1970), p. 275. Levinas' emphasis. Levinas develops the notions of the other's "trace" and of illeity in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974.
 - 35 "Une religion d'adultes," *op. cit.*, p. 34.
 - 36 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 - 37 See my paper, "A Difficult Freedom; Levinas' Judaism," forthcoming in the *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*.

FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO LIBERATION

The displacement of history and theology in
Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to establish a kinship between the philosophy of Levinas and the theology of liberation. In their separate domains, these two enterprises reveal to us a portrait of late, twentieth-century intellectual work which refuses to abandon eschatological urgency. Philosophy and theology may meet, outside of both of their own homes, on a journey toward the other, in ethics.

Introduction

This essay confines itself mostly to the task of interpreting Levinas's major work, *Totality and Infinity*. I therefore spend the great bulk of the paper attempting to spell out, as clearly as I possibly can, the structure and force of Levinas's argument in this work. The essay has taken this form in order to address the relationship between theology, on the one hand, and Levinas's philosophy on the other. It seems to me that we cannot understand the implications of Levinas's thought for theology unless we appreciate the central philosophical position from which these implications arise. Explaining the standpoint of a philosopher who is as difficult and subtle as Levinas, however, becomes an independent undertaking in its own right.

The first part of this essay, therefore, explains the nature of Levinas's argument, and shows what makes it compelling. I then go on to take up the question of theology in the second part of the essay. Because so much of the paper must be taken up with an exposition of Levinas's basic position,

I have been forced me to limit my remarks on theology. Thus I try to explain why Levinas' position produces difficulties for theology, and I suggest a particular approach to doing theology (Liberation Theology) which seems to avoid Levinas's strictures.

Because the paper attends so closely to Levinas's basic line of thought, I think that it brings home his criticism of theology in a way that makes it difficult to avoid. The dialogue between Levinas and theology, which this paper hopes to promote, can only be fruitful.

More than this, however, the paper seeks to establish a kinship between the philosophy of Levinas and the theology of liberation. In their separate domains, these two enterprises reveal to us a portrait of late, twentieth-century intellectual work which refuses to abandon eschatological urgency. Do philosophy and theology perhaps meet, outside of both of their own homes, on a journey toward the other, in ethics?

The argument of *Totality and Infinity*

ENJOYMENT

Why must some form of cognition, or some form of disclosive understanding, or even any form of active agency at all, be our primary relationship to "what is"? In other words, why must theoretical cognition, or even Heidegger's lived disclosing of Being, be the relationship in terms of which we understand all of our other relationships to reality? Why, in short, must we understand human beings in terms of some form or another of *power*?

Perhaps human beings also take part in an entirely different sort of relationship to reality, one marked neither by knowing nor by comprehension nor by agency. Such a relationship to reality will reject the bifurcation between subject and object, because it will exclude any form of the idea that we are subjects who know objects.

This relationship will, moreover, even fall outside the distinction between "activity" and "passivity." We formulate this standard dichotomy on the basis of our active knowledge and hard-won comprehension of a given world of objects with which we interact. But the relationship to reality under consideration transpires before the distinction between subject and object.

What is this relation? How can it differ both from our theoretical knowledge, rooted in the distinction between subject and object, and from our comprehending participation in History, or in Being, which dispenses with that distinction? And what relation "escapes" the apparently inclusive dichotomy between activity and passivity? *Totality and Infinity* is an answer to these questions.

We go about our lives knowing and representing reality. We interact with the world in ways which display what Heidegger calls our fore-understanding of Being, thereby disclosing Being to ourselves. Nonetheless, as we do these things, the world also, at the same time, *affects us*. To use

potentially misleading language, *reality acts on us* as we represent it. Now this statement does *not* refer to the empirical fact that when we represent the world and act in it, a bit of it – say the wind, or a hard chair back, or another person – touches us or responds to our actions. Such equal and opposite re-actions belong rather straightforwardly to the order of representation and knowledge.

In such instances, the world that reacts back upon us in fact *remains* all along merely the objective world upon which we have already acted in representing it, manipulating it and so on. This is, therefore, hardly a new relationship with the world; it is only a reciprocal moment in the subject's knowledge of an object.

In rejecting the above idea, however, we clarify the new relationship to reality that Levinas has in mind. What affects us must enter into a new sort of relationship with us, one different from that between affecting object and affected subject. In other words, *a distinct form of connection between us and what affects us must be produced*. Such a relationship will not take place at some later date – rather, reality must so act upon us even as we go right on representing it, i.e., acting upon it.

Therefore, according to Levinas, in the midst of the mundane representational and theoretical activity that we direct at the world, we *also* have an entirely different “mode of access” to reality, a forgotten contact or connection with “what is.” The world itself, so to speak, enters into this connection with us, outside of and differently from the connection we establish with it in cognition. The dichotomy between subject and object – and the field of experience to which it gives rise – cannot accommodate this forgotten relationship which the world opens up with us. Levinas will call this relationship *enjoyment* (*jouissance*).

In enjoyment I relate to reality (or, more precisely though less elegantly, reality relates itself to me) by means of a “primordial receptivity” not yet taken up into the sensory consciousness of representation. In enjoyment I live out a distinctive relationship with reality – I take delight in, I thrive from the tangible impact which the world makes upon me.

For example, I not only represent the pear I eat: *I relish* the sweetness it produces in my tongue, *I enjoy* the inviting softness it presents to my teeth, and *I take pleasure* in the delicate scent it leaves in my nostrils. “Relishing,” “enjoying,” and “taking pleasure in” – these terms mark a different sort of lived connection with the reality affecting us. This lived contact transpires simultaneously with, but “behind the back of” the contact I make with reality in my knowing and representing.

In enjoyment I live a certain sort of extra-representational satisfaction from the things in my life. I enjoy bread, the newspaper, fine and comfortable furniture, entralling ideas. I do indeed represent these things. And they do indeed replenish me and contribute to my organic well-being. But neither my cognitive relation to reality, nor my biological relation to reality

exhausts my relation to reality. Enjoyment – my experience of joy – differs both from representation, and from the completed act of biological nourishment. It is an irreducible residue. In enjoyment, so to speak, the world gets to me before I get to the world. The world gives my life meaning – the love of life – before I take up the struggle to give the world meaning.

The phenomenological background of enjoyment

In investigating how the ego constitutes a perduring world of re-identifiable, unified objects, Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* announce a complex "backdrop" of activities which contribute – from the shadows as it were – to that work of intentionality through which the ego achieves an objective world of sense. We see such an announcement in the following passage:

Intentional analysis is guided by the fundamental cognition that every cogito is indeed (in the broadest sense) an intending of its intentional object, but that, at any moment, this something intended is more – something intended plus something more – than what is intended at that moment explicitly . . . *This intending-beyond-itself*, which is implicit in any consciousness, must be considered an essential moment of it.

([5,46], translation slightly altered)

Husserl will later call these shadowy "implicit intendings," which lie within and support our explicit intentional acts, "pre-predicative phenomena." They will include such things as passive genesis, corporeal kinestheses, and, perhaps, in Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, even history itself. The temporalizing structures of consciousness may serve as another example of what Husserl has in mind here. Each present state of awareness contains, within its "ownmost essence," both retention of its preceding state, and protention toward its successor state. This retention-protention structure, and the receptive structures of consciousness correlated with it, dwell within and support our explicit acts of objective knowing.

In the interpretation of these implicit phenomena, we come upon a basic divergence between Husserl and Levinas. Husserl understands these implicit horizons solely in terms of their hitherto hidden contribution to our experience of objects, and to the general achievement of objectivity. Husserlian phenomenology strives to identify and assemble all of these many implicit horizons, reflectively recuperating the totality of conditions which make objects possible.

Levinas finds Husserl's discovery of the implicit horizon immensely valuable, but seriously and profoundly disagrees with Husserl's own interpretation of this phenomenon. We see this in a passage from Levinas's essay "Intentionalité et Métaphysique":

For Husserl, the movement of consciousness going toward its object, dissimulates another movement that one would want to call subjective – since this movement does not directly touch upon objects. But one cannot term this dissimulated movement subjective because it is not a simple back-water of the psychic reality, but instead remains intentional, and concerns that sphere which is *other* than the “myself” of the subject – and it is in this sphere that objects finally situate themselves for Husserl. This sphere is delineated as the *horizon* of objects or as their background. Such terms are nevertheless inappropriate. For to designate that plane, on which the intentional movement dissimulated by objectivation directly touches, as horizon or as background is to subordinate this movement to objectivation, and to find it devoid of truth except in so far as it serves as transcendental condition for the object. This would be still to maintain the metaphysical primacy of objectivity, as if being were a superlative of object, as if the relation with the object and relations between objects (for example, causality) were solely susceptible of *truth* and as if the logical forms in which these relations are delineated were the framework of Being.

([8, 137–138], translation my own)

Here we see the birth of Levinas’s idea of enjoyment. Levinas insists that the implicit horizons of an objectifying act, such as representation, do indeed conduct us to realities other than the subject. And he denies that the implicit horizons of an objectifying act bring us the realities to which they conduct us as objects. Levinas sees a distinctly non-objectifying intentionality in these implicit horizons. As a form of intentionality, this non-objectifying relation possesses a certain dignity, which gives it a “susceptibility” to bear truth, along with the other, objectifying forms of intentional relation.

Enjoyment, in which I live the world’s impingement upon myself as contentment and happiness – and not as any sort of cognition of any sort of object – represents Levinas’s re- interpretation of Husserl’s notion of the implicit horizon.

Indeed, a little later in “Intentionalité et Métaphysique,” Levinas clearly announces his own program, reconfiguring the horizons implicit in our objectifying acts in a decisive manner.

The transcendental movement that Husserl discovered within intentionality, dissimulated by the naive vision of the object, accomplishes metaphysical relations, ontologically irreducible, original or ultimate.

([8, 138], translation my own)

Here we see the maturation of the concept of enjoyment. Implicit horizons now have something more than a unique value, and an intentionality

independent of the objectifying act. Levinas has turned a former supporting cast into the stars of their own show.

In this passage, Levinas claims that non-objectifying relations "accomplish metaphysical relations." Thus enjoyment must accomplish metaphysical relations even as I unsuspectingly engage in mundane activities such as knowledge, speech and action. When Levinas says "metaphysical relation," I take him to mean: (1) a relation to which the distinction between subject and object does not apply, and (2) a relation which somehow supports or underlies those relations to which this distinction does apply.

Let us recall Husserl's words here. He says that every intending of an intentional object, e.g., every representing, "is more – something intended plus something more – than what is intended at that moment explicitly." Enjoyment will accomplish metaphysical relations – ones we have yet to spell out – precisely through its conformity to *this* structure [3, 25–26].

In enjoyment reality puts "something more" into me, so to speak, than what I put into reality through my cognition, agency and thought. The world "invests me," or endows me, in enjoyment, adding riches to my life that representation and thought forget. This means, to take a concrete example, that the reality of something I represent as an object in fact *overflows*, or contains something more than, the object I bring to myself in representing it. In enjoyment, according to Levinas, I "live" this something more.

When an object touches the receptive surfaces of my sensuous affectivity – the living borders of a corporeal openness to reality that I have neither chosen nor premeditated – I enjoy or revel in creaturely satisfaction. This contentment, which the world brings to me over and above what I bring to myself of the world, is the "something more" which Husserl finds hidden within every cognition; it is the respect in which the reality of the object I represent overflows my representation of that object. (To say that enjoyment of something overflows one's representation of it as an object, does not mean that enjoyment has a greater dignity than representation. Enjoyment is pre-objective; it falls beneath the achievement of objectivity. It does not rise above or transcend cognition – it rather stays below it. Only ethics, face-to-face contact with the other, will surpass representation.)

We must now resume our discussion of the order of human existence that enjoyment opens up. At least two questions appear at this point. What metaphysical relations do enjoyment and its related phenomena accomplish? And, exactly why does enjoyment not turn out to be merely a peculiar form of intentionality or representation?

The life of the separated being

The being who satiates her needs lives from the pleasure that food, drink, shelter induce in her, over and above the contribution that these things make to her biological sustenance. Such a being is happy for her needs; their

incessant return allows her once again to satisfy them, and thus to enjoy their fulfillment. This structure of need defines a peculiar sort of dependence. The being who needs also enjoys her needs. Thus human need, and the enjoyment to which it gives rise, leave the level of straightforward dependence and neediness. In the joyous dependency of need, the human being reveals herself to be more than a mere "need replenishment system."

The happiness of enjoyment means that we stand in relation to our own needs, looking forward to them and experiencing delight in their satisfaction. This relationship of "living toward our needs and their fulfillment" begins to differentiate us from the animal world (see [7, 114–117] and [6, 86–88]). This peculiarly human structure of delightful dependence that enjoyment establishes also "accomplishes," or concretizes, something even more important. When I enjoy, I am not representing myself to myself, nor am I reflecting on my awareness of myself. In enjoyment I "live" the contentment of my own being; I exist as my own happiness, as my own pleasure. Enjoyment describes a closed-circuit of voluptuousness; it concretizes itself at one stroke as the centripetal movement of waves of gratification. In enjoyment I come into being. We must not confuse this "I" (perhaps we should say this "me"), which "gells" into being during enjoyment, with the far more complex and fully developed "I" that we find in representation and action. For the moment, we must concentrate on the irreducibly personal I of pleasure and happiness that enjoyment produces (see [7, 199] and [6, 91]).

This intrinsically personal, "self-enclosed" I springs up, as it were, from itself. Happiness individuates me; in contentment and joy I crystallize as a unique center of pleasure. In other words, an incarnate egocentricity "congeals" in enjoyment. This egocentric self does not *know*; it does not understand Being. Moreover, this egocentric self arises neither from correlation with, nor from negation of, an other. Differing from all intellectual and dialectical self-definition, contentment – the *joie de vivre* of being alive – *separates* me in an absolute fashion. The non-objective, non-disclosive phenomenon of enjoyment produces what Levinas calls "an absolute starting point." This idea contains some of the greatest depths of Levinas's philosophy. Reality touches me in such a way as to produce enjoyment, and enjoyment concretizes my absolute independence – doesn't such an idea almost mean that *I arise, de novo*, at the touch of reality? But if this were so, how could *I* be hanging around *before* this, awaiting reality's decisive contact? And if I am indeed *not* in existence *prior* to reality's putting enjoyment into me, then who is there to be touched by reality in the first place? This, of course, constitutes the paradoxical idea of creation, which will take on a somewhat more explicit role in Levinas's later thought. From my analysis of enjoyment, it would appear that *Totality and Infinity* is indeed structured around a non-theological concept of creation.

Enjoyment represents Levinas's re-working of Husserl's notion of the implicit horizon. Levinas claims, in a passage we quoted above, that these

implicit relations carry out or concretize metaphysical relations. And here, in the birth of a separated being in enjoyment, we see the accomplishment of the first such metaphysical relation.

The great bulk of the second part of *Totality and Infinity* goes on to delineate the life of this separated being within each one of us. In order to do this, Levinas will spell out the other phenomena, belonging to the order of enjoyment, which accomplish metaphysical relations. These additional metaphysical relations reveal a detailed layer of forgotten happenings, lived occurrences whose immediacy transpires beneath the threshold defined by the subject-object dichotomy. In describing and remembering this forgotten layer of experience, Levinas compels the self of representation and cognition to take cognizance of the egocentric, intrinsically individual, and innocently hedonistic self which dwells within it. As Edith Wyschogrod has rightly pointed out [10, 57], the self – or layer of myself – which results from the touch of reality upon me, must be innocent, for it does not yet *know*. The arrival of knowledge, or in this case, the coming into being of the self which discloses, comprehends and represents, changes the picture entirely, much as in a famous Biblical story.

For the moment, however, we must attend to a basic question. What exactly prevents us from reducing the self of enjoyment to some form or other of representation or thought? What insures that we cannot reduce enjoyment to any form of knowing? Levinas responds to this question by citing what he calls the “irretrievable anteriority of enjoyment to representation.” While representation actively fixes the sense of an object, enjoyment reveals that the representing being also derives nourishment from this very same object. In other words, representation lives from the very reality whose meaning it claims to establish.

In the language of Husserlian phenomenology, representation arrogates to itself the honor of constituting objects, of actively determining their sense. The word “constitution” represents a battle-ground of sorts. Despite the term’s strong idealistic connotation, it appears unlikely that Husserl meant to locate the origin of the spatio-temporal world itself in our noetic capacity! Sokolowski’s study of this question, which still seems definitive, advances a different interpretation, one that underlines the gradual development of Husserl’s concept of constitution. According to Sokolowski, from the *Investigations to Ideas* Husserl retains roughly a form-content model of constitution. This model “explains the constitution of objective things by the objectivating apprehensions which sensations undergo” [Sokolowski, 204–205]. Yet in his *Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, a series of lectures which Husserl actually wrote before *Ideas*, the problems with this “hyle-morphic” model become clear. This sets the stage for the later Husserl’s development of passive genesis, and the pre-predicative sphere in which this occurs. Husserl introduced these modifications in *Experience and Judgment* and *The Crisis of European Sciences*, as well as in the *Phenomenology of*

Internal Time-Consciousness (see [3.1] and [9.1]). Nonetheless, we representing beings in fact live from the touch of an object upon us, in the relationship of enjoyment, even as we claim to constitute this very same object which already supports our lived contentment, our love of life. As Levinas says, in enjoyment,

the process of constitution which comes into play wherever there is representation is reversed . . . If we could still speak of constitution here we would have to say that the constituted, reduced to its meaning, here overflows its meaning, becomes within constitution the condition of the constituting, or, more exactly, the nourishment of the constituting.
([7, 128], [6, 101])

In representing the bread I eat, for example, I cognize an object whose manner of affecting me produces a distinctively human joy – a delight in which my separated being coalesces at one stroke. The reality of the bread I represent as an object exceeds this represented reality in enjoyment, precisely because it feeds my very being, it fills my uniquely human life. This excess, this something more, is a condition of my life.

In other words, the phenomenon of living from what we constitute reveals our “previous implantation” in the very world we claim to uncover, *de novo*, in representation. Levinas expresses this idea in an extraordinary passage:

The body is a permanent contestation of the prerogative attributed to consciousness of “giving meaning” to each thing; it lives as this contestation. The world I live in is not simply the counterpart or the contemporary of thought and its constitutive freedom, but a conditioning and an antecedence. The world I constitute nourishes me and bathes me. It is aliment and “medium.” The intentionality aiming at the exterior changes direction in the course of its very aim by becoming interior to the exteriority it constitutes, somehow comes from the point to which it goes, recognizing itself past in its future, lives from what it thinks.

([7, 129], [6, 102])

Thus enjoyment reveals that the object we represent *conditions* its very being represented. For this reason, enjoyment remains anterior to representation, with an irrecoverable “pastness.” Theoretical cognition cannot “get back to” enjoyment as enjoyment; it always arrives on the scene too late.

The order of enjoyment: element, dwelling, labor, and possession

If the self of representation, concepts and agency lives amidst a world of objects, then where does the self of enjoyment live? What sort of world

opens up for each one of us in enjoyment? How should we describe the sphere in which we live the excess of enjoyment over representation, where we live a life already conditioned by what it discovers? In other words, what is reality *like* when I revel in enjoyment? Or, as Levinas puts it, "In what respect does the sojourn of man in the world he enjoys remain irreducible and anterior to the knowledge of that world?" ([7, 130], [6, 103]).

When we know an object, or cognitively arrange a set of objects, we do so within the articulated and discretely differentiated context of objective reality. The context of objective reality locates the objects we represent or manipulate within its constitutive network of clearly defined, coordinate points of space, time, and matter. Objects come from somewhere; they belong to certain ascertainable and delimitable physical structures in the world.

Enjoyment, on the other hand, reaches reality as an immediate exultation in pure, lived quality. Clearly this lived pleasure does not refer itself to the constitutive network of space, time and matter which provides objective reality with its context. Therefore, transpiring as it does outside the discrete context of objective reality, enjoyment requires its own context, its own format. Levinas calls the context in which we enjoy "the element." The element is an indeterminate, environing medium. Obviously if enjoyment takes place *within it*, it must not yet feature discrete objects.

Levinas cites such things as the sea, the wind, a field and the sky as examples of the element. Without form, these things surround us and locate us within the world in a caressing embrace. We bathe in the element. The element, quality without form, envelops me and thereby produces my "pre-objective" placement inside the very world I constitute. The element and the sensuous way we bathe in it, concretize our pre-objective "lived withinness."

The sheer bodily receptivity of our skin, our "raw" corporeal sensibility, and the element which rubs up against us as we bathe in it may well accomplish our pre-objective placement within a world of qualities and textures. Yet we do in fact pull things away from the enveloping embrace of the element. In representation, we suspend the formlessness of the element and "actively extract" objects from its "shifting background." In enjoyment, however, these objects return to the element, losing their discrete form, melting back into an indeterminate and directionless medium ([7, 130-149], [6, 103-123]).

Enjoyment requires its own format. And so Levinas argues that a second empirical relationship – that of the sensitive body bathing in the element – accomplishes another metaphysical relationship. This second relationship both provides a needed context or format for enjoyment, and concretizes the separated being's non-objective placement within that from which she remains separated. We might say that the element describes "where" the separated, egocentric self of enjoyment lives.

The very insubstantiality of the element, however, necessitates a further specification. As Levinas says, "the element is faceless, mythical." When we

enjoy things in the element, therefore, we find ourselves within a shifting and uncertain medium. The context, the character of enjoyment, despite its happiness and contentment, would seem to be transient and volatile.

Not standing on firm ground, or having a shaky footing in other words, turns out to be intrinsic to enjoyment and happiness. This ought not to surprise us. Levinas insists that enjoyment has to do with lived qualities, not substantial, enduring objects. Levinas calls this concomitant of enjoyment "the futural insecurity" of the element.

Thus we find ourselves asking, "In exactly what fashion does the separated being occupy the element in which she enjoys?" How does the separated being who enjoys in the element manage to live out the futural insecurity, the unreliability of the context within which enjoyment occurs?

In order to enjoy amidst the ephemeral immateriality of the element, the separated being would seem to need a way to withdraw from the transitory medium within which it bathes. The separated being must somehow obtain a solid footing within the shifting unreliability surrounding it. To do this the separated being must pull back from the immediacy of enjoyment; she must "break the plenum of the element." Somehow, the egocentric I of enjoyment must delay its own enjoyment. This clearly requires the self of enjoyment to grasp hold of herself, to take a stand within herself.

This pulling back from the element, this coming to oneself, specifies a certain metaphysical relation. Levinas calls this relation that of "recollection," for in it the separated being re-collects herself in withdrawing herself from the element. In gathering herself together amidst the element, the separated being becomes "at home with herself" even surrounded by the element. The metaphysical relation of recollecting oneself from the element, and thereby establishing one's distance from the element, is accomplished by the empirical relationship of "living in a home" (*habitation*).

We encounter here the usual Levinasian structure. Something more takes place in the empirical event of dwelling in a home than what representation reveals. The home remains more than an object or a tool. It exemplifies a manner of being in which I postpone enjoyment within the sheltering and welcoming *familiarity* of a particular place and structure. Protected within the nurturing, womblike character of the home, I attain an intimate security away from the threatening lability of the element. The familiar embrace of gentleness in which the home envelops me – this "having a place of one's own" – allows me to draw myself up into my own being. What one might call the "maternal familiarity" of the home enables me to gain a foothold in myself, and thus to look out at the element surrounding me ([7, 150–158], [6, 124–131]).

Dwelling in a home delineates, in large measure, "how" the separated being maintains itself in the element. However the home, which allows a re-collected being to take what we might call a "perspective" on the element, includes within itself two more supporting relationships. Dwelling in a home

both requires labor and makes labor possible. The home makes labor possible by opening up a distance from the element, and it requires labor in order to come into being.

Labor transforms the element, which dwelling in a home has put at a distance, into things. It fixes the endlessly insubstantial medium into hard-edged, determinate forms, hewing and fashioning them from the element. Labor dispells the facelessness of the element, what Levinas calls its "mythical character." Through labor which forms the element, things with determinate "faces," or sides, come into existence.

These newly wrought things can then be transferred. They can become, in other words, possessions. The laboring self can extract things from the element and take them back to her home. What I possess is property. In property, I master a thing, I make it mine. The one who possesses a thing does not address merely its physical attributes, as we do in labor or in representation. The owner of the thing instead lays claim to the thing's substance, attempting to control it ([7, 158–162], [6, 131–136]).

This entire realm or order of personal life that enjoyment defines reveals the existence of at least two distinct levels in the life of each one of us. On one level, the overt or public one, we are cognitive agents who participate in large networks of objects, institutions and persons. Yet, on a second level, each one of us enjoys an entirely distinct personal or "interior" existence. This personal life neither fits within the framework of the public, objective world of history, nor conforms to the distinction between knowing subject and known object. Indeed, for this reason Levinas goes to great pains to insist that the distinctly personal existence of the separated being is not "experience."

Thus in the phenomenon of enjoyment, surrounded by the element, recollected in a dwelling within which and from which I labor and possess property, I live out something more than an historical existence. This is not yet transcendence, for I escape the net of history by falling *below* the level of the object in a self-enclosed and private course of life. For transcendence, for rising above the level of the object, something – someone! – other must enter into my life.

The face of the other, ethics and infinity

What happens when the absolutely separated egocentric self of enjoyment, who dwells within us, encounters another human being, face to face? Let us first of all consider the role of representation in the face-to-face encounter. We will then return to enjoyment.

Representation must at least "register" the tangible presence of the face of the other. But according to Levinas, it will not get much further than this. Cognition and theory assemble an objective world within the format of an interlocking network of discrete entities. As we have seen, this public world differs from the individual world of the element within which I enjoy. The

element lacks form; one might define the objective realm, on the other hand, in terms of form. Objects differentiate themselves from one another through form; representation exorcises the languorous indeterminacy of the element through re-instituting and re-storing form.

The face which faces me turns out to be a most unusual sort of "form." Over and above the sensible presence of the face which I represent, the face seems to thwart my attempts to integrate it, as an object, into the public totality of objects. Certainly a formed object seems to present itself to me in the face of the other. Yet each time I grasp this particular form within a theme, or thematize it, the face may "undo" the very form within which I would capture its reality!

The face of the other possesses the ability to "step out from behind" the thematized form in which I seem to have captured it. In this the face reveals itself to be an entirely unique form or object. The face – unlike every other such form or object – can actively challenge and dispute the grasp with which I seek to comprehend it.

The face of the other speaks to me, it expresses itself to me when I stand face to face. The other "means" at me, in and through her face. Thus she may contest the grasp within which I would comprehend her either in a facial expression, or in language, saying to me: "no, I am something else entirely; that's not me."

In the face-to-face encounter, I discover that the face of the other can "dethematize" itself – its very plasticity allows it to undo or overturn the apparent fixity of the form through which I attempt to apprehend it. The face of the other turns out to be volatile and to have a will of its own.

The other seems to grow endlessly, for each time I seek to take her measure in an adequate representation, she indicates the "something more" or the "something else" that she is, over and above the objective form I represent. I can never master or encapsulate her. In expressing herself to me, in other words, in her ability to draw attention to exceeding the form in which I seek to fix her, the other frustrates representation ([7, 197–200], [6, 172–175]).

Presenting herself to me face to face, the other prevents theoretical cognition from making any progress in assimilating the other to the objective totality of history. In the face-to-face encounter, the other proves ultimately resistant to my assimilating representation; she will not be fit into a whole of my making.

Let us now return to our initial question, about the face-to-face relation and enjoyment. The same resistance of the face, which leaves representation nothing better to do than to register the face's sensible presence, manifests itself very differently in the order of enjoyment. When the egocentric self of enjoyment encounters the face of the other, a remarkable event takes place.

The face of the other resists my attempt to enjoy it. It does this by refusing to enter into the context into which I must force it in order to enjoy it, that of the element. When enjoying myself in the element, I find form,

discrete “sides,” and depth dispersed into shifting insubstantiality. But the face of the other, which confronts me in the face-to-face encounter, in turn ceaselessly dispels this directionless element, thereby contesting my attempts to enjoy. How does this come about?

The element, the context in which I experience lived delight, does not possess the hard edges whereby objects particularize themselves, and arrange themselves within a system. It lacks discreteness and so lacks determinate sides. This absence of sides or defined surfaces prevents there from being direction, i.e., any way in which one orientation might differentiate itself from another. Thus in the immediacy and directionlessness of the element I can neither “face” nor “confront” anything. The lived sensibility which constitutes enjoyment simply does not reach the enjoyable in that way.

But the face is a unique surface, a sheer side. The face has no “reverse side” for us to examine – it has no other sides at all. It thus possesses no physical depth, for an object needs many sides in order to define an interior, a hidden depth. The face is just itself, there is nothing “behind” it ([7, 192–193], [6, 166–167]). Unlike the element in which I seek to enjoy it, the face does not “come from nowhere.” The face rather “presents itself out of itself.” Amidst the faceless region in which I greedily take my pleasure, a surface, a definite side flashes forth: what Levinas calls “the epiphany” of the face of the other.

Because the face of the other is a surface with neither other sides nor depth, however, it cannot hide anywhere nor retreat. The face is exactly what it is. It presents itself to me naked. The face’s nudity represents its destitution, its neediness. It is this naked surface that flashes forth, that erupts in the element ([7m 75], [6, 47–48]).

But the other’s face does not merely burst forth like lightning, momentarily interrupting the otherwise indifferent context of my pleasure and comfort. It does something more. In the face-to-face relation, *the other comes from herself toward me*. In other words, the face doesn’t merely show up in some general fashion amidst my comfortable surroundings, briefly altering the primordial insouciance of my enjoying myself. The face aims at me. In her eyes the other opens up a “line of communication” from herself to me. The face of the other looks at me, as I delectate in a world made for me.

If the other’s face inserts a naked side, a bare surface into the context of my pleasure, then her eyes add something even more radical. The eyes of the other, which focus upon me in the face to face relation, introduce *direction* into the indeterminate character of my immediately lived, egocentric delight. The other’s eyes, facing me in the undivertible urgency of the face-to-face encounter, challenge my enjoyment.

A face which looks at me bursts forth into the element. This contests the very possibility of that faceless, directionless moment in which I revel in the sheer pleasure of my self-enclosed, corporeal sensibility. Suddenly, I am aimed at, I am caught in an unbreakable gaze, intended solely for me.

This rupture of the faceless unconcern of enjoyment "calls my name." The face of the other gazes at me and at me alone, taking me by surprise, shocking me. Like the imploring gaze of a homeless man as I walk home after a late night of drinking and dancing, the eyes of the other take me by surprise, catching me in the middle of my own pleasure. The face of the other, presenting itself out of itself, announces "I am somebody." And the eyes that train themselves on me from this face bring this message *to me*, in the ultimate concreteness of my egocentric life of enjoyment. In her contesting my selfish enjoyment, the other sobers me up from the intoxication of pleasure.

Inter-rupting my enjoyment, the face of the other *teaches* my hedonistic self. In the face to face, my self-seeking ego of immediate pleasure finds itself looked at, beseeched, addressed. My enjoyment miscarries; I discover instead that I am challenged. The face of the other calls forth something new from me: it puts my enjoyment into question.

In the miracle of this teaching, the other raises me – i.e., my egocentric self of enjoyment – to an awareness of myself as a being that enjoys. Directed at me alone, the eyes of the other put my hedonism into question, and thereby force me to come to myself as an egocentric being. This account of the directional quality which the other's eyes introduce into the element, represents my own reading of "Ethics and the Face," a crucial section of Levinas ([7, 194–219], [6, 168–195]). I have tried to read this section in creative tension with the immediately preceding section, "Sensibility and the Face" ([7, 187–193], [6, 161–167]).

In this inescapable appeal the other brings about a fissure, an internal distance within me. The face of the other causes the self of enjoyment to exceed itself, to expand, to grow. This self now "discovers" its own spontaneity, its own gratification. In so doing, it takes up a distance from itself – it becomes self-conscious. The other teaches me my own subjectivity. It raises me to consciousness.

The subject is born in ethics. The other endlessly puts something more into the self of enjoyment than was there before. According to Levinas, in this ethical teaching we see the origin of thought, language, and objectivity.

This objectivity is correlative not of some trait in an isolated subject, but of his relation with the Other. Objectification is produced in the very work of language, where the subject is detached from the things possessed as though it hovered over its own existence, as though it were detached from it, as though the existence it exists had not yet completely reached it. This distance is more radical than every distance in the world. The subject must find itself "at a distance" from its own being, even with regard to that taking distance that is inherent in the home, by which it is still in being.

([7, 209], [6, 1894–185])

Being at one remove from oneself, having a perspective on oneself, arises in ethics, in the peaceful face to face relation between self and other. As Levinas says, peace comes first: it is the original condition for violence. (This also constitutes one of Levinas's most pointed criticisms of Hegel, for whom the self come to be in the violent struggle for recognition.)

The other is infinite; she always turns out to be more than I represent her to be, and she constantly puts more into me than is there, in eternal teaching. When I think about the other, moreover, I discover that my very ability to think has always already emerged from an irretrievably earlier connection. Thought cannot get back to this past – ethics precedes and founds thought, and the objective world it makes possible.

Transcendence and the teacher-student relationship

Through the face-to-face relationship, the other educates me, giving me myself and my world. The other teaches me language, which as Levinas says is a “putting in common of the world.” The presence of the other in the face to face, in the primordial peace of ethics, constantly creates and re-creates me – it makes me the eternal student.

In order for me to be at all, the other must have educationally jolted me out of my egocentricity. One might say that ethics is the minimum requirement for my being a thinking, language-using self at all. Nothing is required of me in this teaching. The teacher, the other, enlightens me by putting my power in question, and thereby empowers me. Now the situation rests in my hands, my words, my concepts. The other has put me in a new position. Her teaching itself gives me the power of choosing the way to live out this new reality. The temptation to murder the one who intrudes into my private pleasure grove may arise.

Or as a related way of living my encounter with the other, I may stop up my ears to her plea. I can close myself up in my own interior pleasure, and abandon the other. Nonetheless, my very ability to reject the other comes from the other's teaching me. Referring to this possibility, Levinas says that,

when the soul opens, in the marvel of teaching, the transitivity of teaching is neither less nor more authentic than the freedom of the master and the student, though the separated being thereby leaves the plane of economy and labor.

([7, 181], [6, 156])

Indeed, the separated being would not be truly separated unless it could so “forget transcendence” in refusing the other.

Another possibility remains. I can give to the other. I can take the very things which constitute my life as enjoyment, and put them at the disposal of the other. In welcoming the other, I actually take what I live from in

enjoyment – my food, my clothing, my home – and remove it from my life. I bring the very things which produce my enjoyable lived dependence to the other.

I can feed and shelter the other, offering her the “bread from my mouth, the coat off my back.” In doing this, I pull back from what sustains my own immediate life, I rip myself away from pleasure. The other’s face, in its nudity, expresses indigence. Feeding and clothing the other describes a movement without parallel, in which I ascend toward the height from which the other’s naked face addresses me.

I can open my home to the other, the very home through which I acquire respite from the uncertainty of the element. I can offer to the other my labor and my possessions, through which I take care of myself and control my environment. In the concrete phenomenon of generosity, in hospitality, I literally raise myself above the self I am in enjoyment. I move away from myself and move toward the other. This journeying toward the other and away from myself, concretely accomplished in feeding and clothing the other, in sharing with her, is transcendence.

Generosity enacts transcendence. In giving, I approach the other as indeed other than myself, different, transcendent. (Although it treats a very different topic, the insightful discussion in [1] may nonetheless be helpful in thinking about the issues raised in this section.)

Theology and the distinction between theory and practice

Levinas’s philosophy aims to show the primacy of ethics. He argues that the face to face relation constitutes an absolute point of origin, what Edith Wyschogrod has called “the upsurge” of language, history and totality. Theoretical cognition cannot make this endlessly repeated moment, in which the other’s teaching transforms selfish enjoyment into public speech and inter-subjectivity, into an “event” within the third-person objectivity of history.

This results from the fact that the other disrupts an enjoyment which is always my enjoyment. In ethics, the other faces an absolutely individuated being, one whose crystallization as an ego does not depend upon nor refer to anything outside itself. A third person cannot observe the unavoidable vector of responsibility that comes from the other’s eyes toward me. Only I register this vector – I am its extra-historically unique target. What passes between the self and the other in the face to face relation transpires above the public world of history which it initiates.

Discourse takes place within history, and so necessarily comes on the scene too late with respect to the infinite. Discourse cannot recapture the transcendence of the other. The beings about which discourse informs us have been, so to speak, domesticated. They have been already included within an ontological totality as some sort of object or event – thought negates whatever infinity, whatever radical exteriority they may have once had.

Levinas's position has unfavorable consequences for theology. In attempting to gain knowledge of God in discourse, theology grasps something within the totality, failing to ascend to the beyond-Being. As Levinas says,

transcendence precisely refuses totality, does not lend itself to a view that would encompass it from outside. Every "comprehension" of transcendence leaves the transcendent outside. . . .

([7, 293], [6, 269])

Comprehension does not reach transcendence, it finds itself instead within that realm that transcendence institutes in ethics.

Levinas explicitly rejects theology as a mode of knowing, or talking about God. Insisting that "to hear the divine word does not amount to knowing an object," Levinas goes on to argue that "our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God" ([7, 78], [6, 50]). God does not show up in the totality of Being, according to Levinas, because God remains invisible and not a part of Being.

For Levinas we have no knowledge of God apart from our relationship with human beings ([7, 78], [6, 51]). Levinas does derive one or two statements about God from this relationship. Thus he tells us that "the dimension of the divine opens forth in the human face," and that:

The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.

([7, 78–79], [6, 50–51])

Levinas goes so far as to say that theological concepts are empty, and depend upon the content that ethics gives them in order to function.

All of these anti-theological conclusions follow straightforwardly from Levinas's position. Levinas tells us that we achieve transcendence in generosity, in opening the home to the stranger, in feeding the hungry. Such concrete, enacted relations remain something entirely different from theory and cognition. Transcendence, renouncing the things in my personal life of enjoyment in order to make them available to the other, enacts itself outside the totality of history to which theory finds itself limited.

I do not intend, in this paper, to offer an evaluation of Levinas's critique of theology. Some excellent readings on this question are listed in the bibliography following. Here I am more concerned to establish that these negative consequences for theology do indeed flow rigorously from Levinas's position in *Totality and Infinity*. In order to do this, it has been necessary to present Levinas's argument in detail so as to construe its force as clearly as possible.

I would like instead to offer a possible explanation as to why theology finds itself in the predicament Levinas describes. This suggestion opens up the concrete possibility that at least one form of theology – liberation theology – may avoid the difficulties that Levinas’s argument presents.

Theology generally attempts to approach the divine, and to secure transcendence. In engaging in this task, theology generally understands itself as a form of reflection or contemplation. Such reflection constitutes a “second-order” activity, distinct from action in the world. Indeed, such worldly life may well benefit from conforming to such reflection, and action may well supply contemplation with its material, but the two remain different.

When theology understands itself, in its attempt to approach God, in terms of thought it implicitly relies upon the distinction between theory and practice. In other words, in facing the problem of approaching God, theology ends up fashioning itself in the image of the theory-praxis distinction. For it considers itself “thought” or reflection, which terms derive their meaning from an opposition to practice or action.

The distinction between theory and practice thus exercises influence upon theology. This distinction not only shapes theology, but also helps theology to bring into being two distinct areas of human life: theory and practice. Theology finds itself therefore, as if, *ab initio*, with the question of whether to approach transcendence through thought, or through action instead of thought, or through action which carries out thought. These are the elements with which theology, recognizing itself as theory under the influence of the theory-praxis distinction, always seems obligated to seek God.

But the reason that thought cannot draw near transcendence, according to Levinas, turns out to be the same reason that neither theory, nor practice (nor some combination of the two) generate transcendence. Transcendence happens when I give, when I leave my own self-centered pleasure and minister to the other’s need. The transcendence which giving or hospitality produce is neither theoretical nor practical. Because it concerns my miraculous abandonment of self-concern, one might simply call this transcendence ethical ([7, 29], [6, xvii]).

Opening my home to the other is not a cognition. And it is not merely an action – it is not merely a public event in history. It is rather the almost magical transmutation of my greed into justice, the overcoming of the personal point of view. When the other tears me from myself in ethical transcendence, the enactment does not transpire in history. The concrete giving of food certainly happens amidst the practical vicissitudes of history, but the transcendence produced in this generosity takes place between myself and the other, and deep within my own animal self-interest.

Thus, once theology gives itself the elements of reflection, action and some relationship between the two, its transcendent goal evades it. Neither theory nor practice, transcendence comes rather in concrete, enacted connection with the other. From the perspective of Levinas’s philosophy, I

conclude, theology would be better off seeking God if it understood itself as such lived ethical connection with the other.

Without attempting anything like a complete analysis here of liberation theology, I would like to suggest that this theological movement does indeed seem to satisfy the “Levinasian conditions” for theology. Liberation theologians understand their theological work as concrete solidarity with their neighbors, a lived identification with their suffering and poverty. This lived connection with indigent others becomes, in liberation theology, the approach to God.

Gutiérrez presents us with a striking instance of this theme. In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez takes the Incarnation to represent the actual entry of God into humanity, the divinization of the human. From this it follows that the neighbor is sacred, holy. Gutiérrez writes that:

the neighbor is not an occasion, an instrument for becoming closer to God. We are dealing with a real love of man for his own sake and not “for the love of God,” as the well-intended but ambiguous and ill-used cliché would have it – ambiguous and ill-used because many seem to interpret it in a sense which forgets that the love for God is expressed in a true love for man himself. This is the only way to have a true encounter with him. *That my action towards another is at the same time an action towards God does not detract from its truth and concreteness, but rather gives it an even greater meaning and import.*

([4, 202], emphasis added)

The transcendent reality of the other person, of the neighbor, whom God has sanctified for all time by pouring Himself out into concrete humanity, reveals a new modality for theology’s quest for the divine. For Gutiérrez, the divine is approached in caring for the other, and in struggling on her behalf to change the conditions which oppress her.

Liberation theologians replace the theoretical or doctrinal cognition of God with personal commitment to the other – a commitment which is realized in concrete political work for the other. This leads the Spanish theologian Joan Casanas to reflect that failing to assent to formal religious doctrines, and indeed even an inability to believe the proposition “God exists,” may reflect a deeper religious nobility. As she says of those who die fighting oppressive regimes, but who nonetheless refuse to assent to the proposition “God exists,”

Has what many activists have not discovered by giving their lives for the oppressed been discovered by a Videla, a Pinochet, a Somoza, or the bishops who honor them? Is it so easy to know something about God in a world where injustice is rampant?

[2, 121]

Juan Luis Segundo has also denied that it makes sense to give cognitive assent to doctrinal and theoretical formulas about God in a world dominated by cruelty and inhumanity. Segundo argues that the other human being is the original bearer of God's image. Given the present state of the world, how can one hope to see the presence of God in the face of the neighbor? The oppressive conditions under which people live distort the original image of God which they in fact bear. For Segundo, we cannot show God's presence in the world until we alter the social and economic conditions which obscure it in poor, excluded human beings [9, 3–19].

Liberation theology understands its theological task – that of approaching the transcendent – in terms of solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This solidarity is not a theoretical cognition, nor merely an action. It is a connection with the neighbor which renounces self-seeking pleasure, and seeks to help the oppressed. Certainly this solidarity is concretely enacted in history. But solidarity – as indefatigable orientation toward the other, as relentless struggle on his or her behalf – transcends both the thoughts I think and the actions I perform.

Liberation theology, in other words, refuses to understand its theological movement toward God – even implicitly – in terms of the distinction between theory and practice. In addition to this distinctly Levinasian strain, of course, many other themes run through liberation theology. Indeed, I do not mean to deny the presence of many neo-Hegelian elements in liberation theology. In particular, liberation theology seems to embody both the Levinasian metaphor of the infinite teacher-student relationship, and the Hegelian metaphor of the master-slave conflict (especially as read through Marx). These different basic metaphors clearly carry with them very different views of history, conflict and peace. But uncovering the rich and diverse philosophical roots of liberation theology requires a study in its own right.

I do not claim that liberation theology presents a perfect parallel with the thought of Levinas, nor that Levinas would approve everything that liberation theologians write. But both seek divine transcendence in a life of commitment to the other. There is a prominent liberation theologian who has been explicitly influenced by Levinas. This is Enrique Dussel. Dussel has written one book on Levinas [3.01], and has written several others that explicitly show the traces of Levinas's work. In addition, Robert Gibbs has informed me that while teaching at Louvain, Levinas had as his students many young men and women from Latin America who would later return to their own countries, dedicate their lives to their impoverished neighbors, and create what we now call liberation theology. Thus there would also seem to be a direct, historical connection between Levinas and liberation theology. Might this fundamental similarity reveal that the two movements of thought are siblings – one elder, one younger – seeking the same Parent?

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JEWISH EXISTENCE AND PHILOSOPHY

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Levinas's thought has at least two main sources of inspiration: the experience of Jewish life in intimate contact with the Hebrew Bible, and the European tradition of philosophy and literature. However, according to his autobiographical note, "Signature," his life has also been "dominated by the premonition and the remembrance of the nazi horror" (DL, 374). *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* is dedicated "to the memory of those who are closest among the six million murdered by the National Socialists besides the millions and millions of human beings of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other humans, of the same antisemitism." This dedication shows—and this will be one of the topics on which this chapter concentrates—that anti-Semitism is for Levinas the equivalent of antihumanism, and that to be a Jew is identical with being authentically human.

The reading of the great Russian novelists, who continually asked questions about the meaning of human life, and an early love of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* prepared Levinas for the study of Plato, Descartes, Kant, Bergson, and Heidegger, all of whom asked similar questions in different ways. In a series of radio talks broadcast in February and March of 1981, Levinas calls philosophy "thought that directs itself to all humans" (*penser en s'adressant à tous les hommes*), (EI, 19), and not only to those who share the particular convictions of the thinker. Isn't philosophy, as the activity by which universal reason—as universal as humanity—produces universally valid discourses, opposed to the particularism of discourses appealing to specific traditions or experiences? Before we can answer this question we should find out whether the Western way of philosophical thinking is as universal as it claims. Hasn't Heidegger shown that Western

philosophy, from Plato to Nietzsche, speaks a particular, objectifying and manipulative, language, and that it relies on certain unquestioned presuppositions? And isn't it commonly said that *the* language of philosophy is Greek, although it has been translated, with more or less success, into Latin, from the sixteenth century on into French and English, from the eighteenth century on into German, and since a century or so ago also into American? The desire and the claim of every philosopher is to speak in the name and at the service of *all* people. But is anyone able to speak a universal language? Can thought wrestle free from the particular experiences, traditions, readings, and instructions in which it is rooted?

One of Levinas's achievements is his diagnosis of Western philosophy as a way of thought in which specific attitudes and perspectives reveal themselves. Though his criticism of the occidental way of life and thought would probably have been impossible if he had not been educated as Jew, the means through which he justifies his diagnosis and his own perspective are emphatically philosophical. More precisely stated, his method is a personalized version of the phenomenological techniques inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and transformed by Martin Heidegger.

Before discussing the relations between Jewish experience and philosophy in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, we must clearly identify his message and the way in which he claims to have shown its truth. I will begin with his critique of Western thought, a critique that includes not only the classical texts of philosophy, but also the ideology expressed in the occidental life-style, practice, planning, and technology.

The expression "Western philosophy," as it is used by Levinas and other French philosophers since Heidegger, describes the average knowledge of a French university professor concerning European traditions. It stresses the modern characteristics of our culture, ignores for the most part Medieval philosophy, and identifies the Greek heritage mainly with selected texts of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. A more precise study of the spiritual and attitudinal history of the Western world would certainly reveal the inadequacy of the way in which we have been accustomed to discussing our past, but the central issue here is not a historical one. Rather, we wish to understand what motives and choices dominate our own habitual understanding of the world, God, society, ourselves, and our past—an understanding that seems to be natural and to be supported by the best representatives of our culture.

According to Levinas, Western philosophy from Parmenides to Heidegger, is an *egology*. The discourses in which it has expressed itself display a universe centered around an ego that not only functions as subject of the "*cogito*," but also as the center and end of the world and the source of all its meaning. Egology is the theoretical side of a more fundamental attitude: the egocentrism of Western civilization realizes itself in a peculiar way of life, of which philosophy is the theoretical counterpart. Objectification, material

enjoyment, and the privilege accorded to seeing, manipulation, planning, and exploitation form a pattern which could be characterized by the word "egonomy": the world of Western culture is ruled by ego's law. To characterize the Western project, Levinas himself uses the word "economy," in the etymological sense of a life-pattern subordinating everything to the establishment and maintenance of a house or home. The "law" (*nomos*) of ego's "home" (*oikos*) rules the universe.

The second part of *Totality and the Infinite*, titled "Interiority and Economy," is dedicated to a series of refined phenomenological analyses in which Levinas takes up and partially refutes, partially corrects, Heidegger's famous description of "being-in-the-world" (SZ, secs. 14–24). Instead of beginning with *Findlichkeit*, Levinas starts with enjoyment (*jouissance*) (TeI, 82–125; TaI, 110–42). I "live on" (*je vis de*) or I feast on the elements: I breathe the air, and feel the warmth of the sun on my skin; I walk on the earth and rest on its solid support; I enjoy swimming in the surrounding water. As a humanly living being, the ego is primarily characterized by a spontaneous egoism: love of life, happiness, and self-centered affectivity are the central concerns. This ego-centered dimension of human existence constitutes an individual's independence separating him or her from all other individuals. The elementary affectivity of enjoyment explains the fact that each ego is unique and radically solitary.

Levinas continues his discussion with Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* by showing that human existence is not primarily thrown into a world of things that are ready-at-hand (*Zuhandenes*), but rather a way of being at home in the world (TeI, 125–31; TaI, 152–56). A human dwelling (*la demeure*) is not a tool or utensil, but my private domain, the concrete form of my intimacy presupposed by all possibilities of using and discovering things in the worldly network of utilitarian relationships. Being at home in the world has neither the structure of a subjective activity or passivity in the face of objects, nor the meaningful coherence of a hammer, nails, a wall, and a painting, as described by Heidegger (SZ, secs. 16ff.). The home precedes the world of the useful. It is the elementary center of the human condition. More than once, Levinas observed that hunger and food are absent from Heidegger's world. The same could be said of the intimacy of a home, although the later Heidegger has written in a beautiful—too beautiful—way about "the real plight of dwelling" and our task of "bringing dwelling to the fullness of its essence."¹ As the vital basis of material satisfactions the house has been ignored in his work, however.

Being somewhere at home, I am able to go out into the world, to discover and exploit its possibilities. Only by having a place of my own can I bring other beings into my presence, represent them and make them into objects that I can observe, handle, and transform by labor and study within the framework of scientific theories (TeI, 131–49; TaI, 158–74). The existence of objects, objectifying theories, industry, planning, technology, administration,

and politics presupposes rulers who believe themselves to be centers of the universe and who transform that universe into a domain for their power and sovereignty. On the level of philosophy, such a world expresses itself in a systematic vision according to which the universe appears as a totality of beings unfolding their features, essences, and relationships before a panoramic *cogito* as wide as the horizon of that totality. The presence of all beings in one whole, experienced by one encompassing consciousness, is the egological world of Western philosophy. This world can also be characterized by the word "ontology," insofar as the intentional correlate of the central ego coincides with the totality of all beings seen as grounded in or given by Being itself. God then becomes either the ground, as first, highest, and most fundamental of all beings, or He coincides with the totality insofar as it originates and gathers the parts or "moments" of which it is composed. Heidegger's description of Western metaphysics as onto-theo-logy is reinterpreted by Levinas as a manifestation of the natural egoism which constitutes the elementary level of human life. This reinterpretation places Heidegger's "thought of Being" under the same verdict, however. According to Levinas, Heidegger's attempt to overcome onto-theo-logy by asking the forgotten question of Being itself—as essentially different from the collectivity of beings—fails for the following reason. If Being is considered to be the first and ultimate, then it is inevitably conceived of as a totality and, therefore, as excluding the possibility of real infinitude. The gods (*die Götter*) and "the God" (*der Gott*), of whom Heidegger sometimes speaks, cannot be infinite since they appear within the horizon of a more radical, though still finite, horizon: Being. Although Levinas regards Heidegger as one of the greatest philosophers of the entire history, he claims Heidegger's thought is still dominated by the traditional tendency to totalization. This might also explain why Heidegger could collaborate—though briefly—with the most horrible expression of that tendency: Nazism.

Heidegger would certainly reject the thesis that the way in which he himself questions Being implies a sort of holism. Levinas, however, would maintain that Being itself, as distinguished from single beings, cannot mean anything other than either (1) something common to all beings (rejected by Heidegger in the beginning of *Sein und Zeit*), (2) their encompassing horizon, e.g., the light in which, or the openness thanks to which, all beings appear; (3) the totality of beings in which their differences are immersed and drown; or (4) the oceanic fund from which all beings emerge. In this chapter, I will not dwell on this most difficult question. Together with the question of the relations between Heidegger and Levinas, it will occupy us in chapters 4, 6, and 15. For now it is sufficient that we have an idea of Western philosophy and of the word "totality" as understood by Levinas.

The most adequate example of philosophical totalitarianism, fitting perfectly into Levinas's descriptions, is Hegel's system, which, in this respect, can be considered to be the completion of our philosophical history. In

what is perhaps too Hegelian of a conception of philosophy's history, Levinas extends his diagnosis to all the heroes of Western thought:

Everywhere in Western philosophy, where the spiritual and the meaningful are always located in knowledge, one can see this nostalgia for totality. As if the totality were lost and this loss were the sin of the spirit. Truth and spiritual satisfaction are only reached by a panoramic vision of reality.

(EI 80–81)

Levinas's criticism, as well as his orientation, are summarized by the title of *Totality and the Infinite*. The idea of the Infinite (*l'idée de l'Infini*) cannot be reduced to or developed from the idea of totality.² The universe of ego-centrism is separated by an abyss from the manifestations of the Infinite. In order to distinguish between the "manifestation" or "monstration" of the phenomena which are all finite, and the infinity of the Infinite, Levinas uses the words "revelation" and "epiphany" to describe the latter. These words do not refer to anything thaumaturgic or "supernatural" or theological; rather, they indicate *the* wonder: the wonder that distinguishes humans from self-centered forms of life. This wonder is revealed in the epiphany of the Other: another man or woman or child that emerges "in" (or over against) my world. When I encounter another human, I become aware that "economy" is not an appropriate response to this event. The Other condemns my monopoly of the world and imposes an infinite number of demands on me by simply appearing. The Other's face, the fact that he or she looks at me, makes me responsible for the Other's existence, life, and behavior.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, I would like to state, as clearly as possible, that Levinas explicitly recognizes the positive and necessary aspects of the practical and theoretical totalizations produced by all people in every civilization. More than once he insisted that a systematic totality is indispensable for human practice and theory; what he fights against is not totality as such, but rather its absolutization: totality cannot be the ultimate. Science and technology, economy, law and justice, administration and politics would be impossible if we were not allowed to see and treat the facts and beings of our world as factors within possible networks and as elements of planning and organization. A just world demands institutions by which human beings are *also* treated as elements of larger wholes, numbered, weighed, used and seen, as parts that do not live for themselves alone. A society would die if it were not held together by collective regulations. As Kant put it, respect for humans as "ends" does not exclude that they are *also* treated as means.³

This cannot be the whole of social truth, however. If collective organization and politics were the highest perspective, individual life would not have an absolute worth in itself. Kant would say that such a view denies humans

their dignity (*Würde*) which is incomparable to, and not exchangeable with, any value (*Wert*).⁴ All totalities must be subordinated to a higher criterion which maintains the dignity of the individual.

The radical originality of Levinas's philosophy lies in the formulation of this highest criterion. It is not the "human essence" (*die Menschheit*) common to all human beings, myself included, as Kant claims; it is the epiphany of the Other's face and speech rupturing the homogeneity of my universe and breaking its totality. The mere fact of another's existence dethrones me and makes me into a subject in the strong sense of someone who supports the Other's life and is responsible for it. Such a subject is rather a servant than a sovereign (AE, 125–66; OB, 99–129).

The force of economy and egology is condemned and broken by the asymmetry of the interpersonal relationship, not by a fundamental equality of subjects having the same human rights. Indeed, the idea of a human essence that makes us equals presupposes a perspective transcending the community of all individuals. Who looks from that perspective? Who is capable of taking a place above the collectivity of all humans? Doesn't such a perspective presuppose an egological and totalitarian point of view? Speech presupposes another standpoint. When I speak, I address myself to another person who reveals that my monopoly has come to an end. She robs me of my sovereignty, but thereby frees me from solitude. The first social relationship is characterized by a radical dissymmetry. The mere existence of another human—not his decisions or choices—commands me. I look up to another as to someone who imposes respect and devotion. The Other is characterized by "height" or "highness" (*hauteur*). The absoluteness with which the Other's existence transcends the claims of my self-centered universe by more radical demands, is what Levinas calls its infinity. The Other (*to heteron*) comes from beyond all appearances and transcends the horizon of Being itself. This explains the title of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Adopting Plato's characterization of the Good as "not an *ousia*" but "beyond the *ousia*" (*Republic* 509b), while simultaneously hinting at Heidegger's ontology, Levinas points to the Infinite by stating that it "is" in another way than beings. Its way is not "essence" (*Anwesen* or "*essence*") but otherness (AE, 3–25; OB, 3–20).

The asymmetry of the basic social relation can easily be misunderstood as a simple reversal of the unequal relationship implied by the monopolistic attitude of a solitary ego. The latter functions as the starting point of various social theories in the style of Hobbes, according to whom the "wolfish" nature of humans must convert itself into a more "divine" one by means of a fundamental revolution. Some hasty readers of Levinas's work have misunderstood him to be a moralist or even a preacher who protests against the widespread treatment of other humans as slaves or servants. His oeuvre would tell us for the *n*th time: You must be the servant of your neighbor! I don't think that anyone should be ashamed of proclaiming or repeating this

biblical admonition if it can be done in a nonmoralistic and nonpaternalistic way. Levinas's philosophical message is different, however. He does not write an ethics, but shows, by means of subtle descriptions and analyses, that the ethical perspective must be the starting point of every philosophy that hopes to be true to the *facts*. The discovery that I am a subject who is infinitely responsible for the Other's life—a discovery immediately “given” in any encounter—answers questions like “what is there?” and “how and why are there beings?” by transforming their meaning and status: “is,” “Being,” “essence,” etc., reveal themselves subordinate to my responsibility for others. This discovery is the beginning of all self-knowledge and all knowledge in general. The search for knowledge is redeemed from its natural tendency to egocentrism by a unique revelation of the absolute.

To ease the understanding of his analyses, Levinas sometimes refers to our experience of being more obliged toward others than justified to impose demands on them. I may dedicate and even sacrifice my own life for you, but when I oblige you to sacrifice your life for me, I am a murderer. The basic asymmetry of the social relation is also expressed in a phrase of Dostoyevsky often quoted by Levinas: “We are all responsible before all for everything and everybody, and I more than others.”⁵ Ethics, taken radically, is not a discipline to be developed on the basis of a theoretical foundation given by epistemology and/or ontology. The epistemological question as to how we know “other minds” and, more generally, how knowledge relates to objects, presupposes a precise description of the peculiar mode in which another appears and an analysis of speech as revealing a speaking existence that cannot be reduced to a moment of my consciousness. The most radical forgetfulness in philosophy is not its neglecting the question of Being, but rather its insensitivity to face and speech, for it is there that the Infinite reveals itself to me.

Devotion is not primarily a nice attitude to be preached, but the most intimate structure that constitutes me as *subject*. I am *sub-jectus*, “sub-ject-ed” to the Other, bearer of an endless responsibility for the Other's existence. The structure of “the-one-for-the-Other” constitutes me as a unique individual, because nobody can replace me for the task it implies. To have a conscience means that I am conscious of being infinitely responsible for others. I am a hostage (*otage*) for the Other. My life is “substituted” for the Other's. I am responsible not only for the satisfaction of your hunger, but also for your behavior and guilt, even for your discriminating against or persecuting others, including myself (AE, 148–51; OB, 116–18).

If Levinas's description of the Infinite is faithful to the facts, human existence is the contrary of a force that ruthlessly conquers a realm of its own against similar attempts made by others. The subtle violence of our behavior is detected by Levinas, as it was by prophetic authors from Amos and Ezekiel to Pascal, Dostoyevsky, and Claudel. At the opening of *Otherwise than Being* a word of Pascal is quoted: “This is my place under the

sun." That is the beginning and the image of the usurpation of the entire world" (AE, vi). Against the tendency of the "Nietzscheans" who cultivate violence because it seems a primordial and irrepressible force, the moral experience reveals that I have not the right to live if my life means robbing or oppressing others (EI, 128-32). Proclaiming human rights is hypocritical and ridiculous if it covers a machinery of money-making and power-gathering paid for by its victims. Are we capable of inventing forms of behavior which correspond to the asymmetrical structure of intersubjectivity, or is our incapacity a reason for declaring Levinas's descriptions exaggerated and unreal?

Levinas's discovery of the Infinite, as the epiphany to which all other phenomena owe their ultimate meaning, has important consequences.

The epiphany of the Other subordinates the world of phenomena and experiences to responsibility. Insofar as we have learned the meaning of the words "phenomenon," "experience," "manifestation," "truth," etc., within the context of Western egology, they are all marked by the "egonomic" mode of being described above. As an intruder into this world, the Other, or the Infinite, can neither be described as an object of our knowledge, nor as a phenomenon in the proper sense of the word. The supreme demand is not "experienced" as a "presence" and, in its complete difference from any observable figure, the face is *invisible*. The invisible is, however, the closest and most intimate reality of our lives, because it commands and constitutes the innermost interiority of our selves. The absolute presents itself without being a phenomenon. Its presence is our awareness of a demanding obedience and humility.

In the name of this law, devoted to whomever we meet, we must establish a world of institutional justice, fair politics, and humane economy. Indeed, besides and behind this human Other, present here and now, who is the absolute for me, other human others present themselves. The absoluteness of their claim forbids me to concentrate on one to the exclusion of others. An unlimited extension, and therewith a limitation, of devotion is inevitable, but this does not lead back to egoism. The multiplicity of others constitutes a universal fraternity which must secure itself through the construction of a just society. Here lies the necessity of collective and totalizing views, planning, administration, and political strategy. All social institutions receive their inspiration from the asymmetrical relationship which has made me infinitely more responsible than any other.

The acceptance of this responsibility here and now is the heart of religion. "I am not afraid of the word 'God,'" says Levinas in the interview quoted above,

The Face signifies . . . the Infinite. This never appears as a theme [i.e., as an object that we could posit, observe, study or discuss], but [only] in the ethical signification [i.e., in the signifying character of the

asymmetrical relation] itself. The more I am just, the more I become responsible. One is never without debt with regard to another.

(EI, 111)

When I say before another "Here I am," this "Here I am" is the place where the Infinite enters into language, without, however, permitting me to see it.

(EI, 114)⁶

The fact of such a "Here I am" reverses the natural tendency of life's self-preference and of Being's *conatus* to persevere in existence. The possibility of *me voici* testifies that there is something higher than Being and life. The "otherwise than Being" is the glory of God (EI, 116 and AE, 187; OB, 146–47).

Who would not recognize this God as the God of Moses and the prophets? It is the God of human justice; not a mythical, mystical or sacramental God, insofar as such might imply a fusion of the finite with the Infinite. Levinas is following the sober and severe tradition of the Talmud when he refuses all forms of religious enthusiasm and participation, because he thinks that they endanger the purity of the prophetic inspiration. The austere figure of the pharisee—so slandered by the Christians—is the best example of loyalty to that spirit. But this spirit is not altogether different from the spirit that can be discovered by a philosophical analysis of human existence as such.

This brings us back to the question from which we began: How does Levinas's philosophy relate to the Jewish traditions and experiences by which his life has been determined? Let us first discard the idea that any philosophy is possible on the basis of purely formal procedures applied to experiences so trivial that a discussion about their evidence is superfluous. If we want to call such an enterprise "philosophical," we must add that it has little to do with the meditations to which the classics of Western thinking were devoted.

The ideal of *modern* philosophy is a theory that begins with universally evident elements, in order to build a generally acceptable, and in that sense objectively valid, system. But such an ideal expresses exactly what Levinas rejects: the idea that we could reach some Archimedean point from which we could overlook and conceptually master all beings, theories, cultures and ways of life. A thought which "addresses itself to all people" is hardly a thought if it has not addressed the most radical questions. This presupposes, however, that it has gone into the depths of the traditions from which it stems, integrating the heritage by which it has been nourished. Only by becoming a thoughtful exponent of my own history can I become a valuable participant in the discussion with other, equally particularized ways of seeking the universal and the One.

The reproach of some readers that Levinas contaminates philosophy with religious reminiscences can be responded to by quoting the following affirmations:

I have never explicitly intended to "accord" or to "reconcile" the two [viz., the biblical and the philosophical] traditions. If they are in fact in agreement, this is probably due to the fact that all philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences and that the readings of the Bible belonged in my case to these fundamental experiences. The Bible has therefore played an essential role in my philosophical way of thought—for the most part, however, without my being conscious of it. (EI, 9)

This quote could be interpreted as a concession. Unconsciously Levinas would have been led more by his faith than by his "way of thinking philosophically." However, the agreement between his faith and his philosophy does not constitute an agreement against the authenticity of either philosophy or faith—unless we would accept a priori that philosophy and religion cannot agree. The only way to answer our question is of course by carefully studying the actual way in which Levinas's texts were written; however, the difficulty with which we have to struggle is that we cannot compare those texts with a ready-made rule or method on which we could agree in advance. For, Levinas, who learned the *métier* from Husserl and Heidegger, shows, in his descriptions, that the realities of human life—"die Sache selbst" and "the facts"—urge us to transform their phenomenological method into an approach more truthful to the singular kind of events and appearances we encounter in everyday life. Some interpreters think that Levinas's work only translates old convictions into a phenomenological or quasi-phenomenological jargon, without adding anything important to the actual practice of philosophy. I am afraid that they do not see how radical a level is reached by Levinas's long meditation on the various Hebrew, Greek, Russian, Roman, and Germanic components of history. Every human conscience can recognize, in one way or another, the demands described in his works. "The ethical truth is common." But

that which is said to be written in the souls was first written in the books. I think that the human face speaks—or stammers or gives itself airs or fights with its caricatures—[not only in the Bible, but] in all literature. Notwithstanding the end of Eurocentrism disqualified by so many horrors—I believe in the eminence of the human face expressed in Greek literature and in our literature which owes everything to it. It is due to that literature that we are ashamed of our history. The national literatures, Homer and Plato, Racine and Victor Hugo [etc.] partake in Holy Scripture, just as Pushkin, Dostoyevsky or Goethe, and of course, Tolstoy and Agnon. But I am sure of the incomparable prophetic excellence of the Book of Books expected or commented on by all texts of the world. The Holy Scriptures do not signify through the dogmatic story of their supernatural or sacred origin, but through the expression

and illumination of the other's face before he gives himself a countenance or takes a pose. This expression is as irrefutable as the concern for the everyday life of our historical world is imperious.

(EI, 124–26)

To this convergence of philosophy and biblical religion, we must first add that religion promises certain consolations which can neither be denied nor affirmed by philosophy (EI, 121–22, 127), and, second, that—contrary to an idea held by many philosophers from Parmenides to Hegel—knowledge does not constitute the supreme perfection of spiritual life. Ultimately, philosophy is no more than a commentary on that which reveals itself as the absolute from beyond the essence: the Good. The Good commands a turn toward the Other who does not leave me enough time for a monopolistic universe. It urges me, like Moses, to live for those who continue to live after my death. If philosophy is inspired by this desire, it is not a desire for absolute wisdom, but a *sophia* of *philia*, a “*sagesse du désir*” (AE, 195ff.; OB, 153ff.), a wisdom of desire and proximity.

Notes

- 1 M. Heidegger, “Bauen, Wohnen, Denken,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), 145–62; cf. M. Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 239.
- 2 *La philosophie et l'idée de l'Infini*. Cf. EDHH, 165–78, and *To the Other*, 38–119.
- 3 Cf. TeI, 129–49, 187–208; TaI, 156–74, 212–32; and “Le moi et la totalité,” in *Entre Nous*, 25–52 (CP, 25–46).
- 4 I. Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (Riga, 1785), 77–80.
- 5 EI, 108 and 105 (where Levinas uses “coupables” instead of “responsables”).
- 6 The expression “*me voici*” differs from “here I am,” insofar as it points at “me” in the accusative, thus rendering more clearly the primordial passivity of a subject burdened with an infinite responsibility *before* it can accept this responsibility. Of course, “*me voici*” alludes also to the answers given by Samuel and Isaiah to the epiphany of God in Samuel 3, 4.6.8.16 and Isaiah 6, 8.

'HE' (IL)

Jacques Rolland

Translated by Bettina Bergo

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In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*,¹ at the end of the intrigue of proximity, subjectivity arose with no more surface or breadth to it than a geometric point, and as sharp as a pinpoint. Yet, as such it carries the absolute alterity of the neighbour – who signifies in the ambiguity of his or her face, which is always on the verge of falling outside phenomenality itself. In this condition, which *Otherwise than Being* often specifies as an *uncondition* [*incondition*], the subject is 'the *one* – a non-relation but absolutely an end or term' (OB, 103; 130). And, only as such, does it make possible the relationship with alterity, according to the fundamental lesson of *Totality and Infinity*, which *Otherwise than Being* retains: 'The alterity, the radical heterogeneity of the Other [*l'Autre*] is only possible if the Other is other relative to a term whose essence is to remain at the point of departure, to serve as *entry* into the relationship . . . *A term can remain absolutely at the point of departure of the relationship only as me.*'² Here, however, we see in addition that it is also said of this term – which in this way is defined as 'absolutely an end or term' – that it must be the *Same* and this, 'not relatively, but absolutely'. What precisely characterizes the Me [*Moi*] – who, as consciousness, experiences itself [*se vit*] 'through ruptures and reunions' (OB, 103; 131)³ – is lost the better to find itself anew, and finally lets itself be thought as *ego*, origin of the world. Against this 'Me', *Otherwise than Being* will think the me [*moi*], or the *I* [*je*], which it will discover as the Other-in-the-Same. This does not signify alienation but rather, in passivity, inspiration or an awakening.⁴ In *passivity*. For, it is passively that the subject has arisen, in a latent fashion, at the end of the intrigue of proximity. It is thus that it comes to a head, as on the point of a pin, *one* in the response to which it is called in election. Passive with a passivity 'more passive than any passivity' – about which we will grant, this time at least,

that this expression is not a password amongst initiates, if we must recognize in this passivity that of the *creature*, 'an orphan by birth or an atheist no doubt ignorant of its creator, for if it knew it, it would again be taking its beginning in charge' (OB, 105; 133). It is in this way, and it must be so, in order for the me to be that 'term', which allows alterity to signify and a relationship to be established. But it is necessary, further, that the I [*je*] *last* in this condition, that it remain this passivity in which the other signifies in becoming the Other-in-the-Same. The *question* is posed; and it is posed at a very immediate level, inside that same level on which come to the fore – on the basis of justice, such as it is born in the space of the other-third-me triad – the requirement and the meaning of my salvation starting from my responsibility and 'despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility, which it risks encompassing and swallowing up' (OB, 161; 205). The question is posed at the very level of the me who has arisen in 'the most passive' of passivity. But this me has arisen there as one and unique [*unicité*]. Now, this uniqueness must not become fixed and posit itself – and thereby 'fatten up', as Levinas writes, with an explicit biblical reminiscence,⁵ in a text contemporary with *Otherwise than Being* – and thereby turn already into an identity capable of positing itself as it *takes on*, in a for-itself, the in-itself of that identity. 'Without Identity' – this is precisely the title of the beautiful text that closes Levinas's *Humanism of the Other*,⁶ already written at the high level of *Otherwise than Being*. It is thus necessary that the me *accuse itself* immediately⁷ in a *recurrence* in which its uniqueness is immediately exposed to a denuding, while it exposes itself in *itself* [*en soi*], while it expresses itself in *itself* [*en soi-même*] to exalt its passivity, precisely as a creature:

The oneself [*soi-même*] cannot form *itself*; it is already formed with absolute passivity, and, in this sense, a victim of a persecution that paralyses any taking in charge [*assumption*] that could be awakened in it to pose it *for itself*; a passivity of the attachment already tied up as irreversibly past, on the inside of every memory, every recall. Tied up in an irrecoverable time that the present, represented in the recall or the reminder, cannot equal; in a time of birth or creation of which nature or the creature holds a trace that is not converted into a memory.

(OB, 104–5; 132–3)⁸

A creature – 'or nature', as such going back to a birth – the me, turned back into itself, without positing itself, accuses itself in a body, in a skin, 'in its skin'. And this shows itself from the outset as an *angustum* [difficulty, precarity] not as these *angusta* [majestic, dignified] that lead to the *augusta* we find in Victor Hugo,⁹ but rather as the origin and the etymology of an anguish, nothing of which allows us here to foresee that it might promise to manifest the Nothing liable, ultimately, to be interpreted as Being.¹⁰

The me is not in itself like matter which, perfectly espoused by its form, is what it is; it is in itself like one is in one's skin, that is, already tight, ill at ease in one's own skin. It is as though the identity of matter resting in itself concealed a dimension in which a retreat to the hither side [*un recul en deçà*] of immediate coincidence were possible, concealed a materiality more material than all matter – a materiality such that irritability, susceptibility or exposedness to wounds and outrage characterizes its passivity, more passive still than the passivity of effects.

(OB, 108; 137)¹¹

Yet the self [*soi*] is not, in its turn, a position of rest. It is, itself and from the first, subject to a movement, that of the '*overbid*' ['*surenchère*'] (OB, 108; 137), which, 'better than metaphors', sketches 'the exact trope of an alteration of *essence* that reverses – or inverts itself [*s'invertit*] – in a recurrence in which the expulsion of self out of itself, is its substitution for the other – which would properly signify the me emptying itself of itself' (OB, 110; 141). Let us not go too quickly, however; that is, let us remain a while at the way in which the recurrence of the me into the self does not end with the positing of the self.

Recurrence to self cannot stop at oneself, but goes to the inside, *in* recurrence to self [one] goes to the inside or hither side of oneself. A does not come back to A, as in identity, but shrinks back inside its point of departure. Is not the meaning of responsibility for another person [*autrui*] – not assumable by some kind of freedom – stated according to this trope? Far from recognizing oneself in the freedom of consciousness that is lost and found anew, and which as freedom eases the order of being to reintegrate it in free responsibility, the responsibility for the other, the responsibility of obsession, suggests the absolute passivity of a *self* that has never had to step back from itself in order thereafter to reenter into its limits and to identify itself in recognizing itself in its past. It suggests, rather, the responsibility whose recurrence is my contraction [*ma contraction*], a way into the inside of identity, *eating into this same identity – identity eating away at itself* – in remorse. (OB, 114; 145; Rolland's emphasis at end)

In this non-positing of uniqueness, where the identity barely conferred already eats away at *itself*, the subject becomes absolutely for-the-other, to the point of showing itself – in the obsession that is 'a relationship with the outside, prior to the act that would open this outside up' (OB, 110; 140) – as the *obses*¹² of the other: 'the subject is a hostage' (OB, 112; 142).

Otherwise than Being also says that the subject is 'substitution'. The presentation of this concept or, as we should continue to prefer saying, of this

word, which constitutes the fourth Chapter, forms the 'centrepiece' of *Otherwise than Being*, around which its first draft was constructed (OB, xli; ix). This says enough about its fundamental importance in Levinas's mind, since with substitution is expressed, as it were, the one-self of the self on the inside of the me,¹³ whereby 'the possibility of being torn out of essence' is verified (OB, 8; 9), as well as the possibility of an 'otherwise than being' which the book announced as its programme from its first pages on.¹⁴ Yet this structure would realize such a possibility through its very construction, which is presented, on first glance, in a negative manner:

For the other in the form or guise of the self, up to the *substitution* for the other person. And we must understand that herein lies a relationship unintelligible within being, which also means that this substitution is an exception to essence. For, compassion is certainly a natural sentiment, on the part of him who was hungry, toward the other person and for the hunger of the other. But, with substitution, there is a break up of the mechanical solidarity that may be current in the world or in being. 'Who is Hecuba to me?' we must ask with Shakespeare.

(GDT, 173; 199)¹⁵

We could extend this analysis. In its emphasis, which is its mode of signifying, and its very significance, substitution comes to be placed against, contravening, the fundamental ontology such as it was prepared by the existential analytic. For substitution signifies a putting-oneself-in-the-place-of-the-other, which has no primary psychological sense but makes possible all the human movements of compassion, to ultimately 'die for the other'.¹⁶ Now, this is precisely what *Being and Time* declares impossible:

No one can take the Other's dying away from him. Of course someone can 'go to his death for another'. But this always only means to sacrifice oneself for the Other '*in some definite affair*'. Such 'dying for' can never signify that the Other has thus had his death taken away in even the slightest degree. Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine, in so far as it 'is' at all. And indeed death signifies a peculiar possibility-in-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is at issue. In dying, it appears that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death.¹⁷

The problem is not the empirical possibility or material reality of such a 'dying-for . . .', it rather lies in the fact that it is in principle – existentially¹⁸ – restricted to a 'definite affair' and shown to be ineffective, to say the least, in what concerns the essential death, which, for the other as for myself, 'is essentially mine'. 'To die for . . .' (EN, 111; 129ff), in which Levinas's thought

expressed itself in 1987, clearly no longer belongs *stricto sensu* to the 'period' of *Otherwise than Being's* redaction; but in its 'manner' it refers to it (speaking as we would of a painter's works) and does so in its fashion. For, in 'dying for . . .' it is not a matter (any more than it was for Heidegger) of being defined by the possibility or the reality of the fact of sacrifice. Rather, it is a matter of letting thinking move with an accelerating pace from the 'oneself' [*soi-même*] of Levinas's overbid (which might have been called his 'hyperbole'),¹⁹ to confer all at once – on the attestation (as apex)²⁰ of Heidegger's expression *sterben für* [dying for] in *Being and Time* – a meaning said to be 'extraordinary' to Levinas's 'dying-for . . .'. Now this meaning is extraordinary first in that it is no longer measured, nor held back, by anything. That is, in this case and primarily, it is not measured or held back by being such as it lets itself be thought thanks to the existentials of Dasein. This is a meaning that we must nevertheless not abandon to the taste of the imagination, nor fancy for example in the shape of the saint or the martyr, as it were, in order thus to reassure ourselves with an image, deserting the domain of philosophy. This is a meaning in which – extra-ordinarily – a surplus of meaning is implied over the incontestable sense of death, which is tied to a finitude that is always exclusively my own. Finally, this is a meaning that is always and only *in surplus*, and inscribing itself in the form of a trace: in this case, in the fear for the other person qua fear for his or her death.²¹

The recurrence that effects the passage from the me to the self, to oneself, and from the oneself to the hostage, which is ultimately substitution, outlines a way of working characteristic of the thinking in search of itself in *Otherwise than Being*. This thinking is like the breathing of the writing in which this search is carried out. We could characterize this way of working by the words exacerbation or exasperation. But it is *overbidding* [*surenchère*]²² that better states it – that term which has taken shape by itself in our own lines. This is a necessary overbidding if the self is not to 'recoagulate' into the me or if the latter, as *for-the-other*, is to remain 'haemorrhagic'. Now, this is necessary in order that alterity signify and not be immediately assimilated or purely and simply rejected by the Same. Or again: in order that justice simply be possible as resting ultimately on the proximity it presupposes (even as it alters that proximity), the me, born in passivity, is necessary. However, it is also necessary that this me invert itself into the self, where it 'does not appear to itself but self-immolates' instead (OB, 118; 151), and in which identity gnaws at itself – that same identity that covered over the above-mentioned uniqueness from which identity proceeds. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas calls this procedure 'disinterestedness' (which he will later write as 'dis-inter-estedness'). Let us note that, given his love of literature, Levinas could have thought again of Rabelais, and given this procedure the fine name *déprisement* [to lose one's attachment to something]²³ or disinvestment, which is the highest virtue that *Gargantua and Pantagruel's* 'Prologue' accords to Socrates. 'A more than human understanding, a marvelous virtue,

invincible courage, sobriety without match, sure contentment, perfect assurance, unbelievable disinvestment [*déprisement*] from all that for which humans care for, pursue, work, navigate and battle so much.²⁴ In a word, this is an 'inversion of the *conatus essendi*', according to an expression that we will encounter further on and which owes no doubt less to Spinoza than to what Levinas himself interpolates there. The overbid does not arise from a discourse of predication, but is required instead by description. Yet it is, no doubt, not by accident that the description requires – to come into its own possibility – a language whose terms belong to a habitually moral vocabulary, but whose expressions 'could not signify, after the trials of the twentieth century, the derisive arguments of idealist chatter' (EN, 216; 229). We thus find again (no doubt incidentally but according to a necessity that belongs to the work itself) the problem, displaced onto the question of expression, of ethical meaning and its articulation in a moral discourse, such as we approached it in our preliminary chapter. But what we must emphasize for the time being is the result at which the overbid ends up and which, better than in other places, is expressed by the following words: 'It is through the condition of the hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity. Even the little we find there, even the simple "After you, Sir". *The uncondition of the hostage is not the limit case of solidarity, but the condition of solidarity*' (OB, 117; 150; Rolland's emphasis).

Attention to the most immediate sentiments and actions of moral life, whose description could not be subject to abstraction, already goes back by overbidding to the uncondition of the hostage, which is finally *expiation*, and which would be '*beyond egoism and altruism*, the religiosity of the self' (ibid.; Rolland's emphasis). But this gives its particular tone to the 'discourse on patience' that makes up *Otherwise than Being*; a tone precisely brought to light by Maurice Blanchot when he writes, 'It is as though he said, "May happiness come for all, on condition that by this wish I be excluded from it".'²⁵

Yet it is again this overbid that gives its outline, and something like what we might call its rhythm, to the relationship that is tied up between the other person and myself in responsibility: 'The more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with whom I am encharged the further away I am' (OB, 93; 119). It is a matter, here, of a strange exasperation of passivity within passivity – of a 'passive that increases' (ibid.) – but which traces out originally (or pre-originally) a meaning that we have not encountered up to now: in-finity. More precisely, this means that the way in which responsibility is taken up in the overbid sketches out the 'infinition of the infinite' (ibid.), causing something like an in-finite 'to come to mind', which will later receive the name 'God'. We will see further on how this occurs. For now, we can allow ourselves a provisional use of this word, restricting ourselves nevertheless to the most modest use of it, here. For, what should be emphasized for the present is the *gesture* to which

Levinas's discourse is here responding, which was not made as clearly explicit in *Otherwise than Being* as it was in the first lines of the Preface of his *Of God Who Comes to Mind*.

The various texts brought together in this volume present an inquiry into the possibility – or even into the fact – of hearing the word God as a signifying word. This inquiry is carried out independently of the problem of the existence or non-existence of God, independently of the decision that could be taken before this alternative, and likewise independently of the decision concerning the meaning or non-meaning of this same alternative. What is here investigated is the *phenomenological concreteness* in which this meaning could signify, or does signify, even if it contrasts strongly with [*trancher sur*] all phenomenality. For, this *contrasting* could not be said in a purely negative fashion, and like an apophantic negation. It is a matter of describing the phenomenological 'circumstances', their positive conjunction, and something like the concrete 'staging' of what is said in the guise of abstraction.

(GCM, xi; 7)

Through these circumstances and this staging, it is a matter of discovering a 'mode of access, proper and irreducible' that might be the 'non-ontological access to a notion of God, on the basis of a certain dis-inter-estedness' (GDT, 180; 208). A non-ontological notion of God – this is indeed what is in question – for although Levinas shares Heidegger's diagnosis of the 'onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics', there nonetheless remains, to his mind, one question that must still be posed: 'Did the fault of onto-theo-logy consist in taking being for God – or, rather, in taking God for being?' (GDT, 124; 141).

But to ask this question after Heidegger is equally to respond to it, and to substitute another one for it, which one can follow up with a third question by which the 'mode of access, proper and irreducible' will be specified: 'Does God not signify the *other of being*? . . . Does not the other [or other person], irreducible to the Same, permit us, within a certain (ethical) relationship,²⁶ to think this other or this beyond [i.e. 'God']' (ibid.)? We have here, in its purity, Levinas's philosophical move such as it is expressed in particular in *Otherwise than Being*. We find it expressed in another remark from his lectures on 'God and Onto-theo-logy': 'What we call God can only take on meaning on the basis of those other relationships [relationships called ethical]. It is only on the basis of those relationships that God can "manifest" himself' (GDT, 185; 213–14).

It is in this way that, even before the word God is spoken, the ethical relationship grasped in its rigour (that is, according to the overbid wherein it is exacerbated) traces, within an essentially finite being, the meaning of 'infinity': it sketches out the 'infinition of infinity' [*l'infinition de l'infini*].

But we should be careful! The infinite thus produced through infinity, which we have prudently written (but perhaps imprudently too) 'infinite' – will this not be simply the bad infinity that is the negation of the finite? Levinas's text foresees this objection, and cites Hegel, defining this bad infinity:

Something becomes an Other, but the Other is itself a Something, therefore it likewise becomes an Other, and so on and so forth *to infinity*. This Infinity is the *bad* or *negative* infinity inasmuch as it is nothing other than the negation of the finite, which nonetheless is readily reborn, [and] consequently everything is just as readily not suppressed – or (again), this infinity expresses only the *ought-to-be* (*das Sollen*) of the suppression of the finite. The progress to the infinite remains at the expression of the contradiction that the finite contains, which means that it is just as much *Something* as its *Other*, and it is the eternalizing contradiction of the alternation between these determinations, wherein one brings forth the other.²⁷

It is in the very terms that Hegel uses to pose the problem, that Levinas responds, for he explains that 'in the situation described, the Other does not become *likewise* an Other; the end is not readily reborn, but rather grows distant at each new stage of the approach, [and this] with all the otherness of the Other person [*l'altérité d'Autrui*]' (OB, 193 n. 34; 119 n. 34). Things unfold this way, insofar as the approach does not signify in a spatial sense the contraction or narrowing of the distance to the point of contiguity, or even to that of coincidence,²⁸ but instead responds in its turn to the overbid, thanks to which, when approached, the neighbour as face maintains his alterity or maintains himself in the difference 'without a basis of community' that assures his ambiguity. 'The other as other person [*Autrui comme autrui*],²⁹ as neighbor, is never equal in his presence to his proximity.' But this is also why the infinite, which is in question in the approach 'is distinguished . . . from the *Sollen* [the ought-to-be], for proximity is not simply an asymptotic approach to its end' (OB, 93; 118). More precisely, and considering the pathos of the overbid:

This journey does not remain simply asymptotic toward the neighbor; beyond the bad infinity of the *Sollen*, it increases infinitely – a living infinite – as an obligation more and more strict in so far as obedience progresses, and the distance to cross uncrossable as the approach advances, all this to the point that the *giving* [*le donner*] shows itself as parsimony, and exposition, reserve and holiness as culpable.

(OB, 142; 181)

In fact, we should speak here of an 'actual or current infinite' [*infini actuel*]. This is what Descartes does in the third *Meditation*, in order to

distinguish it from the progress to infinity my knowledge might make. We could speak of it thus if only actuality did not contravene the very spirit of Levinas's research on or for the infinite,³⁰ which he ventures, and which places itself under the sign of the *inactual* [*l'inactuel*] such as it comes, at one point in Levinas, to denote the *otherwise than being*.

The inactual means here *the other* of the actual, rather than its ignorance or its negation; the other of what has been called, in the high tradition of the West, *being-in-act*,³¹ but also the other of its cohort of potentialities that are powers; the other of being, of the *esse* of being, of the epic of being [*la geste de l'être*],³² the other of the *fully being* [*pleinement être*] – fully to the point of overflowing! – that the term in *actuality* states.³³

In this respect it is clear that Levinas would not endorse the '*Deum autem ita judico esse actu infinitum ut nihil ejus perfectioni addi possit*'.³⁴ And so, we could only take the idea of the actually infinite here in a regulative sense, as it were, in such a way as to set forth the in-finite that is produced by an infinition of the entire progress to the infinite. Or we could take it in a way that indicates that, in this infinition, it is God that is signified, 'the word God' that here finds the 'circumstances' and the 'staging' of its meaning, which discovers its significance. Yet it is only with parsimony that we shall use this term, preferring to use the term 'infinite' as much as possible. We do this if only to recall that Levinas's inquiry into a word's conditions of signification is conducted within, or on the in-side of, any opining about the existence or non-existence of the signified [God] of this signification and that, in this way, it escapes those idolatrous shortcomings that Jean-Luc Marion discovers as readily in 'conceptual atheism' as in 'the conceptual discourse that pretends to accede positively to God'. For, both of these suppose ultimately 'that human *Dasein* could reach God conceptually, and thus it could construct conceptually something it would take on itself to call "God", in order to admit or dismiss it'.³⁵

Yet we will perhaps understand better the 'positivity' of the infinite that has led us through the perilous regions of actuality, if we take things by their other end and, rather than speaking of definitions, we use the word *glory*. In fact, strictly speaking, the two terms are synonymous in Levinas's work and they are connected by a non-exclusive 'or' when Levinas uses them for the first time: 'infinition or glory of the Infinite' (OB, 93; 119). We shall distinguish them here – methodologically, though not without a certain brutality – using the first, infinition, to designate the 'production' of the infinite, and reserving the second to signify its 'manifestation'. Now, over the preceding pages we have gained all the instruments necessary to comprehend the definition that is given of this glory, a definition we must read in its full length and redundancies to prepare us to inquire thereafter into its meaning:

Glory is but the other face of the passivity of the subject whereby – substituting [myself] for the other, [in] a responsibility commanded to the first come, a responsibility for the neighbor, inspired by the other – as the Same, I am torn out of my commencement and my equality unto myself. The glory of the infinite is glorified in this responsibility, leaving the subject no refuge in its secrecy that would protect it against the obsession by the Other and cover its evasion. Glory is glorified by the subject's coming out of the dark corners of its 'as for me,' which offer – like the bushes of Paradise in which Adam hid himself on hearing the voice of the Eternal-God crossing the garden from the side of the dawn – an escape route from the assignation in which the position of the Me [*Moi*] is shaken at its beginning and in the very possibility of its origin. The glory of the Infinite is the an-archic identity of the subject flushed out with no possible side-stepping; a me [*moi*] brought to sincerity, making a sign to the other person – for whom I am responsible and before whom I am responsible – for this very giving of the sign, that is, of this responsibility.

(OB, 144; 184)

In other terms, *si licet*: the infinite is glorified in the ('most passive') passivity of the subject (whose glory is but the other face of it) inasmuch as this passivity is the *bearing-witness* [*témoignage*] of the infinite. As entirely different from the relation or the narrative of an experience by him who lived through it, bearing witness is a structure of signification in which the elements enter into composition otherwise than in knowledge. That is, they enter into composition, above all, otherwise than by correlation, and through this, as well, 'something else' is signified than the phenomenon qua 'indephasable simultaneity'³⁶ and thus, indestructible as a unity.

Bearing witness does not thematize that of which it is a witnessing and, as such, it can only be a witnessing of the Infinite. All other witnessings are secondary and derived, and they draw their truth from an experience. Here, bearing witness is an exception to the rule of being: in it, the Infinite is revealed without appearing, without *showing* itself as Infinite. The Infinite does not appear to him who bears witness to it, it is the witnessing itself that belongs to the glory of the Infinite. It is through the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is witnessed (and it is in this sense alone that 'God needs man'). No present is *capable* of the Infinite. In Descartes, the idea of the Infinite that lodges (hardly a comfortable lodger) in a thought that cannot contain it, expresses this disproportion between glory and the present.

(GDT, 196–7; 225)³⁷

This is a disproportion that is indicated in the difference between what is borne witness to [*témoigné*] and the witness [*témoïn*], who does not equal what is found witnessed in his bearing-witness. But it is also indicated in the difference between what is borne witness to and the witnessing itself as that which is doing the witnessing³⁸ – and it is on this latter point that we should start by insisting. However, if we take up again what has been said of glory, then it is clear that what is borne witness to is the Infinite, whereas the witnessing itself is the passivity of the subject accusing itself in itself [*s'accusant en soi*], in which alterity shows itself. The act or event of witnessing thus stands exclusively in the ethical relationship as a relation of the one to the other, manifesting itself to description as a relationship of the one responsible for the other, where 'responsibility' is understood in the emphatic sense that was acknowledged of it and which, ultimately, by virtue of the overbid, leads to substitution.

Now, this relationship is structured in such a way that, to function, it has no need for any external term that would come to set it in motion or confer it some meaning. In this way, if we can say that in this relation the Infinite is borne witness to, we must immediately add that it is signified there as *absent*. This is in no way because the Infinite would veil itself (which would then suppose that its 'revelation' were an unveiling or disclosure through which, once again, one would be placed, in an experience, *in the presence* of the disclosed, which is precisely what *Otherwise than Being* contests in its search for the way in which the Infinite signifies). Again, this is in no way because we must speak, in this sense, of a 'hidden God', but because the relationship in which the infinite 'produced' and thus witnessed does not *contain* it, and this, already for the simple reason that this relationship does not *suppose* it, either. This is what we can take up again at another level, regretting only that this obliges us to pronounce the name of God too early on.

That which bears witness to the infinite is the me, accusing itself in itself in order, at the end of this operation, to acknowledge or confess itself [*s'avouer*] in a name that accuses its accusative: 'here I am' [*me voici*]³⁹ (OB, 145; 184) – *hineni*.⁴⁰ This is a biblical expression by which man responds to the summons of the Eternal, and which in one instance is found specified in the following way, 'Here I am, send me' (Isaiah VI: 8). Levinas immediately interprets this: "'Here I am'" means "send me"' (OB, 199 n. 11; 186 n. 11). And one is astonished in a sense that he should not have considered drawing support for his interpretation from Rashi's gloss on Genesis XXII: 1 (at least from the second part of his statement): 'Here I am [*me voici*]. This is what pious people respond. The response is thus one of humility, and its meaning is, at the same time, "*I am ready*".'⁴¹ Availability, signified by the 'I am read', could only confirm, in effect, Levinas's interpretation of the 'Me voici' as 'send me'. Yet, in its literality as in its consonance with Rashi's

commentary, this interpretation allows us to hear in turn, and from the outset, an absencing of him who 'sends', his withdrawal behind the mission to which the envoy is devoted. In this way, the name of God – which we feared saying too soon – already erases itself:

'Here I am, in the name of God', without referring directly to his presence. 'Here I am', *tout court!* Thus, from the phrase wherein God comes for the first time to mingle with words, the word 'God' is still absent. It is in no way stated as 'I believe in God'. To bear witness to God is precisely not to say this extra-ordinary word, as though glory could be lodged in a theme and pose itself as a thesis or become the essence of being.

(OB, 149; 190)

For us, who must hold to description and for whom, then, 'God is absent' also in the sense that he has not yet come to mingle with words, a new meaning has nonetheless been caught up in the nets of our lines. This is the idea of a 'presence' that remains withdrawn relative to the presence in which it was signified and, if this presence is that in which the relation of the one to the other is played out, then the idea of a third party – of whom we must immediately specify that it is not that party which we saw intervening to open the plane space of justice – and so, if this relationship is indeed that of the I and the Thou (in a sense), then the idea of a *He* who is not 'in some extension of the Thou' comes to signify (GCM, 151; 230). To express this, Levinas forged a word in the years that immediately followed the publication of *Totality and Infinity* (after 1961): *illeity*. This signifies that the 'beyond being is a Third Person' (HAH, 59). In consideration of this word, insofar as it separates from the Thou as much as it differs from the I, 'it is therefore vain to pose an absolute Thou' (EDE, 216).

What we must consider on the other hand, is that 'the non-phenomenality of the other [of the Infinite, which we must here write 'Other,' in keeping with the remarks that follow],⁴² who affects me beyond representation, unbeknownst to me, like a thief, is the Illeity of the third person' (GDT, 201; 230). In this, the Infinite is other than the other person, other otherwise – or of a different alterity. More precisely: what shows here, with the notion of illeity, is that – on the model of the difference of the He relative to the Thou – we must make a strict separation between the Other and the other, between God and the other person, between transcendence and alterity.

This means, fundamentally, that if, according to a sense that remains entirely to be determined, 'the face cannot appear as face – as proximity interrupting the series – unless it comes enigmatically on the basis of the Infinite and of its immemorial past' (EDE, 216). As to the Infinite, it appears neither in, nor alongside of, nor behind this 'appearing of the face'. Now, we saw in the preceding chapter that this formulation is not only the

result of what might still be unfinished in (the language of) *Totality and Infinity*, but that the face effectively appears even if it cannot be reduced to this appearing, only to be effaced in the plurality of faces that show themselves in the space of justice. Moreover we know that the meaning of the face – beyond its appearing – is only possible in a relationship with a subjectivity, but that this relationship occurs according to an asymmetry that is always already corrected, in such a way that the subject is already 'like the others'. What we see in this way is that the subject as other person must be called one or ones. But it must be so called by way of a uniqueness that is still relative, and which admits multiplicity into itself to the degree that the intrigue of subjects 'like the others' unfolds.

The difference with the He – not only relative to the I but also relative to the Thou – would therefore mean, first, that with the Infinite, we are concerned with an absolutely One, or a One without mixture. But was it not rhetorically that Parmenides began, asking Aristotle whether it was true that the One could not be several?⁴³ The one would thus be the first thing that we should have to attribute to the Infinite, thought according to illeity. But the One, rigorously thought, is such that we must say that it has no part in time and ultimately, no part in being.⁴⁴ It is here that the difference of the otherwise gets specified (that difference that we penned at the end of the previous chapter), according as it signifies in the face or in God, urged by the question of contamination, which was raised by one of Derrida's uses of the term. What we must say, then, is that the face is essentially or originally 'contaminated' (ef-faced, into visibility), and that it takes on its alterity or its face-like quality, its faced-ness [*altérité ou sa visagéité*] only by *de*-contamination. This occurs in the excess or the surplus that the enigma inscribes upon the phenomenon, thanks to ambiguity. And it is only in the fine rift traced by the unravelling that this rift brings about, that an omni-alterity [*tout-altérité*] can pass, but effectively it passes. This operation is not suited to the transcendent as He – and as One. But He is glorified from the first as the Non-Contaminated (the Holy), that is, ultimately, as the 'God not contaminated by being' (OB, xlii; x), to use a word, again, whose meaning will only be questioned in the following chapter.

In this way, the transition is guaranteed in itself toward the second consequence of illeity; it is as immediate as was the first one. This is that the Infinite as He is situated from the outset *beyond*, placing itself beyond or in withdrawal from the space – even if it is a 'curved'⁴⁵ space governed by asymmetry – where the relation of the one to the other takes place. This comes to pass in such a way that the *epekeina* [beyond] is the meaning that necessarily 'comes to mind' when we reflect momentarily on the way the Infinite signifies – and, more precisely, on the *epekeina tes ousias*, beyond being or essence.⁴⁶ This is not a metaphysical proposition, but one that limits itself to drawing out the consequences of the essentially finite character of being. Yet this is, nonetheless and for its part, not without consequences,

already as concerns the meaning of the transcendence in play both here, and in metaphysics. And we would say of the transcendence that comes into question with illeity, that 'one is not obliged to make it enter immediately into Heidegger's interpretation of Being transcending beings' (EDE, 189). This interpretation rests, in its turn, on the interpretation of the *he tou agathou idea* [the idea of the good], or the 'Idea of ideas' as what 'makes all that can appear appear and is thus, itself, that which truly and properly appears'.⁴⁷ This interpretation is at once drawn from an adequate reading of Greek thought and opposed to the drift that distances itself from it:

We translate 'to agathon' by 'the Good.' This expression seems easy to understand. Moreover, most of the time the Good is understood as the 'moral Good', so called because it conforms to the moral law. Such a conception takes us out of Greek thought, although Plato's interpretation, which makes the *agathon* an idea, may itself have provided the occasion for giving to the 'Good' a 'moral' coloring, and finally for inscribing it among the 'values'.⁴⁸

This leads us, ultimately, to Nietzsche, whom Heidegger cites on the basis of *The Will to Power*. 'The truth is that type of error without which a certain species of living beings could not live. That which is a value from the point of view of life, is decisive in the final analysis.'⁴⁹

However, the Good bears perhaps another interpretation, liable to thread its way between the two branches of this alternative. We should thus think of it as the other name of the Infinite, such as it sets itself aside in illeity, and of which glory is, as we said, 'the other face of passivity'. This would mean that passivity bears witness to the Infinite and that the Infinite, therefore, without being present in the witnessing itself, is effectively signified in it. It would mean that, without our having yet made any claim about the 'problem of the existence or non-existence of God' (GCM, xi; 7), the passivity and the intrigue with which the infinite unfolds in the face 'produces' that Infinite, and it produces it in such a way that, if *effectively*, it becomes thinkable – in a turning of infinity into glory, which we were doubtless correct to distinguish above, however excessively – that the Infinite 'could produce' passivity, that it *creates* it in the sense that it produces 'the absolute passivity on the in-side [*d'en deçà*] of activity and passivity – which the idea of creation brings with it' (OB, 110; 140). This is a glory that does not *appear*, for all that, to him who bears witness in this passivity, 'for appearing and presence would deny it by circumscribing it as a theme, assigning to it a beginning in the present of representation, whereas, as the infinity of the infinite, glory comes from a past more distant than that which, in reach of memory, is aligned with the present' (OB, 144; 183–4). A passivity, in this sense, of the 'creature, it is an orphan by birth or atheist, ignoring its Creator no doubt, for if it knew it, then it would again take charge of its beginning'

(OB, 105; 133). We have already cited these words, but it is worth our rereading them here. Before speaking of the foundation of the totality of beings (in a modality forgetful of being and of the difference), the idea of creation expresses 'the kinship of beings amongst themselves, but also their radical heterogeneity, their reciprocal exteriority on the basis of nothingness'. The notion of a creature thus characterizes 'beings situated in the transcendence that does not close up into a totality' (TI, 293; 269). Creation thus fully characterizes the ethical relationship, which, in a bottomless difference, 'renders kin [*apparente*]⁵⁰ the one and the other, situating the relationship in regard to the infinite, which excludes itself in the guise of illeity in a way that is nonetheless not indifferent, since the relationship is situated 'in transcendence', and in such a way that the one and the other, separated by the 'hiatus of inequality' find themselves precisely 'rendered kin'.

Creation can in this sense be heard in terms of election, and it is on that basis that the Good can receive an interpretation that separates as much from Greek (or Heideggerian) thought as from its determination in terms of value (but where we find the point starting from which all values may have value):

As if there were in the me [*moi*], always irreducible to presence, a past within [*en deçà de*] every past, an absolute and irrepresentable past. The present is the site of initiative and choice. But does the Good not *elect* the subject before any choice, by an election that is that of the responsibility of the me [*moi*], who cannot slip away and takes its unicity from this election? This priority of responsibility relative to freedom signifies the goodness of the Good: the Good must elect me before I could choose it; the Good must elect me first . . . In this relationship of the Good to me, which is the assignation of me to the other person, something comes to pass that survives the death of God. For we can understand the 'death of God' as a 'moment' in which *we may reduce every value that gives rise to a drive, to a drive giving rise to a value*. On the other hand, if we refuse this equivalence or this reciprocity, if the Good inclines the me by inclining it toward the neighbor, then the difference of diachrony is maintained in the guise of non-indifference of the Good that elects me before I welcome it.

(GDT, 176–7; 204–5)

Understood in this way, as election – as 'elector' – and in this sense alone as creator – the Good passes beside its ontological definition as what brings [something] to appearance [*amène au paraître*], as well as its 'moral' definition in terms of values. Yet it makes the *site* appear, in which the very notion of value can take on meaning, and it is perhaps here that a Levinasian morality could be 'deduced'. Perhaps here – 'inasmuch as, in the immediacy of the relationship to the other man, and without recourse to some general

principle – is first sketched a signification such as value’ (GCM, 150; 228–9). Now, perhaps here a Levinasian morality might be ‘deduced’ originally, or here the juncture between his properly ethical investigations and what we must acknowledge, in certain texts, as his moral discourse could be made. But it is also here, on the basis of this Good that elects [*Bien électeur*] and in this sense creates, that the word God (which we have attempted to hold back from pronouncing as much as possible) effectively comes to its meaning or finds the ‘circumstances’ of its signification, the intrigue of which ‘produced’ by the Good would be its ‘staging’. In this way, it is meaningful, henceforth, to speak of the Infinite that commands me starting from the other (OB, 161; 205). And it is meaningful also to envision the relationship of the one with the other as responding to this commandment. Likewise, we may reinterpret in this sense the ‘softening’, produced with the ‘appearance of the third party’, of the absolute rigour of the pure intrigue of alterity: ‘It is *thanks* to God alone that, as a subject incomparable to the Other [*Autrui*], I am approached as an other like the others, that is, “for me”. “Thanks to God” I am an other for the others’ (OB, 158; 201). But this is only possible because the other person is not alone in the world with me. In truth, there would not be a world in that *solitude à deux*, but next to the other person, ‘in the eyes that regard me’, there is always a third party, and thus there is a world. It is only this way because creation is a multiplicity, and that in it, the absolute alterity of the face is the ambiguity of the face and the visible, on the basis of which, within that heterogeneity, ‘without any basis in community’, a ‘kinship’ is set up, to take up the terms in which *Totality and Infinity*’s ‘Conclusion’ speaks of creation. In this sense, it is ‘thanks to God’ that it is this way.⁵¹ But we should beware! ‘God is not “in question” as some putative interlocutor: the correlation attaches me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in *illeity*. The “passage” of God – of which I cannot speak otherwise than by reference to this aid or this grace – is precisely the returning of the incomparable subject into a member of society’ (OB, 158; 201–2). And again, beware. We can certainly say that the Infinite commands me, but we must be more circumspect and more precise, and speak of ‘the Infinite that commands me enigmatically – that commands and does not command – starting from the other’ (OB, 161; 205). Not to command (me) in commanding (me) – this ambiguity responds to a structure of bearing witness, which has not been highlighted up to now:

The glory – which does not come to affect me as a representation, nor again as an interlocutor before which or before whom I set myself – is glorified in my saying, commanding me by my mouth. Interiority is not a secret place somewhere in me. It is this turning round or over [*retournement*] whereby what is eminently exterior – precisely by virtue of this eminent exteriority, this impossibility of being ‘contained’ and consequently of entering into a theme – poses, as infinite, an exception

to essence, concerns me, and surrounds me, and orders me by my own voice. The commandment is uttered by the mouth of him that it commands.

(OB, 147; 187)

But strictly speaking, it commands in such a way that the witness who obeys the command knows nothing of him who commands it and, in the final analysis, the witness does not even know that he responds to a command. For, witnessing, in this sense, has the structure of inspiration, which is sketched in the following way: 'To be the author of that which was, *unbeknownst to me*, breathed into me [*à mon insu insufflé*]; to have received from who knows where, that of which I am the author' (OB, 148–9; 189).

This is an irreducible ambiguity, in which the ambiguity is revealed as the very signification of the word God – outside of any ambivalence or any equivocation, yet, as we will see, as an enigma – or that of transcendence. And it is already an ambiguity made necessary by the word God itself, by its special structure: 'A said [*Dis*] unique in its kind, a word that does not closely espouse grammatical categories (it is neither a proper noun, nor a common noun); it does not incline precisely to logical rules (as excluded middle between being and nothingness)' (OB, 151; 193). Yet, as such, it is a word that borders on being and skirts nothingness. First, the nothingness: 'The gaping of an abyss in which proximity, the infinite that blinks, refusing speculative audacities,⁵² is distinguished from nothingness pure and simple by committing the neighbor to my responsibility' (OB, 93; 118). And yet we saw that this 'commitment' is precisely that which the witness does not hear, when he hears, in his own voice – 'Here I am!' or 'I am ready' (in Rashi's translation) – as the order that ordains or gives him over to the other person [*autrui*]. But does this order come *in fact* from the infinite, or does it come from the face alone, which calls me in its solitude, on the verge of falling outside of phenomenality? The subject in the position of a witness could not decide this, however – in his incapacity to give a univocal answer – he can *take as nothing* or as a simple idea, the infinite that commits him to the neighbour. This is the effect of the 'atheism' of the creature (OB, 105; 133), which could lead to an atheist, or agnostic, reading of Levinas.⁵³

But the word God also borders on being, but therein lies still more dangerous company. For God gets translated into *logos* to the point of being betrayed in it, to the point of becoming an object of onto-theo-logy, or to the point where one can finish by taking up an 'option for the ultimacy of being', as the 'diachronic ambiguity of transcendence lends itself to that choice' (OB, 95; 121). In brief, one can take God for a being and, in truth, for the Supreme Being, even if 'the supremacy of the supreme is thought in being only on the basis of God' (OB, 193 n. 36; 124 n. 36). 'In this way, the dangerous path opens in which a pious thought, or one concerned with order, hastily deduces the existence of God' (OB, 93; 119). And this is why

'to transcendence, to the beyond of essence that is also *being-in-the-world* [in as much as it is said in the *logos*],⁵⁴ ambiguity is necessary: it is necessary as a flickering of meaning that is not only a passing certitude, but a border or frontier at once ineffaceable and finer than the tracing of an ideal line' (OB, 152; 194).

This flickering of meaning alone dislodges the word God from the signified, where it was closed up in the *logos* to serve as the object of onto-theo-logy, yet this will reflect back on the word's signification as such and on the administration of its proper 'proof', at the same time as it reflects back on the position of the subject facing transcendence.

That prophetism could take on the appearances of information circulating among others, emitted by the subject or coming from influences *undergone* by the subject . . . therein lies the enigma – the ambiguity – but also the regime of transcendence. The infinite would fail or refute itself in the proof that the finite wants to give of its transcendence, where it would enter into conjunction with the subject that should make it appear. The infinite would lose its glory there. Transcendence is bound to interrupt its own demonstration. Its voice must be silent once we listen to the message. It is necessary that its pretense be exposed to derision and refutation, to the point of letting one suspect, in the 'here I am' that attests it, a cry or a slip of the tongue from a diseased subjectivity.

(OB, 152; 194)

Or again, less pathetically but no less radically:

Revelation from beyond being, which is perhaps only a word, to be sure; but this 'perhaps' belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the Infinite resists the univocity of something originary or of a principle; it belongs to an ambiguity, or to an ambivalence, and to an inversion that is uttered precisely in the word God – the apex of our vocabulary, the admission of the 'stronger' than me within me [*'plus fort' que moi en moi*] and that of the 'less than nothing,' of the nothing but an excessive word, a beyond the theme within a thought that does not yet think or that thinks more than it can think.

(OB, 156; 199)

It must appear clearly here that, to comment on the way in which the 'perhaps' comes about in this sentence, we could have saved the text on Kierkegaard, which we cited at the end of the first chapter, to specify the notion of ambiguity in an initial moment.⁵⁵ And we henceforth understand well how ambiguity can be said in multiple ways. We understand how, more precisely, this notion does not affect transcendence the way it conditions

subjectivity and alterity. The latter two are, as it were, wholly woven with ambiguity – the 'pin-point' I is implicated beyond justice, in which its un-ity⁵⁶ is always already effaced, or the face de-contaminates itself in its original de-facing – in such a way that their 'purity' is never anything but the result of a process of *purification*, effected in an operation that we must call, in all rigour, indefinite.

On the other hand, ambiguity does not affect transcendence 'in itself' – or, we should have to say, 'in its essence', had *Otherwise than Being* not reserved a special use for that word ['essence'], which Levinas clarifies in the 'Preliminary Note', and had that work not precisely raised the Transcendent *beyond essence*. However that may be, what we must understand is that ambiguity only affects the *revelation* of the Transcendent, whose transcendence consists precisely in transcending that revelation itself and, consequently, in transcending the ambiguity in which the revelation is effectuated (although, we should add, it is only effectuated this way), in order to distance itself as Holy, that is to say, as Non-Contaminated. From all this flow two things: a) the effectuation of transcendence is realized in the guise of a positing of a pole of transcendence, capable of giving an orientation to the real and to discourse, without this pole imposing itself as the necessary prerequisite to some originary factuality [*une archi-factuelité*] in the mode of the pole of alterity, which we encountered in our first steps in this book; b) transcendence *is* not ambiguity in the same sense as subjectivity and alterity; and this is probably why the name *enigma* is reserved for it by choice. To the revelation of transcendence, ambiguity is nevertheless *necessary*, and this ambiguity must be radicalized to the point of inscribing *the question mark* as 'the very pivot of Revelation, of its flickering light' (OB, 154; 196).

Ambiguity is therefore necessary to transcendence – or to its revelation, at least. Ambiguity, diachrony, a non-simultaneity of significations within the unity of the signifier and the signified, all these are necessary to transcendence. '[Transcendence] requires the diachrony that breaks the unity of transcendental apperception, which does not manage to assemble the time of modern humanity – passing, in turns, from prophecy to philology, and transcending philology (for it is incapable of denying the fraternity of human beings) – toward prophetic meaning' (OB, 152; 194).⁵⁷

This text – resonant moreover with Kierkegaard's remarks, cited at the end of the first chapter – is astonishing enough to demand that we pause at it and venture a commentary. In effect, it is curious that in a thinking as patently and consciously a-historical as this – and in the course of a discussion bearing exclusively upon the modality of the revelation of the Infinite (and on ambiguity as the *how* of this modality) – Levinas should appeal to a historic situation in which humanity, crossing 'the deserts of the Crisis', can rediscover, otherwise, the meaning of the text in the sentiment of 'belonging to the post-critical age'.⁵⁸ For it is indeed this that is in question: the 'crisis' engendered by historical critique and the possible way in which to live or

experience it.⁵⁹ But what does the crisis mean, or rather, what does the criticism that generated it mean?

Perhaps it means only the end of a simplistic conception of inspiration, the 'death' of a god, standing in the 'worlds behind the world' and – though he were a Supreme Power, or the most just and only being worth adoring – still acting like one force among others, and from whom men hope for assistance in their wars and their loves, and from whom they await beatitude as one awaits a salary. Perhaps even a conception of the inspired Word, less naïve than that which expired under the pen of the critics, lets the true message pass by way of human witnessings from everywhere, yet all miraculously confluent in the Book. Perhaps, men have ultimately never ceased hearing the Word of God, thanks to the scientific rationalism penetrating into Scripture. Perhaps, to the contrary, criticism seizes hold of texts because of its way of listening [*d'une écoute*] that is unable to perceive the divine resonances of the Word, which, being thus reduced to a linguistic fabric, itself requires the precautions of science.

(HS, 126; 191–2)

However that may be, criticism attests the profundity of the crisis more than it merits univocal blame as its cause. Yet, with the crisis, an era is opened in which humanity hears Scripture (only) according to the lessons of criticism, as a linguistic fabric precisely – but not as a text! – whose provenance and coherence we must secure scientifically. That, according to our text, is necessary for the meaning of transcendence, and for its significance. And it reveals its necessity in the life of a 'modern humanity', profoundly different in this way from the humanity that lived in 'tradition', but which lived tradition 'in no way as guaranteeing the purity of its sources and the fidelity of its transmission, but rather as a "site" in which the harmonics of the *said* resounded, and where a whole life animated the letters of the text with its inspirations' (HS, 127; 192).

A traditional reading – which is 'neither the prerogative of milieus called "orthodox", nor the routine of under-developed classes' (HS, 128; 193) – that would be as necessary as that which commands historicist criticism. Yet it is a reading that cannot find the text anew, or the inspiration to which this reading can give rise, until it has crossed the deserts of the crisis, whose crossing appears like the 'dietetic therapy' [*cure d'amaigrissement*] necessary to it.⁶⁰ Such is diachrony, through which, historically, the ambiguity of revelation is manifested.

However, Levinas's reflection, of which we have just restored only the point of departure, does not develop in regard to the crisis of meaning in general. Instead, in the text from which we have taken this reflection,⁶¹ it questions itself about the consequences of criticism in the specifically Jewish

approach, in the 'Jewish Reading of the Scriptures'. I just named, in the note, two texts taken up in *The Beyond the Verse*,⁶² to which we will have to turn in a moment. We have here the occasion to reflect briefly on the truism that reminds us that the God and the Revelation of which Levinas speaks are Jewish. It is certainly no great secret to say that, raised in the reading of the Jewish Bible (that is, the Bible read in the Hebrew and accompanied by Rashi's commentary), Levinas was not really introduced to Judaism such as he defines it – 'the Old Testament, but through the Talmud' (BV, 136; 166) – until much later (which is to say, for the tradition, very late): after the Second World War, when he began his initiation, at the same time that he undertook a systematic re-reading of Hegel.

But these years are also those of the origin of *Totality and Infinity*,⁶³ whose investigations will be extended (at the same time that they are overturned) in *Otherwise than Being*, and in which, in a certain sense, what had been assimilated of Jewish learning shall be 'thought philosophically, that is to say, independently of the authority of Scripture and its exegesis' (BV, 126; 155). Such a formulation is perhaps worth refining. But it nevertheless poses with precision the terms of the problem. And it is no surprise that we see Levinas reasserting these terms in the 'Débat général', which forms the principal piece of *Autrement que savoir* [*Otherwise than Knowing*], where he defends himself vigorously against those who wanted, in one way or another, to make of him a 'Jewish philosopher'.⁶⁴

This being firmly set down, it is more interesting to see a reflection laid back to back with the oral tradition (see 'The Name of God According to Some Talmudic Texts'),⁶⁵ converging with what I attempted to present without borrowings. The text starts out, in a sense, from the declaration of the fact that

to say God as we do in French, or to say *Gott* as the Germans do, or *Bog* as the Russians do, is in the Talmud to say 'the Holy One, blessed be-He' (i.e. the nomination of an attribute, holiness, by way of an article). In Rabbinic thought, holiness evokes above all separation (like our word 'absolute'). The term thus names—and this is quite remarkable—a mode of being or a beyond being rather than a quiddity.

(BV, 119; 147–8)

In this mode of being – as separated, and thus ἐπέκειναι in its fashion – is rooted the 'ambiguity, or the enigma' of manifestation or of the revelation of this God, his 'uncertain epiphany, at the limit of evanescence' (BV, 121; 149). Yet this uncertainty and this evanescence are neither the fact of a vacillating faith, nor that of an inconsistent God. They belong to the very modalities of revelation and qualify a God who signifies 'beyond being'. As such, they signify in precarity, 'but what is precarious in revelation is never precarious enough'.⁶⁶ And this is why they will have to invent a special

modality for themselves. In the concreteness of the liturgy where, in the blessing, God is invoked in the third person after having been named in the second person: 'The Thou becomes He in the Name, as though the Name belonged at once to the rectitude of thou-saying and to the absoluteness of holiness.' This is why 'this anchoresis of God in his manifestation, where the *Klingen* is already an *Abklingen*'⁶⁷ (BV, 122; 151), is not simply negative theology, but immediately takes on concrete significations. Yet what the Scripture contributes is that these significations are from the outset of an ethical character.

But what is the positive sense of the retreat of this God who only says his names and his orders? This retreat does not annul manifestation. It is not a non-knowledge pure and simple. It is precisely the obligation of man in regard to all other men. According to the word of the prophet (Jeremiah 22: 10), to give priority to the poor and the unhappy 'is certainly what is called knowing me, says the Eternal.' As a knowledge of the unknowable, transcendence becomes ethics.

(BV, 123; 152)

There is thus a retreat of God in manifestation itself, an 'effacement of the Name' (BV, 123-4; 153) in its attestation. This is a retreat and an effacement that are holiness itself, and that signify otherwise than by the *via negativa*. 'The transcendence of God is his effacement itself, but which obligates us in regard to men' (BV, 125; 154).

It is not astonishing, consequently, that this 'Talmudic discourse' – pronounced to be sure in the framework of the *Istituto di studi filosofici* in Rome by request of its president, Professor Enrico Castelli – should end with a philosophical resumption of the entire thematic, resting up till then on the authority of Scripture and its exegesis in oral Law. It is in this sense that we could legitimately have begun with this thematic itself. But it was better to mention it at the end, as a pre-philosophical source of a thinking that no longer recognizes any authority other than the philosophical approach and the history of philosophy 'into which enter ever new interlocutors, who each have something to restate, but in which the ancients take back the word to respond, therein, through the interpretations they give rise to, and in which nevertheless, despite this lack of "sureness of step" (or because of it), no one is allowed a slackening of attention or a lack of rigor' (BV, 10; 25).⁶⁸

Notes

- 1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974; 2nd edn, 1978). In English, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Boston and Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic

- Publishers, 1991; translation from the second French edition). Hereafter cited in the text as OB. In the present text, French pagination follows the English pagination throughout. I sometimes modify Lingis’s translation slightly for fluency with Rolland’s text. – Trans.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), p. 6. In English, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 36. Hereafter cited in the text as TI. In the present text, French pagination follows the English pagination throughout. I sometimes modify Lingis’s translation for fluency with Rolland’s text. – Trans.
 - 3 Lingis translates ‘à travers ruptures et retrouvailles’ as ‘across breaks and recoveries’, yet the language is redolent of an intersubjective relationship of intimacy here. ‘Retrouvailles’, always in the plural, concerns coming back together, finding one another again, though here the story concerns, simply, the ‘Me’. – Trans.
 - 4 E. Levinas, ‘Eloge de l’insomnie (Vendredi 7 mai 1976)’, in *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, ed. J. Rolland (Paris: B. Grasset, 1993), p. 239. In English, *God, Death, and Time*, tr. B. Bergo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 210. Hereafter cited in the text as GDT. In the present text, French pagination follows the English pagination throughout. I sometimes modify the translation for fluency with Rolland’s text. – Trans.
 - 5 E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1982), p. 58 n. In English, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, tr. B. Bergo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 31. Hereafter cited in the text as GCM. In the present text, French pagination follows the English pagination throughout. As before, I modify the translation occasionally for fluency with Rolland’s text. – Trans.
 - 6 E. Levinas, *L’humanisme de l’autre homme: Essais* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972). In English see *Humanism of the Other*, tr. Nidra Poller, Introduction by Richard A. Cohen (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 58–69. – Trans.
 - 7 ‘S’accuser’ can be translated as readily ‘to admit to something’, ‘to blame oneself for something’ and to ‘to become pronounced’ in so doing. Here, albeit without conscious agency, the ‘me’ does all this, out of its own passivity. – Trans.
 - 8 I have modified Lingis’s translation extensively here, to highlight the ‘breathless’ quality of Levinas’s style in *Otherwise than Being*, his eschewal of the verb ‘to be’ (which would drag these non-states or qualities into ordinary predication and ontologize them), and the rhetoric of parataxis and overbidding by which he approaches the emphasis and affectivity of the ‘situation’ of a self exposed. – Trans.
 - 9 Victor Hugo, *Hernani*, Act IV, Scene 3.
 - 10 Rolland’s reference is to Heidegger’s treatment of *Angst* in *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), see Chapter VI ‘Care as the Being of Dasein’, ¶¶ 40–1, pp. 228–41.
 - 11 Of *materiality* (as distinguished from matter, pure and simple), *Existence and Existents* gives a striking description that opens onto the *there is*. Yet, since Levinas always insists on the fundamental, pre-philosophical experiences without which there would not be philosophy, we must no doubt recall here the essential *angustum* that was the experience of being itself over a number of years for a family of European humanity: ‘The rapid usury of all forms between 1939 and 1945 recalled more than any other symptoms, the fragility of our assimilation. In that world at war, forgetful of the very laws of war, the relativity of all that was indispensable from the time of our entry into the city, appeared brusquely.

- We came back [*sommes revenues*] to the desert, to a space without landscape or to a space just barely made – like a tomb – to contain us; we came back to space-as-receptacle. The ghetto is that, too, and not only a separation from the world.’ Levinas, *Noms propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 179. In English, *Proper Names*, tr. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 121.
- 12 *Obses* is the Latin root for hostage, surety, pledge; *obsessor* is one who besets or haunts us. – Trans.
 - 13 The French text reads, ‘le soi-même du soi en deçà du moi . . .’ (p. 100). – Trans.
 - 14 The present analysis and interpretation displaces the book’s centre of gravity toward § 3 of Chapter 5, ‘From the Saying to the Said or the Wisdom of Desire’, in which the ‘interposition of the third party’ is brought about (Derrida). I believe we must take these pages, effectively, as the pivot in the whole reading of *Otherwise than Being*. Nonetheless, it remains that we cannot forget Levinas’s programme of being ‘torn out of essence’, which is stated from the first pages and which leads many of these pages into an anarchic writing [*écriture anarchique*]. It is only if this anarchy is taken seriously that we may hold a discourse about the third party that is not simply soothing.
 - 15 See Rolland’s *Parcours de l’autrement: Lecture d’Emmanuel Lévinas*, Chapter 2, p. 91.
 - 16 E. Levinas, *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1991), p. 227. In English, *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 214–15. Hereafter cited in the text as EN. In the present text, the French pagination follows the English pagination throughout. As before, I modify the translation occasionally for fluency with Rolland’s text. – Trans.
 - 17 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, ¶ 47, p. 284; p. 240 in the German edition. Rolland follows a famous French ‘bootleg’ translation by Emmanuel Martineau, available in the 1980s, p. 178.
 - 18 Rolland writes ‘existentialement’, following Heidegger’s distinction between the *existentiell* and the *existential*, where the latter modality is the condition of possibility of human facticity and of ‘fallen’ modes of being in the world. – Trans.
 - 19 See Levinas, ‘Questions and Answers’, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 91. Rolland does not provide a reference to his interjection here. – Trans.
 - 20 Hapax or ἅπαξ is an adverb generally meaning ‘once’ – Trans.
 - 21 On this meaning of death, see *Parcours de l’autrement*, Part II, Chapter 5 ‘Death in its Negativity’ [‘La mort en sa négativité’], pp. 355–85. Translated into English by B. Bervoorn in New School for Social Research, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20(2) and 21(1), 1998, pp. 461–94. – Trans.
 - 22 The French verb *enchérir* has come to have the particular sense of bidding, in the sense of raising the value or cost of an item, generally at an auction. But *enchérir sur* can also mean ‘to go one better than’ or ‘to go further than’. *Sur-enchérir* sets the expression into a hyperbolic or superlative mode, since *enchérir* already denotes a comparative increase. – Trans.
 - 23 ‘*Déprisement*’ is the nominalization of the verb *déprendre*, often expressed reflexively as *se déprendre*, which literally means to betake oneself from something, or to loosen the hold someone (or something) has upon one. – Trans.
 - 24 Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1955), p. 3. In English, see *The Works of Rabelais* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1940), vol. 1, p. 6.
 - 25 Maurice Blanchot, *L’Écriture du désastre*, p. 40. In English, *The Writing of Disaster*, tr. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 22.

- This remark is criticized, wrongly to my mind, by Catherine Chaliar in her 'Le bonheur ajourné', in *Rue Descartes*, no. 19, February 1998 (Paris: Albin Michel and Collège international de philosophie), pp. 40–1.
- 26 The French text contains a fecund ambiguity here, related to Levinas's innovative use of the concept of the 'ethical': 'L'autre irréductible au Même, ne permet-il pas, dans une certaine relation (l'éthique), de penser cet autre ou cet au-delà?' This could also be translated as 'within a certain relationship (i.e. ethics), to think this other or this beyond?' – Trans.
 - 27 Rolland cites G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopédie des sciences philosophiques*, vol. I: *Logic*, tr. Bernard Bourgeois (Paris, 1970), §§ 93–4, part of which is cited by Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*, p. 193 n. 34 (in the French, p. 119 n. 34). A. Lingis, who translated *OB* into English, cites the Wallace translation of the *Encyclopedia Logic*, which I reproduce here. It is sufficiently different that I have chosen to retain the French for fluency with Rolland's text. 'Something becomes an other: this other is itself somewhat; therefore it likewise becomes an other, and so on *ad infinitum*. The *Infinity* is the wrong or negative infinity; it is only a negation of a finite: but the finite rises again the same as ever, and is never got rid of and absorbed.'
 - 28 We should recall that it is with this definition, this negative definition, that the unfolding of the intrigue of proximity had begun, in the first chapter – the intrigue with which the work itself properly began.
 - 29 As has been repeatedly discussed by commentators like A. Peperzak, 'the Other', written *l'Autre* or *l'autre*, is a nominalized adjective and denotes the concept of the indeterminate other, or otherness. The Other, written *l'Autrui* or *l'autrui*, is the substantive for human other, not an adjective, but other in the object case. It expresses the other in his or her concrete human approach. However, since for Levinas the Other is always firstly the human other, a certain ambiguity slides into the use of these terms. *Autrui* remains, however, the other person I experience, in a sense, my other (without possession). – Trans.
 - 30 This is a researching on, or about [*recherche sur*], the infinite that does not thematize it and which, for this reason, becomes a searching of [*recherche de*] or for the infinite – under the shock or influence of the infinite. This is why, in his course on *God and Onto-theo-logy*, Levinas cites, in the lecture of 12 December 1975, the letter from Descartes to Mersenne (dated 28 January 1641): 'I have read through the booklet of M. Morin, whose principal fault is that it treats everywhere of the infinite, as though his mind were above, and he were able to comprehend its properties, which is a fault common to all; one I have attempted to avoid with care, since I have never treated of the infinite other than to submit to it, and never to determine what it is or what it is not' (Descartes, *Œuvres complètes, Adam et Tannery Edition*, vol. III, p. 293. For English, see *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, ed. and tr. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 92–4.
 - 31 Being in act, as contrasted with being in potential, translates the Aristotelian *energeia/dunamis* couple, where what is 'in potential' can only be defined by what is 'in actuality' or 'in activity', i.e. fully deployed in its being as what it is. – Trans.
Rolland adds between parentheses, 'whatever its fidelity or infidelity to the spirit of Aristotle's notion, which being-in-act claims to translate'. – Trans.
 - 32 Note that *la geste* does not mean what *le geste* (gesture, act, deed) means. *La geste* comes from the *Chansons de geste*, so many epic or picaresque poems recounting the adventures of a figure, or his/her epic. – Trans.
 - 33 E. Levinas, *L'humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 11; see *Humanism of the Other*, p. 3. Hereafter cited in the text as HOM. – Trans.

Rolland inserts a note here, which reads: 'I proposed a commentary on this proposition in my essay "L'inactuel" in *Philosophies de l'actualité*. Marx, Sartre, Arendt, Lévinas (Paris, Centre national de documentation pédagogique, "Passages" [journal], 1998).'

- 34 Descartes, *Adam et Tannery*, vol. VII, p. 47. Also see Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: A Bilingual Edition*, ed. and tr. George Heffernan (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1990), p. 141: 'But I so judge that God is actually infinite that nothing could be added to his perfection.'
- 35 Jean-Luc Marion, *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Fayard, 1982), pp. 50–1. In English, *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 32–3.
- 36 A simultaneity that cannot be put out of rhythm or time, can't be put out of touch as well. This would be something other than a simultaneity of temporal phases, which is necessary to the correlation that permits the intentional 'fit' of a consciousness united with its object, a noetic act in fusion with its noematic object, as Husserl would have it. – Trans.
Rolland inserts a reference here to Levinas's essay 'Énigme et phénomène', in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1949, 1976), p. 209. The English translation of this work does not contain that essay. It can be found in A. Peperzak, S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds and trs) *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); it is also featured in *Levinas Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Duquesne University Press, 1998) as 'Phenomenon and Enigma'. I abbreviate it as EDE and translate from the French – Trans.
- 37 On the idea of the Infinite, see the two final lectures of the course on 'God and Onto-theo-logy', as well as the fundamental essay 'God and Philosophy' (GCM, 55–78; 93–127). I have taken up the theme of a 'Levinasian theology', myself, on the basis of the idea of the infinite in me, and thus otherwise than in the present essay, in my 'Divine Comedy: The Question of God in Levinas', in Arno Münster (ed.) *La différence comme non-indifférence. Éthique et altérité chez Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Kimé, 1995), pp. 109–27.
- 38 The French original reads: 'mais aussi . . . dans la différence entre le témoigné et le témoignage même en tant que ce qui en témoigne', cf. *Parcours de l'autrement*, p. 109. The utterance of the witnessing act is 'that which bears witness' to an event which cannot be recaptured or brought to sight, because it exceeds or is invisible to everyday vision. This is as true of a witnessing of the 'Infinite' as it is of a catastrophe or secret act. Ordinary vision is a construction and the coordination of a seer and a seen. – Trans.
- 39 As we know, the French *me voici* is the contemporary shortening of *tu me vois ici*, or you see *me* here. The 'me' is clearly an accusative, whereas the 'here I am', functionally the same response, maintains a nominative I. Thus the English obscures the notion of a 'name that accuses its own accusative', which is the me of responsibility, now proffering itself in readiness as sincerity. – Trans.
- 40 The Hebrew *hineni* is composed of 'here' הנה (here) + אני (I). – Trans.
- 41 Cited according to the translation of the Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary (Paris: Fondation Samuel and Odette Lévy, 1981, 4th edn), Rolland's emphases.
- 42 Rolland's bracketed insertion – Trans.
- 43 Plato, *Parmenides*, 137c.
- 44 Ibid., 141e.
- 45 Levinas refers in *Totality and Infinity* to the 'curvature' of 'intersubjective space', whereby I answer the call of the other in a 'vertical' direction, rather than in a horizontal one. Horizontality would amount to a reciprocal relation of exchange,

- which is an economy already influenced by the effectivity of the third party. – Trans.
- 46 See Plato, *Republic*, Book VI, 509b.
 - 47 Martin Heidegger, 'La Doctrine de Platon sur la vérité', in *Questions II*, tr. A. Préau (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 149. In English, see 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', in *Pathmarks*, tr. and ed. William McNeill (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 175.
 - 48 *Ibid.*, p. 148.
 - 49 F. Nietzsche, *Fragments posthumes. Automne 1884–Automne 1885*, 34, p. 253. See *Œuvres philosophiques complètes*, vol. IX, trs. Michel Haar and M. B. de Launay (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), p. 235. In English see, F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), § 493, p. 272.
 - 50 Rolland uses a verbal form of *parenté*, or kinship: *apparente*. This term resembles 'appearance' and the adjective 'apparent(e)' enough to suppose that he is playing on 'to make kin' of two beings and 'to make appear' two beings in their relation to each other. – Trans.
 - 51 On this point, Rolland refers us to his Part I, Chapter 6, 'Of Anarchy, or Thanks to God', pp. 205–29.
 - 52 Let us note in passing that, if it were permitted to construct a 'Levinasian theology', it would be in terms altogether different from speculative ones that one would have to do so.
 - 53 It seems to me that there is, in effect, space for an agnostic or atheist reading – and we have seen him not recoil before this word – of Levinas. Such a reading would hold itself resolutely to the I-Thou structure and would take *literally* the illity of the He [*au pied de la lettre* l'illéité du Il]. To be sure, it could serenely allow that 'everything comes to pass as though' this I-Thou structure were, enigmatically, commanded by the He, or starting from the He. But it would not need this movement, which it would allow itself to call supplementary. And, it would challenge the movement vehemently if it had to lead to some sort of *position* or *positing* of the He. Such a reading would certainly distort the Levinasian text, but it would nevertheless be more faithful to him than any faith-based annexation [*annexion fidéiste*] – and this, by virtue of its refusing all positing. Chapter 6 will show, moreover, that it is only on the basis of what Derrida calls, with a felicitous expression, 'the interposition of the third party', that one can think of a certain 'necessity of the He'.
 - 54 I take the liberty of this specification, since I cannot see how otherwise to interpret this rather obscure phrase.
 - 55 In *Proper Names*, Levinas writes, and Rolland cites in his chapter 'I' ['Je']: 'The idea that the transcendence of the transcendent resides in its extreme humility allows us to glimpse a truth that is not a disclosure [*dé-voilement*]. The humility of the persecuted truth is so great that it does not dare present itself "in the clearing" of which Heidegger spoke. Or, if you like, its presentation is equivocal: it is there as though it were not there. Such is, for me [Levinas], the new philosophical idea that Kierkegaard brought us. The idea of persecuted truth allows us perhaps to put an end to the play of disclosure, in which immanence always wins over transcendence: for, once the being has been disclosed [*l'être dévoilé*], even partially, were this only in the Mysteries, it becomes immanent. There is no true exteriority in this disclosure. And thus we see, with Kierkegaard, something manifesting itself and then, we may ask ourselves whether there was manifestation. Something made an opening. But no! It or he said nothing. The truth is played out in two times: at the same time the essential was

said, but, if you will, nothing has been said. Here then is the new situation, the permanent rending, an outcome that is not an outcome. Revelation and, after the fact, nothing. This new modality of truth, brought to us by Kierkegaard, is not an invention of the philosopher. It is truly the translation of an epoch . . . that has lost confidence in the authenticity of the Scriptures without losing the possibility of hearing a voice that comes from there [*qui vient de là-bas*]. Scriptures are perhaps nothing. Since the historic Critique of the Bible, they are explained by a host of contingencies. And yet there was a message there. It is in this sense that there is, in the Kierkegaardian way or manner of truth, a new modality of the True.' See *Proper Names*, tr. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 77–9; French edition, pp. 114–15. Cited in Rolland, *Parcours de l'autrement*, pp. 58–9 [translation modified slightly for fluency with Rolland's text] – Trans.

- 56 Rolland hyphenates 'un-ity' to underscore the one-ness implicitly in the notion of unity. – Trans.
- 57 The English translation breaks up this sentence, placing the words 'for it is incapable of denying the fraternity of men' at the end of the section. In so doing, however, it becomes unclear *what* precisely is incapable of denying the fraternity of human beings, which is signified by transcendence itself through the encounter with the face of the other person, which is 'always on the verge of falling outside phenomenality itself', because the face, and the flickering of the Infinite in it, interrupts the continuity of the I, assured by Kant's transcendental apperception. – Trans.
- 58 Levinas, *Hors sujet* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987), p. 196. In English, *Outside the Subject*, tr. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 130ff. Hereafter cited in the text as HS.
- 59 Recall here Kierkegaard's words, cited at the end of the first chapter, where it was a question of an epoch that has lost confidence in the authenticity of the Scriptures 'without having lost the possibility of hearing, through them, a voice from afar [*qui vient de là-bas*]. Since the historical criticism of the Bible, they are explained by a host of contingencies. And yet there was a message there' (NP, 78; 115).
- 60 I [J. Rolland] borrow this expression [*cure d'amaigrissement*] from Gianni Vattimo, who used it in a very positive sense in his 'The Crisis of Humanism', translated by me [J. Rolland] in *Exercices de la patience*, no. 5 (Spring, 1983), p. 30.
- 61 The text is 'Les cordes et le bois', from which (Rolland indicates) several elements are taken up in 'Revelation in the Jewish Tradition', see Seán Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), pp. 190–210, see esp. 191–200 and 204–5.
- 62 Levinas, *L'Au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1982). In English see *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, tr. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Cited in the text as BV, I modify the translations occasionally for fluency with Rolland's text – Trans.
- 63 An origin for which *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* may be considered as visible traces, but which are also worth reading as autonomous writings. It is, moreover, one of the great merits of Jacques Derrida's first essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', to pass constantly from the 'great book' [*Totality and Infinity*] to the 'shorter writings'.
- 64 Emmanuel Levinas et al. *Autrement que Savoir: Avec les études de Guy Petitdemange et Jacques Rolland. Colloque du Centre Sèvres June 3, 1986* (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1988), pp. 79–83.

- 65 *Beyond the Verse*, pp. 116–28; in French, pp. 143–57.
- 66 See Jacques Derrida, ‘At this very moment in this work here I am’, tr. Ruben Berezdivin in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds) *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 11–48.
- 67 Where the sounding or resounding [*Klingen*] is already a dying away of sound [*Abklingen*]. – Trans.
- 68 Heartfelt thanks go to Claire Katz, Philosophy Department, Pennsylvania State University, for encouraging this project and to Michael Arrance, Philosophy Department, Duquesne University, for his extensive and scrupulous bibliographical research.

QUESTIONING THE SACRED

Heidegger and Levinas on the locus of divinity

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For anyone sympathetic to the descriptions and diagnoses contained in those of Heidegger's writings which revolve around the issue of the sacred, the recent upsurge of awareness and concern over Heidegger's short-lived commitment to National Socialism during the 1930s must, to put it mildly, give pause for thought. Anyone who finds the religiosity, if I may use this term, of Heidegger's thought compelling cannot help but be disturbed not only by the actions of Heidegger the man in this respect but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the various critiques of Heidegger's philosophy which his political involvement has since occasioned. These give grounds to at least suspect that this religiosity is one that might be separable from a concern with human suffering and the demands of morality and justice.

Since the latter concern is also (and some will in fact want to question even this "also") essential to what is generally regarded as a properly religious sensibility, the possibility of a disjunction between Heidegger's evocation of the sacred (*das Heilige*) on the one hand, and the sense of divinity as discovered through the ethical relation on the other, requires some critical investigation. The question here is in fact not only about Heidegger, but about the possibility of such disjunction in general, and this is the truly disturbing element for anyone who feels an affinity for Heidegger's location of the sacred.

No one has drawn attention to this disjunction more powerfully and more uncompromisingly than Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, too, this is not merely a question about Heidegger. It is a question about what is truly sacred, about the true locus of the sacred or, as Levinas sometimes puts it, rejecting the notion of the "sacred" (*le sacré*) as a positive notion altogether, about the "holy" (*le sainteté*) as opposed to the "sacred".¹ Against Heidegger's talk of "poetic dwelling", of the "mystery", of the fourfold of

earth and sky, mortals and divinities, all of which Levinas brands as "pagan", Levinas' own (quasi-) phenomenological analyses emphatically maintain that the essence of religion is found exclusively in the proto-ethical relation, the face-to-face relation between human beings. The opposition could not be any starker. While Heidegger, in "Der Feldweg", speaks of "the wide expanse of everything that grows and abides on the pathway", and says that "in the unspoken of its speech . . . God is first God",² Levinas remarks, "On *Feldwege* there is a tree; one encounters no men there".³

This paper attempts to mediate between these two positions. In such a case, however, mediation does not and cannot mean simply evaluating the soundness and validity of the arguments on both sides, since the difference between the two cannot be reduced to a difference between two theses supported by inferences from a common set of evidence, or even from different sets of evidence where there is at least a consensus about what would count as evidence. In fact, even the term "position" is not wholly apt here. Rather, one is dealing in this case with descriptions and prescriptions arising from experiences so fundamentally opposed that Derrida asks if Levinas' critique of Heidegger, with its frequent misinterpretations, does not "express an *allergy*—the word, the accusation, which Levinas plays upon so often—to the 'climate' of Heidegger's philosophy".⁴ In this instance, mediation requires assessing factors like the sensitivity of the text to the phenomena it addresses, its inclusiveness, its points of emphasis and the appropriateness of its rhetoric, and these are all points which I will take up. Naturally, such an assessment must itself rest on an appeal to particular experiences, and cannot claim the persuasive power of universality and thus of so-called "objectivity". I will return to this point in the course of my analysis, as one of the broader issues that arises here concerns the nature of phenomenological (understood in the broadest sense) accounts like those of Heidegger and Levinas, and of the strategies involved in evaluating them.

Because the question of the sacred, as it relates to the opposition between Heidegger and Levinas, is so closely connected with the question of ethics, the first section of this paper will examine the place and problem of ethics in Heidegger's thought, focusing especially on Levinas' critique of Heidegger in this respect. The second section will then move to a more precise critical analysis of the loci of divinity as presented in the writings of these two authors, with particular emphasis on the failures of Levinas, evident both in his presentation of ethics itself and in his delimitation of ethics as the only genuine place in which divinity is encountered.

I. Heidegger: the charge of unethicity

Heidegger's support for National Socialism and his near-silence about the Holocaust in later years is vulnerable to two somewhat different forms of criticism. First supposing that it is possible to separate the "man" from his

“philosophy”, there is the charge of unethicity directed simply at the former. This charge implies that knowledge of Heidegger’s political actions alone invalidates the content of his philosophical writings. But if it is indeed possible to distinguish the character of Heidegger the man from the character of his philosophical texts, this suggests that there could be a discontinuity between the two, and some scholars have argued that they should be judged independently of one another.⁵

The second and more prominent form of criticism rejects this distinction and attempts to show how Heidegger’s political involvement was the natural outcome of a certain way of thinking, a way of thinking expressed as much in his philosophical *oeuvre* as in his personal actions and his occasional political speeches and writings.⁶ Although it can, I believe, be convincingly argued that attempts to find strong, unambiguous correlations between, say, the existential phenomenology of *Being and Time* and the ideology of German fascism are suspect, tending as they do to reconfigure retrospectively the text by selecting certain elements to the exclusion of others, any thoroughgoing distinction between Heidegger’s political involvement and his philosophy is nonetheless unsustainable, for a number of reasons. For one thing, as several scholars have pointed out, Heidegger’s philosophy itself challenges the distinction between theory and practice, between thought and existence.⁷ It challenges the sort of philosophy which moves within these distinctions, placing itself on one side or another, and it would seem odd to defend Heidegger through recourse to distinctions which he himself rejects.

Also, however, when the question concerns *ethics*, not in the narrow sense of universal rules of conduct but in the broader and more basic sense of appropriate treatment of others (and Heidegger does have something to say about this, even if he has no “ethics” in the narrower sense), it is hard to see how the *thought* of ethics could possibly be separated from the issue of *being* ethical. How, that is, could one draw a real distinction between reflection about how to be towards others and actually being towards others in this way, such that the two could be considered independently of one another? The problem is that, on the whole, one tends to think that a reflection which says something positive about how to be,⁸ but does not actually issue in being so has in fact said something wrong, or at least incomplete. At the very least, it has misunderstood the relation between actions and a certain type of reflection, but this is itself a fault in the reflection. Therefore, whether or not it is possible to find a positive conceptual framework common to both Heidegger’s political and philosophical works, the two cannot, I believe, be legitimately dissociated. Either there is such a common framework, in which case the philosophical works are worth questioning, or there is not, in which case they are also worth questioning, perhaps with a view to what has been left out. Thus, although the charge of being unethical directed purely at Heidegger the man would seem to disregard his philosophy, in truth the

underlying problem posed by this charge also emerges when, with an orientation towards ethics, one considers the relation between Heidegger's actions—and silence is also an action—and the nature of this thought. I will confine myself here to an examination of Heidegger's philosophical works, but with the supposition that, if there is something wrong with Heidegger, it is, in one way or another, reflected in these works.

In relation to the question of ethics, one of the most common objections to the earlier Heidegger, understood first and foremost as the author of *Being and Time*, is that he presents a form of groundless subjectivism, in which an individual, and by extension also a nation or people, is "authentic" when he, she or it resolutely decides upon a course of action in the absence of any ethical norms that would guide and limit this decision. Thus, Heidegger's early philosophy, it is charged, is a form of "decisionism".⁹ Another, and related, objection is that, in spite of Heidegger's brief discussions of *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge* in *Being and Time*, for the most part social life belongs, in this work, to the sphere of inauthenticity. The authentic individual, by contrast, is isolated, drawn away from relations to others by anxiety and anticipatory being towards death, and thrown back upon him- or herself as a being which is, in an essential sense, alone. This, it might seem, is a philosophy that rejects the importance of concrete interpersonal relations in favour of a radically individual concern with self-realization.

On the other hand, it has also been argued that the account of decision and action in *Being and Time* is deterministic as well as voluntaristic, once the passages on Dasein's historicity in its belonging to a *Volk* are taken into account.¹⁰ The apparent determinism of the later works, where man waits upon the "sendings" of being without having the power to compel those sendings and thus genuinely to alter the shape and course of an epoch, would then represent the radicalization of an ideal already present in *Being and Time*, rather than constituting a break with its supposed voluntarism and subjectivism. In addition, the later works, with their seemingly esoteric and perhaps anachronistic talk of the destiny of being, the fourfold, the turning and so forth, have also been accused of fleeing from the complex needs of actual human existence into a form of fatalistic mysticism, "a diffuse readiness to obey in relation to an auratic but indeterminate authority".¹¹ What is again left out is the question of ethics, of those freely accepted and yet obligatory relations of responsibility between human beings. In that case, Heidegger's philosophy, both early and late, would be an invitation to ethical irresponsibility.

Leaving aside for now the issue of whether Heidegger's thought goes "deeper" than ethics, there have been various attempts to defend Heidegger against these charges by locating a basic ethics within his philosophical *oeuvre*. These can be broadly grouped into what I will call the "interpersonal" defense and the "metaphysical" defense.¹² One representative of the

former is Lawrence Vogel's *The Fragile "We": Ethical Implications of Heidegger's Being and Time*.¹³ In this book, Vogel argues for three possible interpretations of *Being and Time*, an "existentialist", an "historicist" and a "cosmopolitan" one. On the "cosmopolitan" interpretation, which, however, Vogel claims, "requires a supplementation of Heidegger's texts at odds with the author's intention",

authentic self-responsibility implies neither "subjectivism" nor "relativism", for it makes possible "authentic Being-with-Others": a posture in which one feels an obligation to respect the dignity of other persons and compassion for the suffering of others.

(p. 9)

Developing this interpretation, Vogel points out how "in authentic *Mitsein* as 'liberating solicitude' we find the ultimate sense in which fundamental ontology is a fundamental ethics" (p. 68), although liberating solicitude must be distinguished from a concern for the other's "welfare" (p. 78). Heidegger's phenomenological sketches of authentic Dasein in *Being and Time* do not, then, depict an isolated individual acting on the arbitrariness of its own self-seeking and self-projected resolutions. Rather, what is involved here is "an attunement to the particularity of others, to other *as* truly other, stemming from an awareness of the singularity of one's own existence" (p. 71). Unlike the "impersonal" stance which attempts to subsume both situations and persons under general categories and rules, this attunement manifests itself as "an *interpersonal* orientation motivated by one's desire not to incorporate others into 'the universal' but, rather, to 'let others be' in their freedom for their own possibilities and to allow one's own self-understanding to be informed by theirs" (p. 71).

Fred Dallmayr, in *The Other Heidegger*,¹⁴ makes some similar points. Arguing against Habermas' claim that Heidegger's thought remains subject-centred and does not deal effectively with intersubjectivity, for instance, Dallmayr, like Vogel, draws attention to the primacy of *Mitsein* in *Being and Time* (pp. 60–62), and to the attitude of letting-be which is "strikingly captured in the notion of 'anticipating-emancipatory solicitude' (*vorspringend-befreiende Fürsorge*)" (p. 64). But sections of Dallmayr's book, in particular Chapter 4, "Heidegger on Ethics and Justice" (pp. 106–131) also present what I am calling the "metaphysical" defense of Heidegger's relation to ethics. Here, focusing mainly on Heidegger's later works, especially on the commentaries on Schelling and Anaximander, Dallmayr argues that these writings subtly call for an accordance with being which is decidedly a form of justice, so that they can actually be read as an indictment of Nazism (p. 125).¹⁵ For instance, in "The Anaximander Fragment", Dallmayr argues, where "Heidegger develops the notion of *Seinsfuge* with specific reference to the issue of social (and cosmic) justice" (p. 118),

juncture and hence justice is the readiness to let others be and to attend to them with considerate care; by contrast, disjuncture or injustice involves the insurgence of selfish conceit bent on permanently monopolizing the space of presence while shuffling others out of the way.
(p. 125)

The explicit claims made by both Vogel and Dallmayr regarding the (central, not merely marginal) presence of ethics in Heidegger's thought are, I believe, fundamentally correct. Heidegger's analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time* actually requires liberating solicitude as the only appropriate and authentic response to the other, and this response is rooted in respect and concern. Moreover, as Vogel suggests, the various elements of the *Daseinsanalytik*, and precisely the ones which, on a superficial reading, appear the most "solipsistic", help to awaken awareness of the other as a concrete individual like oneself. I would in fact go further and say that the immensely rich analyses of the structure of Dasein—of worldhood, of care, of temporality—form a powerful contribution to the task of imagining the other, and in such a way as to bring home with peculiar force the inviolability of such a being and, consequently, the enormity of the violation that occurs when this being, with its in one sense utterly unique opening of the world in the web of what has touched it, is extinguished before its time. If it is at least to some extent true that evil is a failure of imagination, then it could be argued that certain elements in Heidegger's analysis have an ethical value which actually goes beyond the dry rhetoric of categorical imperatives and ends-in-themselves.¹⁶

Heidegger's later emphasis on man as a *Lichtung* of being adds a moment of transcendence, perhaps implicit all along, to this understanding of Dasein, and thus adds to the dignity and worth of this being, as Heidegger suggests in the *Letter on Humanism*.¹⁷ When this is taken together with the metaphysical concern for justice, also manifest in some of the later writings, there can be little room for doubt that the general movement and tenor of Heidegger's thought is opposed to any subjective ethical relativism. Moreover, although, according to Heidegger's self-interpretation, being cannot be equated with God or with the holy, when the transcendence and special dignity of human existence rests in its relation to being, and when there is a profound ethical moment at the heart of this relation, it seems not unwarranted to claim that Heidegger's concern with justice moves in a region of thought close to the one where, in the tradition of Western philosophy and theology, the question of ethics has been posed in terms of the relation between the human and the divine. Thus, it would be simplistic to conclude that in no sense is there a connection in Heidegger's thought between ethics and the holy.

One may feel, however, that in spite of the validity of such defenses of Heidegger, there is still something awry in Heidegger's texts at those points

where he touches upon the issues of justice and concern for the other. For one thing, there is the notable fact that the concrete realities of physical need, deprivation and pain, which the thought of justice usually takes as central, are not represented in the terms of Heidegger's discourse. In addition, while there is indeed, as Heidegger claims, a sense in which the notion of Dasein as *Lichtung* elevates its status, this notion also suggests, at least on the surface, that human beings are "for" something, are means rather than ends, so that what truly counts—what has priority—is what comes to light in and through them. And this suggestion apparently demotes the status of particular human beings to a subordinate rank, thereby depriving the realities of human suffering and need of their independent ethical significance. As a response to the threat of nihilism, Heidegger's reflections on the relation of man and being form a valuable answer to the needs of the present time, but when read with an eye to the enormous violence inflicted on individual human lives in this same time, they can appear not only as lacking, but even as ethically offensive.¹⁸

It is on precisely these points that Levinas' critique has its edge. In turning now to an examination of this critique, I do not intend to give an exhaustive summary of it within the overall context of Levinas' thought—a task which, in any case, I am not qualified to undertake—but only to pick out some key elements.

In an essay entitled "The Search for a Heideggerian Ethics",¹⁹ Michael Zimmerman claims that "the burden of Levinas' critique of Heidegger" resides in noting how "Heidegger's fascination with the Greeks led him to discount Jewish and Christian insistence on the importance of personal responsibility for the concrete other" (p. 81). Levinas' insistence, against Heidegger and others, on the concreteness not only of daily human existence as such but of the particular individual qua individual is evident in his well-known comment in *Totality and Infinity* that "Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry",²⁰ and in the lengthy analysis of *jouissance*, enjoyment (a relation which, Levinas claims, Heidegger does not take into consideration) in the context of which this comment occurs. It is evident also, in *Otherwise than Being*, in Levinas' emphasis on physical need and vulnerability, on a corporeality which is necessarily and always "exposed to outrage and wounding, to sickness and ageing",²¹ as well as in his repeated usage, in this work, of the trope of taking the bread out of one's own mouth to feed another as a model for the ethical relation.²²

However, the heart of Levinas' attempt to expose how not only Heidegger, but the whole of Western philosophy, has expressed and maintained a relation to the other which suppresses its reality lies in his critique of ontology as inherently totalizing and neutralizing: "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other (*l'Autre*) to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (TeI, p. 13/TI, p. 43). While Heidegger's thought struggles to

overcome the “totalizing” impulse which Heidegger himself sees as inherent in metaphysics, understood as the project of ordering and grasping the totality of beings within a conceptual system, for Levinas, Heidegger’s articulation of the relation between being and beings, both in *Being and Time* and in the later works, is still another instance of a comprehension within which the individuality and genuine alterity of the other person evaporate. In *Being and Time*, according to Levinas’ reading, the fact that “being is inseparable from the comprehension of being” means that “being is already an appeal to subjectivity” (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 45), so that Heidegger’s claim that beings are always understood on the basis of a prior comprehension of being means that they are not maintained in their alterity, but are reduced to being only what is visible against the horizon of the categories and projects of the constituting subject. Thus, in spite of Heidegger’s attempt to break with the subject-centredness and abstractness of Husserlian phenomenology, in spite of his critique of the general tendencies within traditional ontology both to misapply categories derived from objects to human existence and to take the basic orientation from the relation of knowing, Levinas still claims that, “approached from being, from the luminous horizon where it has a silhouette, but has lost its face, the existent (*l’étant*) is the very appeal that is addressed to comprehension (*l’intelligence*)” (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 45). In his later works, Heidegger takes what he thinks is a further step towards overcoming the increasing subject-centredness of Western thought, but Levinas sees the “turn” in Heidegger’s thought as leading only to the positing of neutral, anonymous power, “a *Logos* that is the word of no one” (TeI, p. 275/TI, p. 299).

On Levinas’ interpretation, then, whether Heidegger’s notion of being is conceived as the general term through which entities are understood or as a faceless power ruling over their destiny, being has *priority* over beings.²³ Heidegger, that is, subordinates the entity to being, thereby engaging in a form of “ontological imperialism” (TeI, p. 15/TI, p. 44):

Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.

(TeI, p. 17/TI, pp. 46–47)

It is impossible not to notice the non-sequitur in this sentence, and in the second section of this article, I will ask whether Levinas’ often impressionistic and authoritarian method of commentary does not at times demonstrate a lack of genuine consideration of what is being said that borders on irresponsibility.²⁴ Setting this point aside for the present, however, the main thrust of his critique seems to be that the basic stance underlying Heidegger’s prioritization of being is opposed to the stance in which one is open to the

commanding address presented by the face of the other, where the acceptance and welcome of this address form the basis of the ethical relation, prior to any disclosure of specific qualities, prior, in fact, to anything that would generally count as "knowledge". It is in this sense that Heidegger, among others, subordinates ethics, the "calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other" (TeI, p. 13/TI, p. 43), to ontology, to "theory as the comprehension of beings" (TeI, p. 13/TI, p. 42).

Levinas' challenge to Heidegger's development of the notion of *aletheia*, of truth as disclosure, makes a similar point. While Heidegger himself questions the conception of truth implicit in the standard philosophical metaphors of light and visibility stemming originally from Plato, Levinas claims that Heidegger also takes vision—and a vision which projects the horizon, the being, of entities in advance of the encounter with them—as primary (see TeI, p. 39/TI, pp. 67–68). Levinas contrasts this with "manifestation *kath auto*", which "consists in the being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*" (TeI, p. 37/TI, p. 65). More fundamentally, Levinas' objection to the subordination of ethics to ontology in Heidegger's thought is already an objection to the relegation of the ethical moment to a moment of truth, even if the latter includes the respect that "lets be".

R. J. S. Manning makes this point succinctly in *Interpreting Otherwise Than Heidegger*,²⁵ when he says that "because Heidegger defines respect for being as a moment within the comprehension of being, which is truth, rather than seeing respect for being as truth itself, as does Levinas, Heidegger subordinates ethics to ontology" (p. 121). Moreover, for Heidegger, Manning continues:

Any manifestation of Being, no matter what form it takes, is truth; and ethics, or what we have allowed ourselves to consider as a possible ethical dimension in Heidegger's philosophy—respect for Being—is not truth itself, but simply amounts to the demand to let Being come to presence as truth in whatever form it may take.

(p. 121)

Against this, it needs to be taken into account that "truth", for Heidegger, is not mere factuality. The truth of being, which is truth itself, is *meaning*, and the meaning of what is, as Heidegger makes clear in *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, is actually discovered in relation to the good that is *epekeina tes ousias*, as Plato said, beyond being as the totality of beings.²⁶ Yet the point remains that the place of *aletheia* in Heidegger's thought, together with his notion of man as *Lichtung*, and that means as a place for the happening of truth (i.e., the site of *aletheia*), still gives the leading place of importance to disclosure, as if what really mattered were not the *desire* for the good as the desire for justice, but the *coming to light* of the justice or

injustice of a situation in and through the thoughtfully receptive mediation of the "shepherd of being".

There have, over the years, been several attempts to answer Levinas' critique of Heidegger. Some of the major flaws in Levinas' interpretation, for instance, are addressed by Derrida in his "Violence and Metaphysics", which, however, is also sensitive to the perspective and force of Levinas' own writings. One absolutely central point concerns Levinas' tendency to treat Heidegger's notion of being as if it indicated some other thing besides entities, a sort of prior existent:

There can be an order of priority only between two determined things, two existents. Being, since *it is nothing* outside the existent . . . could in no way *precede* the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc. . . . being is but the *being of* the existent, and does not exist outside it as a foreign power, or as a hostile or neutral impersonal element.

(ED, p. 200/WD, p. 136)

In fact, in taking "being" as if it were something like a supreme entity, Levinas ignores what is perhaps the most fundamental element in Heidegger's thought. "There are few themes which have demanded Heidegger's insistence to this extent: being is not an excellent existent", and "in reality, there is not even a *distinction*, in the usual sense of the word, between being and the existent" (ED, p. 203/WD, p. 138).

As a second point, and an obvious one, "not only is the thought of Being not ethical violence, but it seems that no ethics—in Levinas' sense—can be opened without it", because "thought—or at least the precomprehension of Being—conditions the *recognition* of the essence of the existent", and so "conditions the *respect* for the other *as what it is*: other" (ED, p. 202/WD, p. 138). After all, what is *absolutely* foreign can in no way speak to us, can in no way address us as something to which we are related in one way or another. How could the ethical relation be possible without the prior recognition of the other *as* other, as another self—a person, as opposed to a stone—to whom I have this debt? Levinas also misunderstands Heidegger on the very issue of understanding. Heidegger's conception of disclosure is that of "letting-be", and this does not primarily mean, as Levinas seems to think, letting be as an "object of comprehension", but "concerns all possible forms of the existent" (ED, p. 202/WD, p. 138). Furthermore, what Heidegger means by being when he raises the question of being is emphatically not synonymous with a concept under which entities are to be subsumed. "Thus, the thought or pre-comprehension of Being signifies nothing less than a conceptual or totalitarian pre-comprehension" (ED, p. 206/WD, p. 140).

On the issue of Heidegger's lack of attention to the physical, C. D. Keyes makes the point that while "no one can deny Levinas the legitimacy of his analysis . . . what can be challenged is the implication that Heidegger should

be faulted for not having undertaken the same kind of analysis".²⁷ *Totality and Infinity* begins with biological needs, *Being and Time* with the world of pragmata; why should "the difference between the two types of analysis" not "be regarded as complementary rather than contradictory" (p. 132)?

Looking, first, at Derrida's criticism, he is surely right to say that "Being is not an excellent existent", so that Levinas' way of conceiving the priority of being, where it is understood as something impersonal apart from the entity, is wrong in the most obvious sense of the term. That is, it does not accord with the philosophical import of Heidegger's thought on the question of being. But perhaps philosophical import is not what is truly at stake here. Consider, for example, these sentences from *Introduction to Metaphysics*:

Man is forced into such a *Da-sein*, hurled into the need (*Not*) of such being, because the overpowering as such, in order to appear in its power, *requires* a place, a scene of disclosure. The essence of being-human opens up to us only when understood through this need compelled by being itself. The *Da-sein* of historical man means: to be posited as the breach into which the preponderant power of being bursts in its appearing, in order that this breach itself should shatter against being.²⁸

Although, in this interpretation of the Greek conception of being as *physis*, being is decidedly not another existent apart from man, not a "foreign" power that "makes" man, at least not in the ordinary sense of these terms, the rhetoric of the passage does suggest that being, as the overpowering, has a priority which one is tempted to describe in terms of first and final causes.

Of course, Heidegger would strongly object to such a metaphysical, i.e., ontotheological, description. *Physis* is neither a cause nor a ground; if anything, it is a process. Still, the precise terms and formulations that Heidegger employs here do suggest the imagination of being qua *physis*—which is certainly no one and thus, in a sense, "faceless"—as violently originating and ruling over the essence and destiny of man, and of man as for the sake of being and thus a *Mittel*, a means, existing *so that* being may have a site of disclosure within human dwelling. Although being is never, for Heidegger, some other thing besides beings, there is a form of distinction between being and beings (the ontological distinction), and the resonances of the language in which Heidegger describes this distinction and its corresponding relation have a significance that cannot be abolished by appeal to what one might call the true philosophical content, as opposed to the misleading images. These images also *speak*, and what they say indicates the nature of their source no less fundamentally than do the "cleaner" utterances, those where the language is more fully sublated into the formal clarity of philosophical discourse.

While the passage cited above forms part of a reflection on the Greek understanding of being, it also belongs to Heidegger's own thought, insofar as such reflections are meant to prepare the possibility of another beginning,

a repetition, in Heidegger's sense of *Wiederholung*, of this Greek one. Although it undergoes many variations, the motif in which man is conceived as existing for the sake of the disclosure of being is constantly repeated in Heidegger's thought. In the *Letter on Humanism*, precisely where it is claimed that "the highest humanistic determinations of the essence of man" do not yet experience "the authentic dignity (*Würde*) of man", Heidegger says:

Man is rather "thrown" from being itself into the truth of being, so that (*daß*), ek-sisting in this way, he might safeguard the truth of being, in order that (*damit*) beings might appear in the light of being as the beings that they are. (my italics)

(Hb, p. 75/BW, pp. 233–234)

The point remains that sayings like these demonstrate a source that is more deeply touched by the process of coming to light, by "truth", than by the everyday realities of suffering and injustice. Surely, as John Caputo suggests in "Heidegger's Scandal",²⁹ only from such a source could the thought arise that mass agriculture and "the manufacturing of corpses in gas chambers" are "in essence the same", or that the explosion of the atom bomb "is only the grossest of all gross confirmations of the long since accomplished annihilation of the thing".³⁰

It is true that Levinas underestimates the qualitative indeterminacy and the quantitative force of the *lassen* in *Seinlassen*, and that the thought of being is not a comprehension. But, for all that, is Levinas not right to claim that Heidegger's thought still exhibits an orientation that privileges the relation of knowing over the desire for justice? It is also true that the notion of an ethical relation preceding any and all disclosure is absurd. But if one accepts Levinas' claim that, in Derrida's words, "the neutral thought of Being neutralizes the Other as a being" (ED, p. 144/WD, p. 97), and if one also accepts that such observations can claim the status of valid objections, then one is implicitly asking that the work of reflection be guided, beforehand, by the ethical relation—and, what is more significant, one is asking this from a position which is itself prior to reflection, and certainly prior to any theorizing or theoretical justification. In that case, there is something appropriate in Levinas' assertion of the ethical relation as preceding at least *theoretical* disclosure.

This point is relevant to a consideration of the difference between Heidegger and Levinas with respect to where their analyses "begin". Keyes asks why Heidegger should be criticized for beginning elsewhere than Levinas, and why the two analyses cannot be considered "complementary rather than contradictory". But insofar as Levinas is concerned with the nature of the relation to others that both precedes and determines reflection, it is understandable that he criticizes, first and foremost, Heidegger's choice of "beginning", for this choice expresses a prior comportment—an *existentiel* comportment, one

might say—in which a decision is implicitly made about which phenomena are to have the highest rank in a consideration of human existence.

To be sure, the later passages on *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge* ensure that sociality and the concern for others are represented in *Being and Time*. Moreover, against charges of relativism, one can point out that the fundamental structure of Dasein and world outlined in this work actually excludes the possibility that any choice of action which treats entities having the nature of Dasein as means rather than ends could be justified within the total framework of its terms of analysis. Thus, Vogel is right that there is a “cosmopolitan” dimension to *Being and Time*. But perhaps, where the question is that of ethics, not as a branch of philosophy but as a relation prior to philosophy, the formal rightness of the thought is not enough. What is demanded in this case is a sensitivity, a vulnerability or exposure, to the need of the other which is registered in the *manner* of saying what is said. In that case, although Levinas speaks against rhetoric, understood as the art of persuasion,³¹ in another sense this is very much a question of rhetoric, for the presence or absence of such sensitivity can only be measured by the way the phenomena (for lack of a better term) are addressed.³² That is, the way the phenomena are addressed in the precise contours of the language expresses the way they have been addressed beforehand, and it is precisely this “beforehand” that is at issue here. Sadly, what Levinas points out, not only against Heidegger but against the whole of Western philosophy’s self-conception, is that thought always comes too late to ensure the rightness of this “beforehand”.³³

II. Levinas: a more subtle form of violence?

Levinas’ critique of Heidegger’s relation to ethics is at the same time a critique of his relation to the divine. For Levinas, “the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” (TeI, p. 50/TI, p. 78), and only from there, so that “there can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men” (TeI, p. 51/TI, p. 78). The aspects of human existence with which Heidegger’s sense of the divine appears to be associated, on the other hand, are all, in Levinas’ view, irreducibly “pagan”, a term that Levinas identifies with the attachment to place captured in the term “rootedness” (*enracinement*),³⁴ with *le sacré filtrant à travers le monde*,³⁵ and with “natural” existence, or the idolization of natural existence.³⁶ The “pagan” elements in Heidegger’s thought include his emphasis on human destiny as intertwined with place and landscape, his privileging of the revelatory power of art and poetry, and his elevation of non-human things. Also suspect, for Levinas, is the appropriation of Judaeo-Christian motifs of eschatology and grace in Heidegger’s later writings. Filtered through a dialogue with early Greek thought, with Neoplatonism and with German Idealism, this appropriation seems to yield the idea of an impersonal and ethically neutral power playing the role of God. To Levinas, such elements

suggest that Heidegger's conception of the sacred is, frankly, backward, since "everything that cannot be reduced to an inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion" (TeI, p. 52/TI, p. 79).

But here, the question naturally arises as to what authorizes such a judgement. And this question is given special urgency by the somewhat alarming tone of statements like this one, the *height* from which they are spoken, as well as by their sweep, by the fact that they exclude, with one stroke, the claim to validity of vast regions within the landscape of human religious experience. Moreover, a fair treatment of this subject requires that one resist the coercive force of a certain violent gesture in Levinas' own rhetoric, which tacitly asserts that his mapping of ethical experience is the only possible one, the only truly ethical one, so that any domain of religious thought or sensibility not contained in this map must on that account be unethical, or at least non-ethical and thus indifferent to the Other and to justice. If left unresisted, this gesture makes it impossible to give a just hearing to those voices, for instance, that speak from a spirituality in which the sacredness of "things", whether natural or man-made, and the sacramentality of so-called natural human activities, of the specifically human relation to food, sleep, work, sex, are intimately connected with respect for others and, indeed, with the holiness of the other. A way of thinking and speaking that implicitly dismisses all of these voices—be they Greek or Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist or Native American—with the abusive and highly suspect term "primitive" is certainly worth questioning.

There is an interesting moment in *Violence and Metaphysics* where Derrida, juxtaposing Levinas with Kierkegaard, begins one sentence with the words, "Let us add, in order to do him [Kierkegaard] *justice*" (Derrida's emphasis), and interrupts another with the interjection, "—for we must let the other speak" (ED, pp. 163–164/WD, p. 111). Does this interjection not suggest that there is something in the manner of Derrida's projected partner in dialogue at this moment (namely, Levinas) which in fact *resists* letting the other speak? One wonders whether, behind Levinas' affirmation that the proto-ethical relation, *as he presents it*, is universal and prior to all reflection, behind the claim that "the ethical moment is not founded on any preliminary structure of theoretical thought, on language or on any specific language",³⁷ there does not lurk a very old philosophical (but not only philosophical) move—the assertion of a particular perspective, in this case a perspective decidedly belonging to Judaic theology, as absolute.

It sometimes seems as if Levinas' desire to redress the lack of attention to physical need, compulsion and violation in the thought of Heidegger and others—a just desire, as argued in the last section of this article—blinds him to a more subtle, but also dangerous, form of violence. This violence, this irresponsibility, is evident in his lack of genuine consideration for texts and experiences that are truly "other" to him. Although it must be admitted that

Heidegger, too, is given to making proclamations from a questionably majestic height, one should also note, in all fairness, that this more subtle form of violence is one to which he is often deeply sensitive.³⁸

Levinas himself, while certainly not denying the rootedness of his thought in Judaic theology, nonetheless claims to be doing phenomenology rather than theology, although he does not follow most of the procedures that were basic to Husserl's conception of phenomenology.³⁹ Certainly, the legitimate appropriation of the term phenomenology no longer requires that one follow the particular elements of Husserlian methodology, e.g., the *epoche* and eidetic reduction, nor that one accept the premises underlying the employment of these elements. In the meantime, phenomenology has come to have a broader and less rigid meaning, in which these elements are not necessarily preserved. What is always preserved, however, insofar as something is still phenomenology and not, say, empirical description, literature, or theology, is close attention to phenomena as they appear (which can also include noting what does not, or cannot, appear) together with an attempt to suspend, to the extent that this is possible, the intrusion of definite, inherited prejudgements and theories upon the interpretation of what is being addressed so as to achieve at least a certain degree of general validity. For the most part, it is now generally accepted that this is a limited enterprise, and that asking a phenomenology to locate strictly universal essences, understood as the already-and-always-present structures of human experience as a whole, is asking too much, since no such essences exist.

But insofar as the term phenomenology still has any meaning which would distinguish it from neighbouring forms of enquiry and writing, one still expects that an enterprise bearing this name fulfill the demands mentioned above. What I am questioning here in noting the extent to which Levinas' perspective is determined by theology is whether his writings fulfill these demands. Important facets of his presentation of the proto-ethical relation make one suspect that they do not. For instance, there is Levinas' insistence, fundamental to his thought, of the obligation, and therefore guilt, that precedes all freedom. "Does not freedom appear to itself as a shame for itself?" he asks in *Totality and Infinity* (TeI, p. 280/TI, p. 303), and in *Otherwise than Being* he quotes from *The Brothers Karamazov*, "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (AE, p. 186/OB, p. 146). This notion of prior obligation is accompanied by a call to infinite responsibility, to a selflessness exceeding the requirements of equality and proportionality and of any justice based on these: "as responsible, I am never finished with emptying myself of myself" (DP, p. 122/GP, p. 182). Linked to this sense of prior guilt and infinite responsibility is Levinas' understanding of the relation between I and other as containing "a meta-physical asymmetry" (TeI, p. 24/TI, p. 53). Justice does not consist in treating the other as an equal, but "in recognizing in the Other my master" (TeI, p. 44/TI, p. 72) who approaches "in a dimension of height" (TeI, p. 48/

TI, p. 75). Thus, "Goodness consists in taking up a position in being such that the Other counts more than myself" (TeI, p. 225/TI, p. 247). And this height of the other, as face, "is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed" (TeI, p. 51/TI, p. 79).

In what manner are these claims asserted? If they are phenomenological claims, do they mean to locate structures of experience which everyone, upon reflection, could recognize as their own? But this is simply not so. By no means is everyone likely to recognize an original guilt and absolute responsibility, or a demand that I treat the other as counting for more than myself, or the ideal, achievable or not, of self-abnegation. Many are likely to respond that these are religious relics, that there is no guilt prior to the conception of freedom, that the ethical relation is a symmetrical one in which I may demand as well as give, and in which indignation at acts of injustice committed against myself is ethically justified.⁴⁰ Many will also claim that the "height of God" is not revealed to them only in the human face, or that it is not revealed to them anywhere at all.

If, on the other hand, the manner of Levinas' assertion is not descriptive but prescriptive, then one has the right to ask for justification, and it will not do—indeed, it is not just—to meet this demand with a rhetoric which implies that the demand itself is already unethical, as if failing to accord with Levinas were inherently and inevitably unjust. Thus, I would pose Derrida's question, and perhaps more urgently than he himself does: "Independent of its 'theological context' (an expression that Levinas would most likely reject) does not this entire discourse collapse?" (ED, p. 152/WD, p. 103). I believe that the answer to this is yes, but it does not follow that the discourse does in fact collapse. As a phenomenology of Judaism, it retains its validity and authority. This does not mean that Levinas' discourse can be relegated to the scrap-heap of outdated religious usages, or that it can be conveniently disposed of by setting it within its context. As a phenomenology of Judaism, it is a powerful voice to contend with. I only wanted to clarify the nature of this voice, against its own pretensions, before turning to a closer consideration of the voices that might be raised against its confinement of divinity.

The most obvious place to begin this consideration is with the very different relation that Levinas and Heidegger have towards *things*. Against Heidegger's sense of the graciousness of *Es gibt Sein*, which evokes awe and wonder before what-is as a whole (*das Seiende im Ganzen*),⁴¹ Levinas asserts "the mute and anonymous rustling of the *il y a*" (AE, p. 3/OB, p. 3), in a mood reminiscent of Roquentin's experience of the tree root in Sartre's *La Nausée*. Against Heidegger's obvious respect for the things in the world encountered by human beings,⁴² Levinas asserts that "things have no face; convertible, 'realizable', they have a price" (TeI, pp. 113–114/TI, p. 140). While Heidegger's descriptions of being touched by natural phenomena are almost always imbued with a quality of transcendence,⁴³ Levinas, although

he values "sensible qualities . . . the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset" (TeI, p. 108/TI, p. 135), nonetheless views them purely in terms of sensuous enjoyment. While Heidegger says that "beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness",⁴⁴ Levinas speaks of "the beautiful, whose essence is indifference, cold splendour and silence" (TeI, p. 167/TI, p. 193). And whereas Heidegger finds an aspect of the holy in the bond between a people and the landscape in which its destiny takes shape,⁴⁵ Levinas sees, in the relation to being which underlies this experience of the sacred, the origin of tyranny. Even if his association of Heidegger with the further description of this origin as lying "back in the pagan 'moods' (*états d'âme*), in the enrootedness in the earth, in the adoration that enslaved men can devote to their masters" (TeI, p. 17/TI, p. 47) is another example of irresponsible commentary, his basic questioning of the sacredness of place, and thus of the things that belong to a place, cannot be so simply dismissed.

One should not, moreover, be misled into thinking that Levinas' emphasis on need and enjoyment ultimately gives more value to "sensuous" human activities and the things bound up with them than does Heidegger's description of *Zeughaftigkeit* in *Being and Time*, or of "poetic dwelling" in later works. On the contrary, the involvement of things in the projects of a being that is constantly illuminated by the understanding (*not* theoretical comprehension) of being, such that this understanding, this disclosure, determines all of its activities to the extent that they are *human* activities, gives both these things and those activities a status above the sensuous, as this word is generally interpreted. Levinas' claim that "the world as a set of implements forming a system and suspended on the care of an existence anxious for its being . . . bears witness to a particular organization of labour in which 'foods' take on the signification of fuel in the economic machinery" and that "food can be interpreted as an implement (*utensile*) only in a world of exploitation" (TeI, p. 108/TI, p. 134) is, not to mince words, ludicrous. *Zeug* does not exclusively mean "implement"; it only means "stuff", not, however, *Stoff* as the indifferent matter posited by physics and by philosophies led by physics, but the everyday stuff that human beings encounter, the stuff of the world.

Levinas' misconstrual of this point rests in part on his equation of Heidegger's concept of *Sorge* with "the naked will to be" (TeI, p. 84/TI, p. 112), whereas *Sorge* is actually meant to name the structural unity of Dasein as a concernfully reflexive and self-projecting entity. Still, it is not insignificant that Heidegger here chooses a term whose everyday meaning is "worry" (Fr. *souci*), and therefore Levinas does not wholly miss the mark when he maintains, against Heidegger, that "to enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure—this is the human" (TeI, p. 107/TI, p. 133). The problem is that it is hard to see how this is a description of the human, as opposed to the animal. When Levinas says that "at the origin, there is a being gratified, a citizen of

paradise" (TeI, p. 118/TI, p. 144), he does not address the fact that this "origin" is always already past, and that this is why Heidegger's analysis of how *Dasein* is *zunächst* and *zumeist* begins with thrownness and falling, and develops in a way that is itself indebted to the Judaeo-Christian myth of the Fall. There is no actually present "primordial positivity of enjoyment"; "the gap between the animal and the human" does not lie in the fact that disquietude *can* trouble it (TeI, p. 119/TI, p. 145), but that it does so, from the beginning and always.

For Heidegger, it lies in the intrinsic connection between this disquietude and the special way in which human existence grasps itself, where the latter makes the former possible. Moreover, being cannot be equated with drive, and *Dasein* is not will to power with intelligence, not "natural" existence, as Levinas conceives of it.⁴⁶ Rather, its essential reference to being is what gives human existence the possibility of transcending the "natural", as the sphere of self-seeking utilization, of being established outside the realm of will,⁴⁷ in accord with a power which Heidegger, at one point, associates with love (Hb, p. 57/BW, p. 220). When, as in the later works, this reference is clearly and unambiguously conceived in terms of man as *Lichtung*, the space is cleared for the dimension of the sacred *within* the world, within life. Levinas, however, equates this "within" with "natural" existence, and can therefore view its sacralization only as a species of pagan idolatry. For him, by contrast, the holy resides only in that which, on his analysis, interrupts such existence: the face of the other, demanding justice.

It is on this point that mediation between Levinas and Heidegger is most difficult. Rather than asking directly how one might reach a decision between these two locations of divinity—a question which, I suspect, would quickly lead into a blind alley—perhaps it would be more fruitful to take an indirect route and ask what might prompt Levinas to set his face deliberately against the sacred as Heidegger articulates it. The answer is not hard to find. It lies in the disjunction between *le sacré* and *la sainteté*, between the sacred discovered in the sorts of phenomena that Heidegger speaks of, and the holy as linked to ethics. One has only to think of the 1945 film made by the Allies upon entering the death camps, in which at points the quiet, rustic beauty of certain villages is deliberately juxtaposed with the unspeakable horror of what lay on their doorsteps, a horror registered nowhere in the flowering hills, the still lakes and mountains, the charming facades of the houses.⁴⁸ Surely, this juxtaposition speaks as eloquently as the creatures on Heidegger's field-path?

However, one may still ask whether what it says necessarily contradicts the voices referred to earlier, which testify to a conception of the sacred in which there is a deep spiritual continuity between the elevating power of beauty, the respect for nature and for things, and sensitivity to human suffering. The existence of people who can feed their hearts on the beauty of natural things while closing them to the needs of others does not

demonstrate that any religiosity maintaining a connection between these forms of sensitivity is mistaken—no more than the existence of people who can combine tenderness towards their kin with cruelty towards strangers demonstrates an error in those others for whom love of the ones who are closest is experienced as preparation for the love that extends further. Rather, in both cases, from the perspective of those who apprehend such continuities, it is the ones who do not that are mistaken, that have failed to understand something.

Moreover, if the relation to divinity is excluded from every point of human existence except that at which it suffers—and justice becomes a question only where life suffers—then does this not make nonsense, and a monstrous nonsense at that, of the relation between existence and the divine? It does not merely create a problem for theoretical reflection on this issue, i.e., for theodicy, but violates an expectation of how God must be, a religious expectation prior to theology. Levinas frequently refers to Plato's *epekeina tes ousias*, but while Plato's idea of the good was that of a desire echoed in the world of becoming, a light that organizes and gives life to the things that are and in relation to which the imperfection of the world—its transience, its suffering, its injustice—are to be measured, in Levinas' version there is nothing good but the ethical relation itself, the obligation to answer the need of the other. The need of the other, however, consists in his deprivation of goods belonging to a life which in itself, on Levinas' analysis, contains no dimension of the holy. Where the only locus of divinity is found in the desire for justice, and where the desire for justice revolves around the interruption of life by need, is there any room for the idea of a kingdom of heaven (always distant, to be sure) where, within justice, life itself could be holy? For all his failings, Heidegger does help point to a *life*, a way of being in which the traces of divinity can be found not only in the negations of being, in distress, abandonment and sacrifice, but also in its affirmations, in wonder, in releasement, in celebration.

Similar points could be made about Levinas' depreciating analysis of art, as it relates to the role of art in Heidegger's sense of the sacred. Levinas' general distrust of the image, his assessment of it as a shadow of reality and his consequent rejection of its capacity to express or reveal,⁴⁹ is not my theme here. For these features of Levinas' analysis of art can be challenged *without* challenging the elements in his account that cast the most suspicion on the way Heidegger speaks of art in the passages where the question seems to impinge on the question of the sacred. The objection, for instance, that art can actually express the face-to-face relation more tellingly than plain speech, a point that Levinas himself eventually admits, at least with respect to poetry,⁵⁰ leaves intact much of his critique of art as linked to things and to enjoyment, as lacking seriousness and as constituting a flight from reality. This is simply because the *sorts* of art works Levinas seems to have in mind here are not the sort that express realities relevant to the

ethical, as he conceives it. They do not include, for instance and to use an extreme example, the images produced by the victims of concentration camps—images of fragility and pain, of bodies and spirits shattered by violence and inhumanity.⁵¹ And these are also not the sorts of works that Heidegger has in mind in his best-known writings on the subject—for instance, in “The Origin of the Work of Art”.

Rather, Heidegger’s analysis, in this essay, of the “essence” of art as manifest in the Greek temple and in Van Gogh’s painting is oriented towards the same sorts of works that Levinas takes as his point of departure when he says, “The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image” (TeI, p. 114/TI, p. 140). For the most part, Levinas’ analysis treats art as the object of aesthetic enjoyment, and as belonging to a form of life much like the “aesthetic stage” described by Kierkegaard in *Either/Or*. Again, this is a description which rejects any sense of the sacred as experienced in and through the way human existence is touched by things, in the sublimity or gentleness of nature, for instance, or the significance of artifacts. Thus, the difference between Levinas and Heidegger on this point is ultimately rooted in their very different relations to both non-human entities and to human existence itself.

I have already stated what I find questionable in Levinas’ stance here, and will not labour the point. Instead, I would like, finally, to make some brief comments on a theme in Levinas’ writings which is in fact not represented at all in Heidegger’s thought: his analysis of the feminine and of the erotic. As is well known, *Totality and Infinity* identifies the “feminine face” (TeI, p. 124/TI, p. 150)—perceived as “the Other”, naturally—with “the interiority of the Home” (TeI, p. 128/TI, p. 155). And this identification once more raises the suspicion that, in spite of his definition of “the face” as “the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (TeI, p. 21/TI, p. 50), Levinas is actually all too prone to making assertions which, in the blindness of their partiality, demonstrate an insensitivity to that more subtle form of violence which does not employ physical power but which nonetheless robs the other of his or her true identity. By “true” identity, I mean here someone’s identity as a *self*, rather than as an appearance anticipated by someone else so as to be encountered purely within the horizon of that person’s concerns. This impression is reinforced by the simple offensiveness of some of Levinas’ descriptions of the feminine, for instance as “a delightful lapse in being (*une défaillance délicate dans l’être*)” (TeI, p. 129/TI, p. 155).

These concerns cannot be dissolved by appealing to a difference between “the feminine”—“the Woman”, as Levinas also says (TeI, p. 128/TI, p. 155)—and “women”, as if concepts that are supposed to articulate the essence of something could be wholly absolved from the specific context and manner in which that something has been grasped. If they could, then one would

have the right to refuse any interpretation which attempted to trace what is meant by such concepts back to a particular orientation towards particular beings. But this is a right which Levinas does not grant to Heidegger, and there is no reason why it should be granted to Levinas himself.

Against Levinas' conception for the feminine as the Other, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, in *The Second Sex*:

it is striking that [Levinas] deliberately takes a man's point of view, disregarding the reciprocity of subject and object. When he writes that woman is mystery, he implies that she is mystery for man. Thus, his description, which is intended to be objective, is in fact an assertion of masculine privilege.⁵²

In response to this objection, Robert Bernasconi remarks that:

it would be possible to argue that by writing of the Other of man as a woman, without exploring what it might mean for the Other of a woman to be a man, Levinas was simply preserving the asymmetry of a relation that necessarily excludes reciprocity. In other words, it could be argued that in terms of the social or face to face relation, it would have been more objectionable for Levinas to attempt to write from the perspective of a woman.⁵³

The problem, though, is that, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas shows no consciousness of writing *as a man*, and thus of "writing of the Other of man as a woman". It seems, rather, that he is writing *as man*, in precisely the sense of this term that de Beauvoir criticized in *The Second Sex*.

In any case, what is disturbing in his account is not simply the fact that he writes from the perspective of a man. He can hardly do otherwise. What strikes some readers—including this one—as offensive is rather the details of his characterization, which, *when asserted in a certain manner*, tend to deface, demean and confine this other, where such a tendency is not (I hope) essential to writing from the perspective of a man. The qualification emphasized in this last sentence is important. There may be nothing offensive about a man describing his wife as a gentle being who greets him in the welcome of his home. But Levinas' account is supposed to be phenomenology, not biography. These are not descriptions of a woman; they are assertions about "the Woman", and it is as such that they are offensive.

The above-quoted remark by Bernasconi, however, is only a rather tentative aside in an article whose main purpose is actually to question the assumptions in the cultural partiality of Levinas' thought. It is in much the same spirit that Luce Irigaray, in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love",⁵⁴ challenges Levinas' description of the erotic relation, which is of course bound up with his notion of the feminine. Irigaray

notes that in the pleasure (*volupté*) of which Levinas speaks, the feminine other is not a subject, but "merely represents that which sustains desire" (p. 110). Far from recognizing, in the act of physical love, the face of the beloved who also loves, Levinas "abandons the feminine other, leaves her to sink, in particular into the darkness of a pseudoanimality, in order to return to his responsibilities in the world of men-amongst-themselves", and "on this point, his philosophy falls radically short of ethics" (p. 113). Levinas also "knows nothing of communion in pleasure" (p. 110). Without recognition or communion, there is naturally no possibility that the relation between lovers could be divinized. But "if these gestures of ultimate relations between living humans are not a privileged approach to God, who is he?" Irigaray asks. And what, in this approach to divinity which shuns all mysticism, is the point of flesh, except to commit sacrileges (p. 116)?

Similar concerns underlay my suggestion that Levinas leaves no room for the holiness of existence, and that this poses a problem for the relation between existence and divinity. With respect to the erotic, all I wish to add to Irigaray's critique is some further emphasis on a point that is implicitly recognized in her objections: that Levinas' description of the erotic relation takes no account of the version of this relation in which one person relates to another as to an *individual* and in the most concrete possible way. In these versions, what is wanted and touched is not "merely" flesh, and not femininity or masculinity as such. It is, rather, *this* person, in the utter uniqueness of his flesh, which can in no way be separated from the uniqueness of who he is as a subject. It is also to this incarnate subject that one relates in the desire to give pleasure, a desire of which there is no trace in Levinas' description. What hallows this relation is the impossibility of substitution, the fact that what I want is *him*, and no one else, and that what he wants is *me*. It is this that "spiritualizes" the intense physicality of the relation, lifting it beyond all vulgarity and beyond any need for modesty.

It is obvious that the tension between virginity and voluptuosity (TeI, p. 236/TI, p. 258), immodesty and exhibition (TeI, p. 240/TI, p. 262) in Levinas' description of sexual encounter reproduces some of the saddest and most common gestures in the history of male representation of the feminine. What is perhaps less obvious, but no less important, is that, when this description is related to the experience in which two individual subjects desire one another and recognize themselves in the desire of the other, it also appears as a profanation, and even as, I would venture to say, indecent.

I have suggested, in this article, that the exclusions characterizing Levinas' conception of divinity point to a manner of thought and assertion which, contrary to his own idea of justice, is not open to the saying of the genuinely other. Levinas' banishment of the divine from all relations except the ethical one, where ethics is understood as discontinuous with the rest of existence, includes a delegitimation of any form of religiosity which would claim to relate to the divine through a relation to, for instance, beauty, whether in

nature or in art, or to non-human things, or to place, or to other subjects in relations like that of desire. But the legitimacy of this delegitimation is itself questionable. Its claim to being phenomenology is not justified, since it does not grant proper attention to the *different* appearances of that to which it addresses itself. Nor, in that case, is its claim to justice justified, since it does not allow itself to be addressed by these differences, as openness to the saying of the other would demand. Levinas' conception of the feminine is symptomatic of this lack of openness. It indicates a thought which remains within the circle of its own anticipations, while maintaining, implicitly, that that circle is all-encompassing, and that its vantage-point provides all that is needed to comprehend and judge what is not like itself. The subtle form of violence to which the title of this section alludes consists primarily in this gesture, with its failure to pay heed to the other, and therefore to the other's relation to the wholly Other.

Notes

- 1 See "Désacralisation et désensorcellement", in *Du sacré au saint: cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1977), pp. 82–121.
- 2 *Der Feldweg* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1986), p. 4. "The Pathway", trans. Thomas O'Meara, in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), p. 70.
- 3 "Philosophie, justice et amour", in *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991), p. 135.
- 4 "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Lévinas", in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), p. 214; henceforth ED. "Violence and Metaphysics", in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 145; henceforth VM.
- 5 Alphonse de Waelhens, for example, argued for such contingency in "La philosophie de Heidegger et le nazisme", *Les Temps Modernes*, 2 (1947), pp. 115–127. More recently, Richard Rorty has advocated maintaining a distinction between the man and the philosophy. See "Taking Philosophy Seriously", *New Republic*, (April 11, 1988), pp. 31–34; and "Another Possible World", in *Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art and Technology*, eds. Karsten Harries and Christoph Jamme (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1994), pp. 34–40.
- 6 See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *L'ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Minuit, 1988); Victor Farias, *Heidegger und der Nationalsozialismus*, trans. Klaus Laermann (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1989), and the preface to this edition by Jürgen Habermas, "Heidegger—Werk und Weltanschauung"; Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990)—to name only a few.
- 7 See, for example, Wolin's *The Politics of Being*, pp. 8–11.
- 8 Which, I believe, Heidegger's reflections do, in spite of his occasional objections to the contrary in *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962]; see e.g., pp. 68, 210–211). I agree with Robert Bernasconi's suggestion, in "The Double Concept of Philosophy and the Place of Ethics in *Being and Time*", that languages are already shaped by ethical meanings, which cannot be eradicated by simple edict. *Research in Phenomenology*, 18 (1988), p. 49.

- 9 E.g., Karl Löwith, "On Martin Heidegger's Political Decisionism and Friedrich Gogarten's Theological Decisionism", in *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 159–169.
- 10 Wolin, *The Politics of Being*, pp. 53–63.
- 11 Jürgen Habermas, "The Undermining of Western Rationalism through the Critique of Metaphysics: Martin Heidegger", in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), p. 140.
- 12 I use this latter term deliberately, with full awareness of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics and his attempt to "overcome" it. I do not accept, however, that Heidegger's thought represents an overcoming of *every form* of metaphysics. On this point, see my "The Philosophical Bases of Heidegger's Politics", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 25 (1994), pp. 258–259.
- 13 Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994.
- 14 Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- 15 I have also argued for such a reading of these texts in "Heidegger's Appropriation of Schelling", *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 32 (1994), pp. 421–448.
- 16 Werner Marx, in fact, employs one of these elements, "being towards death", in precisely this way, in *Towards a Phenomenological Ethics*, trans. Ashraf Noor (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
- 17 *Ein Brief über den "Humanismus"*, in *Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit* (Bern: A. Francke, 1947), p. 75; henceforth Hb. "A Letter on Humanism", trans. Frank A. Capuzzi and J. Glenn Gray, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978); henceforth BW.
- 18 For one such reaction, see John Caputo, "Heidegger's Scandal: Thinking and the Essence of the Victim", in *The Heidegger Case*, eds. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 265–281.
- 19 In *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition*, Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center (Duquesne, 1992), pp. 57–90.
- 20 *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), p. 108; henceforth Tel. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 134; henceforth TI.
- 21 *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 71; henceforth AE. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 55; henceforth OB.
- 22 In "The Ethics of Suspicion", Robert Bernasconi notes that Levinas uses this image on at least nine different occasions in *Otherwise than Being, Research in Phenomenology*, 20 (1991), p. 4 and p. 16, n. 2.
- 23 Keeping in mind that, as Derrida points out, 'by *existent* (*existant*), in effect, Levinas almost if not always understands the being which is man, being in the form of *Dasein*' (ED, p. 133/WD, p. 88).
- 24 C. D. Keyes, in "An Evaluation of Levinas' Critique of Heidegger", also uses the term "irresponsibility" with reference to one of Levinas' critical comments on Heidegger. *Research in Phenomenology*, 2 (1972), p. 133.
- 25 Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1993.
- 26 See *Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 181–185. I discuss this point at length in *Forms of Transcendence: Heidegger and Medieval Mystical Theology*, forthcoming, SUNY Press. See also Klaus Brinkman, "Heidegger and Jaspers on Plato's Idea of the Good", in *Heidegger and Jaspers*, ed. Alan M. Olson (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), pp. 111–125.

- 27 "An Evaluation of Levinas' Critique of Heidegger", p. 132.
- 28 Einführung in die Metaphysik (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1987), p. 124. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 162–163.
- 29 See note 18.
- 30 Quoted by Caputo, pp. 266, 277.
- 31 In *Totality and Infinity*, he calls rhetoric "the position of him who approaches his neighbour with ruse" (TeI, p. 42/TI, p. 70), and claims that "justice coincides with the overcoming of rhetoric" (TeI, p. 44/TI, p. 72).
- 32 Stephen G. Smith makes a similar point about Levinas and rhetoric, arguing that "his entire philosophy is deliberately and self-consciously rhetorical", in a positive sense. "Reason as One For Another", in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), pp. 67–69, p. 71, n. 41. Cf. also David E. Klemm's discussion of the various voices in *Totality and Infinity* through which "Levinas actually performs his theme rather than merely speaking about it". "Levinas' Phenomenology of the Other and Language as the Other of Phenomenology", *Man and World*, 22 (1989), pp. 406ff.
- 33 Robert Bernasconi makes this point in "Habermas and Arendt on the Philosopher's 'Error': Tracking the Diabolical in Heidegger", (*Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 14 [1991], pp. 3–24), where he says: "Heidegger's failings, which extend beyond the political and the moral to thinking itself, reflect not just on him, or on a school of philosophy, but on the very ideal of the Western philosophical tradition as a way of life. This idea constitutes a conviction about philosophy so deeply held that only a philosopher's apparent blindness to events as cataclysmic as those witnessed in Europe in the middle of the century could destroy it. Here is an end of philosophy, of philosophy's self-conception" (pp. 20–21).
- 34 "Simone Weil contre la Bible", in *Difficile Liberté*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p. 183.
- 35 "Heidegger, Gagarine et nous", in *Difficile Liberté*, p. 301.
- 36 "It is a matter of an existence that accepts itself as natural, for which its place in the sun, its soil, its place orient all meaning. It is a matter of *pagan* existence." *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967), p. 170.
- 37 "Dieu et la philosophie", *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 30/31 (1975), p. 127; henceforth DP. "God and Philosophy", trans. Richard A. Cohen and Alphonso Lingis, in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 186; henceforth GP.
- 38 An example is the model of dialogue presented in "A Dialogue on Language", the caution with which he addresses the other here, with an awareness of the limitations imposed by the definiteness of every language. In *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 1–54.
- 39 See "Questions et réponses", *Le Nouvel Commerce*, 36/37 (1977), p. 72.
- 40 I am not overlooking the role of *le tiers* in Levinas' later conception of justice, whose presence introduces comparison and judgement in relation to the need for equity. In "Questions et réponses", he says: "The word 'justice' is actually much more appropriate where what is required is not my 'subordination' to the other, but 'equity'" (p. 66). With the appearance of the third person, opposition to another may be justified—but *still not* on behalf of myself. Rather, for Levinas, "my resistance begins when the evil which [the other] does me is done to a third who is also my neighbour" ("Questions et réponses", p. 68).
- 41 "Postscript" to "What is Metaphysics?" trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick, in *Existence and Being* (London: Vision Press, 1968), pp. 384–386.

- 42 See, for example, "The Thing", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 163–186; esp. p. 182.
- 43 E.g., in "The Thinker as Poet", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 1–14.
- 44 "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes", in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), p. 42; "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 56.
- 45 See Hölderlin's *Hymnen "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"*, Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 39 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1980), p. 84.
- 46 For an explication of Levinas' understanding of being, existence and essence as realities opposed to the good, see Catherine Chalié, "Ontologie et mal", in *Emmanuel Lévinas: L'éthique comme philosophie première*, Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle sous la direction de Jean Greisch et Jacques Rolland (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1993), pp. 63–78.
- 47 See "Addendum" to "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 82; and "What are Poets For?", *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 119–121.
- 48 "Memory of the Camps", PBS Frontline Series (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1985). The film was made in 1945, but only discovered 40 years later, in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London. The sequences to which I am referring were filmed around Belsen and Ebensee. Speaking of prisoners in the camp at Ebensee, one line in the script runs, "They were able to see the mountains, but what use are mountains without food?" (Most of the soundtracks for the film are missing, but the script for the narration was found. In the *Frontline* version, this script is read by Trevor Howard.)
- 49 Expressed most fully in "Reality and its Shadow", trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader*, pp. 129–143.
- 50 See John Llewellyn's discussion of this point in *The Middle Voice of Ecological Conscience* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 109–113.
- 51 Such themes were also present in the 1937 Nazi exhibition, "Entartete Kunst". Examples are Lovis Corinth's "Ecce Homo" (1925), Christoph Voll's "Vier Knaben und ein kleines Kind" (1919/24), and Ludwig Gies' "Kruzifixus" (ca. 1921). The grotesque realities of war are also brutally portrayed in some of the paintings by Otto Dix hung in this exhibition, although the organizers clearly did not understand Dix's attempt, influenced by Nietzsche, to reflect coldly rather than judge. This incomprehension is evident in the pamphlet accompanying the exhibition which, with obvious reference to Dix's "Kriegskrüppel" (1920) and "Der Schützengraben" (1920/23), condemns art that destroys respect for the heroic military virtues. Reproductions of these pieces can be found in "*Entartete Kunst: Das Schicksal der Avantgarde im Nazi-Deutschland*", ed. Stephanie Barron (New York, NY: Museum Associates, Los Angeles Museum of Art, 1992); p. 37 (Gies), p. 38 (Corinth), pp. 57 and 373 (Dix), p. 369 (Voll). The text, in the original pamphlet, directed towards the section in which the above-mentioned works by Dix were displayed, is reproduced on pp. 370–372 of this book. Two books containing selections of holocaust art are: *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940–1945*, with essays by Miriam Novitch, Lucy Dawidowicz, Tom L. Freudenheim (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981); and Janet Butler and Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust* (New York, NY: The Rutledge Press, 1981).
- 52 Trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), p. xvi, n. 3.
- 53 "Who is my neighbour?" in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition*, pp. 7–8.
- 54 Trans. Margaret Whitford, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 109–118.

PHILOSOPHY AND INSPIRATION

Chalier's Levinas

Michael B. Smith

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Emmanuel Levinas has been the lasting inspiration of the work of the French philosopher Catherine Chalier. Nearly all of her publications intersect with his thought to some extent. Chalier obtained her “agrégation” in philosophy in 1971, and ten years later completed her Doctorat d’Etat.¹ Since 1982, she has published 9 books on Judaic and Levinasian themes, collaborated on 6 collective works, and published some 30 articles.

The themes of her works are broadly reflected in their titles: for example, *Sagesse des sens: Le regard et l’écoute dans la tradition hébraïque*.² As the theme is developed, one begins to sense the infinitely more, the “world within a grain of sand.” In *L’Alliance avec la nature*,³ which opens with a “commonplace,” the alienation of Jews (“qui n’avaient plus que l’étude pour demeure”) from nature and their orientation toward the Book, an antithesis quickly nuances that not unfounded thesis. Some of the Jewish holidays that were originally tied to the seasons began to be associated more strongly with historical events. The absolutely fundamental nature of the inquiry soon emerges: the enigma of the mixture of immanence and transcendence. Through a careful consideration of the meaning of the *mitzvot*, and of those biblical passages that indicate that the covenant was not only with the Jews or even mankind but with all of nature,⁴ it becomes apparent that it is not a question of turning away from nature in favor of the Torah, but of raising nature to the level of Torah, and of seeing the trace of the infinite in the finite.

Since none of her works have yet found their way into English, here is my own translation of the opening paragraph of her study titled *L’Histoire promise*:⁵

L'imminence si fréquente d'une nuit interdite d'aurore menace les êtres singuliers qui, soumis aux violences de l'histoire profane ou s'efforçant

d'en infléchir le cours dans un sens plus heureux, sont condamnés par elle au suspens du souffle qui anime leurs vies brèves.

How frequently the imminent threat of endless night imperils solitary souls, who, passively subjected to the violence of profane history or struggling to redirect its course in a more felicitous direction, are condemned to the suppression of the breath that sustained their brief lives. Even the most noble causes fall beneath the unjust rule that governs the course of human events. History fails to reserve their own unique places for the men and women who, together, constitute the long chain of this evolution. The very idea of such a chain, and of the precious nature of each link, brings a derisive smile to the lips of those who see in history nothing but the moments in which heroism takes precedence over the sanctity of every life, however humble. If all that counts is the relentless struggle for recognition and power, all that is worthy of the register of history are the events that lead up to its visible triumph, be it littered with broken, soon to be forgotten lives. Even the indispensable and beautiful cause of freedom and justice falls beneath the ruthless rule of history.

It is the refusal on Catherine Chalier's part to speak in a voice that would feign indifference to the human condition that is reflected in her style, and the communication of that non-indifference sets her apart as an interpreter of Levinas.

L'histoire promise does not skirt the issue of the insufficiency of explanations of history by recourse to a divine plan. It thematizes the difficulty. Although it observes that "saintliness does not need glory," we, as philosophers, are bound to try to move our understanding forward even amidst the moral scandals and intellectual impasses of our time. After Auschwitz, what theodicy?

Chalier's latest book, which I have just read, is *L'inspiration du philosophe: "L'amour de la sagesse" et sa source prophétique*.⁶ The book is a carefully ordered meditation on the relation between philosophy (as we know it in the West, our philosophy that we have inherited from the Greeks, or "Athens" for short) and the Hebraic tradition of enlightenment through the hearing of a voice and the transmission of that voice through the prophets. What this amounts to is, of course, to a large extent the examination of the two sides of Levinas's work. He himself, as we know, always wanted to keep these two facets of his work separate, even using different publishers, as he points out, for the two. He never adduces scripture to make a philosophical point (or at least not in the guise of proof or substantiation of any sort). In an earlier work specifically devoted to presenting Levinas's work, titled *Levinas: l'utopie de l'humain*,⁷ Chalier already explores this question in a much more succinct manner, in the her chapter "Hebrew and Greek." Her findings there are not at variance with her thesis in the work we are now

considering, although the format of the earlier work restricts the elaboration and supporting arguments that could be brought forward.

Chalier takes this separation as her theme in this work, which is dedicated to the memory of Levinas, who died on December 25, 1995. Her liminary quote, "... the profound rift in a world attached at once to the philosophers and the prophets," is from Levinas's book, *Totality and Infinity*.⁸ In that context, Levinas associates philosophy with the True, and prophecy with the Good; but he is not content to leave these two notions in a symmetric repose: philosophy/truth, prophecy/goodness. His constant thesis is that our experience of the infinite, the beyond thought or the absolutely other, is experience *par excellence*. This Cartesian moment of the thought of infinity "overflows thought in a wholly different sense than does opinion," writes Levinas, insisting that there is no dogmatism here that would make the experience of the infinite anti-philosophical per se, by being an infringement on philosophy's autonomy. He calls this infinity "more objective than objectivity."

This most recent book of Chalier's challenges the refusal of inspiration by reason. Is an ontological rationality the only possible rationality? Or can there be an inspired rationality, or a rationality of transcendence?

In translating, in the subtitle of her work, the word philosophy into its component parts at the outset, Chalier makes the point that before the unambiguous triumph of the concept, philosophy was larger. It was the search for truth, but also and perhaps as a necessary precondition, the leading of an exemplary life. One can distinguish a weak claim here, that the Greek philosophers' holistic mission was to find the best way to live our lives, and a stronger one (which appears in Pascal, but also in J. Halevi), that the heart has its reasons that reason does not understand, or that one must love in order to understand the most "elevated" matters.

One of the functions of Chalier's problematic is to bring this issue to a head – this contrast between the neutrality and autonomy of reason, which is sometimes held to be the essence of philosophy, and the view that while reason may occupy the middle ground of philosophy, it is neither its alpha nor its omega. One can scarcely refrain from contrasting Anglo-Saxon (or analytic) and continental philosophy (but Chalier does not do so) in this perspective.

I shall make an initial hypothesis, of an historical nature, that has some bearing on this question. In the Western world at least, it seems that religion, philosophy and science emanated from a common amorphous ancestor. Pythagorism, for example, was at once a cult and a philosophy. Lucretius's *De Natura Rerum*, from the first century B.C.E., already claims that Epicurean atomism can free men's minds from the fears of superstition, although in fact science and philosophy were not yet distinct entities. In the Middle Ages, knowledge was seen as too limited to comprehend divine truth, and to stand in need of supplemental faith; in a countervailing Renaissance

movement, knowledge (as in Francis Bacon's thought) becomes power over nature, a burgeoning technology. Philosophy, between religion and science, problematizes knowledge as epistemology.

But Athens is not Jerusalem. If the distinction between religion and philosophy is clear when we are thinking in terms of religion *qua* Christianity and of philosophy *qua* Greek, it becomes far less so if religion, as in the case of Levinas and Chalier, is Judaism. It is well known that the role of faith in Judaism is not analogous to its role in Christianity. One reason for this is because faith plays a *defining* role in the latter case, since to be a Christian is to believe in the divinity of Christ, while Jews may be said to be "over-determined" before the letter.

To return now to *L'Inspiration du Philosophe*, Chalier points out in her preface that the goal is not to declare a victory of the philosopher over the prophet, nor vice versa. Such an enterprise, she assures us, would be "vain and violent."⁹ But to consent to this tension is not an illegitimate acceptance of the irrational on the part of philosophers: it is rather "the overthrow of the idea that men, and especially institutions, have of the essence of philosophy and prophecy." She then proceeds to elucidate the major themes and movement of Levinas's philosophy. It is a movement through and beyond the dialectic of the Same, ever assimilating the Other in the guise of "grasping" or understanding, towards an asymmetrical relation in which the Other remains other, haunts, troubles, keeps wakeful and vigilant the Same, which would otherwise sink into coincidence with itself: the bad ideal of philosophy. Alteration is the other person, but also the absolute Other of God. A God not contaminated by being, beyond onto-theo-logy, otherwise than being. Chalier defines the question her book seeks to answer in the following terms.

... whether ontological rationality, which constitutes philosophy, is the only one that can be conceived, or whether it is possible to legitimate the point of view of an inspired rationality, or a rationality of transcendence, without, however, relinquishing the concern for universality.¹⁰

Living the tension between philosophy and prophecy is better than "a discourse of exclusion." Chalier further suggests that the desire to defend the purity of the essence of philosophy may mask a position of power. It seems clear that she is alluding to the structure of the profession of university professors of philosophy in France, though the implications are broader. Chalier distinguishes, in passing, the language of prophecy from that of poetry, while granting kinship. The Logos is not capable of knowing "individual suffering," while the prophets do not authorize such forgetfulness. Nor is the rift between philosophy and prophecy just academic: it is displayed in the history of the century, in the "ignominy that man imposes on his fellow man, in the name of barbaric causes." But cannot philosophy,

without ceasing to be philosophy, bring man to an awareness of a source of meaningfulness that speaks of the promise of the advent of the human in being?

Chalier emphasizes the wisdom/knowledge distinction in order to reinforce the thesis of philosophy as love of wisdom, hence of a way of life, not just a conceptual endeavor.¹¹ She applies a midrash (from the *Midrash Raba*) on the Tower of Babel episode (Genesis 11:4 et seq.): it is a warning not to leave the "Orient," which in Hebrew is also origin (*quedem*), or, according to Rabbi Eleazar bar Shimeon, to leave the Ancient One of the World (*Quadmuto*). Chalier moves the text in the direction of a refusal to recognize *divine alterity*, and subsequently any alterity. Here we have an echo of Levinas's doctrine of self as Same, and its lack of recognition of Otherness or Alterity would be the fate of a philosophical language that invents its autonomous verb, rejecting all others as non-philosophical.

Closely allied to this theme is that of the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Levinas treats this theme extensively in his *Time of the Nations*, in a Talmudic lesson titled: *The Translation of the Scripture*.¹² It was necessary and good to accept the language of the Greeks – i.e. the inspired wisdom of the Hebrews accepts the risk of being expressed in the language of philosophy – but not their wisdom – because that wisdom does not accept the possibility that the existence of multiple interpretations could signify anything but their imperfection and remoteness from truth.

The multiplicity and irreplaceable value of interpretations (which is typical of Talmudic study) is valorized in Chalier's study, which speaks of the "nobleness of the hermeneutic task." In the tradition of Talmudic study, the consecrated phrase is: "These and those are the words of the living God." But Chalier is far from depriving the Greek *Logos* of its truth, in favor of the Hebrew *Davar* (=word and/or thing). The former, present in all its anteriority and mystery in the fragments of Heraclitus, was progressively abandoned by the philosophical tradition in the West. But although it is true that Plato exiles poets from his City, he does call upon the philosophical equivalent of Mythos, allegory, in attempting to understand the workings of love and the soul.

Chalier's next chapter, "The Saying and the Said," treats the question of the link between reason and ontology. It opens with the Nietzschean contrast between Apollonian clarity and Dionysian emotion and disorder. This points in the direction of the verbal austerity (a severe asceticism of words) often preferred in philosophy. Some philosophers, Spinoza among them, consider that words and images stand between us and the true essence of things. Words and images are "external," and a hindrance to the ideal of transparency.

The argument proceeds, studded with quotes from Levinas, midrash and the Bible, to argue in favor of a kind of reason that would be open to "inspiration." Inspiration is understood on the analogy with breathing (the

Hebrew "ruah": breath, wind or spirit). The inspiration being described is from the Other to the other, i.e. from God to us in a form that becomes as personal to us as we ourselves are unique, enabling us to pass on that inspiration, but in an inimitably personal form, to the other person.

As an eruption into Western philosophy, Levinas is quite untimely. Although he does not fail to comment on the philosophical movements by which he is surrounded, there are no deep affinities between his metaphysics and French existential phenomenology, and even less with structuralism, cultural anthropology, Lacan's neo-Freudian thought, and postmodernism. At the heart of his work we have a critique of ontology and a return to metaphysics. What Levinas gives us is a new metaphysics, based on the contrast between totality and infinity, and positing the primacy of ethics. It is cruelly ironic that the one twentieth-century philosopher with whom Levinas's work does have connections, Martin Heidegger, became a Nazi. Levinas's work is to be situated along the line of German existential phenomenology. His early studies of Edmund Husserl and his later critique of Heidegger are the moments of his thought that engage the Western philosophical tradition most closely. That aspect of his work has been examined by Jacques Rolland, Marlène Zarader and Alain David, among others.

But that is not the approach taken by Chalier. Chalier, as I have said, places Levinas within the tradition of Jewish thought. This gives her work a coherence lacking in other approaches, because it allows her to present his work as whole, centered within itself as it were. But her approach is not regressive: she does not reduce Levinas's thought to some original elements that would be the original units, somehow, of a Levinasian synthesis. It is rather the case that Chalier, as both a European philosopher and a Jew well versed in the Judaic heritage, is able to present Levinas's thought in its simple specificity. Although her approach does not explore Levinas from the point of view of the phenomenological tradition in the way others attempt to do, it may itself be called phenomenological, in that it follows the Husserlian principle of respecting the specific "evidence" of its realm, viz. the thought of Levinas.

On the other hand, paradoxically, there is a sense in which the unity of Levinas's work is most evident in its dichotomy. That is what is most proper to it, and most central. Its specificity, like that of so much of European Jewry, is its cultural overlap, and the resultant inner split – as exemplified in the "gespaltete Seelen" or split souls of the sixteenth-century *marranos* or *conversos* of Spain. I will venture to suggest that Levinas's originality is the continuation of a phenomenon mentioned by Michel de Certeau in his introduction to *The Mystic Fable*:¹³

Just as the massive adoption of German culture by the Jews of the nineteenth century made possible theoretic innovations and an exceptional intellectual productivity, the upsurge of *mystics* in the sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries was often the effect of the Jewish difference in the usage of a Catholic idiom.

I do not wish to imply that Levinas is a mystic, nor that a Jewish approach to Levinas is more valid than a phenomenological one. I merely wanted to impart a sense of the relation of Chalier's work to Levinas's. Both Chalier and Levinas are "bilingual," conversant in the idioms of both Athens and Jerusalem. But just as Yiddish began as an attempt to communicate with the local inhabitants and evolved into a new particularism, so Levinas's philosophy, for all its bilingualism, ends up practicing, according to his felicitous phrase, an "indiscretion vis-à-vis of the ineffable" that contrives to suggest what neither component idiom can say severally. To the question the preceding considerations might raise, as to whether the unity of Levinas's thought is best grasped from within Judaism or from without, I would tender a Hegelian "both."

It would not be difficult to criticize Chalier's treatment of Levinas as being uncritical. And it would not be untrue to say that Chalier's works are "works of piety." But I would not want them to be different. Chalier's are among the few books of their type I tend to re-read, not because I have not understood, but because they provide a medium in which thought and spirituality seem happy to be together. Their style gives access to a certain mental temper in which a Messianic peace seems, if not immanent, at least not impossible; a peace not to be confused, as Levinas points out and Chalier emphasizes, with the artificial peace of churches and synagogues that too often promulgate a peace that might more accurately be rendered as "Leave me in peace, all you wretched ones of the earth."

Chalier's style is more rhetorical than Levinas's. She brings out the very condensed meanings of the latter, giving them breathing space, turning them loose in a larger world so that we may see how they behave in this new space. The concatenation of conjunctions in Chalier is not as marked as in most philosophical prose, but the gait is vigorous and assured as it moves from theme to theme. Still, at times I am left wondering whether I should like her work as much as I do. Her argument in favor of philosophy's discourse being open to its other, prophecy, is perhaps more pertinent to her own work than to Levinas's. Levinas, seeing the structure of receptivity as it awaited him with all its restrictions, accepted the dichotomy of scripture and prophecy more willingly than does Chalier. The latter, thematizing this difficulty, has produced a work that may in part be a reflection of, and on, the difficulties she has encountered within a university system that has been less than welcoming to her. Hence, perhaps, her inclusive or even conciliatory discourse on inspiration and philosophy – a balm to repair a broken world.

Though much of Chalier's work is a restatement of Levinas's philosophy, often against a background of Judaic thought, her style and emphasis are

very distantly her own. Marie-Anne Lescouret, in her useful biography of Levinas,¹⁴ refers to her as "l'une de ses plus constantes et fidèles exégètes." In conversation with Levinas, I once alluded to Chalier as "un de vos disciples." He corrected me: "Non, c'est une amie." At once closer and more independent.

Notes

- 1 Catherine Chalier. *Judaïsme et altérité*, (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1982). That same year, Verdier also republished Challier's *Figures du féminin. Lecture d'Emmanuel Lévinas*, which had appeared some months earlier in the series, "Questions," directed by J. Rolland, (Paris: *La Nuit surveillée*, 1982).
- 2 Catherine Chalier. *Wisdom of the Senses: Looking and Listening in the Hebraic Tradition*. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).
- 3 Catherine Chalier. *The Covenant with Nature*. (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1989), p. 11.
- 4 Cf., e.g., Gen. 9:10 and Jer. 33:25.
- 5 *The Promised History*. (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1992), p. 9. but since the rhythmic qualities of her periodic *incipit* are only indistinctly reflected in English, I give as much as in the original.
- 6 *The Philosopher's Inspirations: "The Love of Wisdom" and its prophetic source*. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996, p. 9.
- 7 *Levinas: The Utopia of the Human*. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), p. 24.
- 8 *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. by A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, n.d. [1969]; *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961).
- 9 *L'inspiration du philosophe*, p. 10.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.
- 11 Spinoza, though underestimating the importance of scripture, does insist on philosophy's being a modification in our way of desiring and wishing, not just thinking. See Chalier's a study on Spinoza, which comprises the first half of her *Pensées de l'éternité: Spinoza*, Rosenzweig Editions du Cerf, 1993.
- 12 *In the Time of the Nations*, tr. M. B. Smith. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), esp. 52 ff; from *A l'heure des nations*. (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1988) esp. 63 ff.
- 13 Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*. tr. M. B. Smith (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992). p. 23. from *La Fable mystique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), pp. 39–40.
- 14 Marie-Anne Lescouret. *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), p. 346.

THE REVELATION OF THE HOLY OTHER AS THE WHOLLY OTHER

Between Barth's theology of the Word
and Levinas's philosophy of Saying

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The aim of this essay is to look in two directions simultaneously, and, on the basis of this biopia, to ask a fundamental question and make a theological observation. I am, to some extent, following a precedent set by Derrida in his essay "The Linguistic Circle of Geneva" where, in comparing the work of Rousseau and Saussure, he writes: "we are concerned . . . with discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and certain directive concepts. And then, on this basis, of formulating questions".¹ My own comparison is between Barth's theology of the Word as it is developed in the period from the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* to his theology of language in Chapter five of *Church Dogmatics* and Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy of Saying.² I will show the parallels in the structures, though certainly not always in the details, of their thinking. On the basis of these parallels (Derrida's "repetition or permanence . . . of certain fundamental schemes"), I will ask the question why the structure of their thinking on the Word/Saying is so similar. I will then proceed to make the observation that each thinker is analysing the character and ethical demands of a phenomenology of signification. Furthermore, I will suggest that for both thinkers the phenomenology of signification (an account of how something becomes manifest and meaningful *for* the human condition) is necessarily a theological account endorsing the ethics of kenosis and exhibiting a trinodal operation. Signification, for both of them, is unavoidably theological.

In wishing to draw out the parallels between Barth's work and Levinas's, I do not wish to collapse their differences. Neither is this an exercise in

ecumenics. The differences between their religious traditions, their idioms, their historical, geographical and linguistic contexts are not simply contingencies of their thinking. Some roots are shared – the rejection of totalizing systems, often associated with Hegelian modes of thinking, the influence on Levinas's work of Barth's German contemporaries – Cohen, Rosenzweig, Buber, Husserl and Heidegger, the Scriptures as a sphere of unique revelation or testimony. Where their similarity lies is in the constellation of ideas that cluster around what Barth once termed *Krisis* (and later *Ereignis*) and Levinas "rupture" or "diachrony".³ Within these constellations comparable sets of interrelated themes are evident which I shall examine in the following order: First, there is a concern to situate ethics beyond ontology. This is related to, secondly, a need to articulate the relationship between the Word and words or the Saying and the said in a way which radically reorients logocentrism or models of analogy founded upon logocentric correspondence. Thirdly, concomitant with the understanding of revelation as non-thematizable knowledge of God, there is a rethinking of the theological and anthropological grammar. An alternative account of the subject-object relation is viewed as necessary with profound ethical consequences. A "true" humanity is described in which there is an irreducible disposition towards substitution and expiation. From tracing the parallels in these three sets of themes, two forms of difference between Barth's work and Levinas's emerge: the christological difference and the trinitarian difference. When analysed these differences will still exhibit a remarkable parallelism.

Having clearly sketched out the extent and nature of the parallels in the structure of Barth's theology of the Word and Levinas's philosophy of Saying, we can proceed to the question of why they are so similar and, hence, onto formulating our theological observation on the phenomenology of signification.

Ethics beyond the ontology of Dasein

For both Barth and Levinas an encounter with what is wholly other is ethical, for it calls into question or acts as a judgement upon the values and philosophies of the self and its world. The ethical claims of this encounter are prior to ontology or anthropology.

Levinas describes this encounter as a "calling into question" which establishes a relationship "with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance" (T.I.p.41/12). This transcendent priority is distinct from ontology which seeks "a reduction of the other to the same by interpolation of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (T.I.p.43/13). The metaphysics of being requires a *tertium quid* that mediates both the other and the same, drawing them into a common relationship which domesticates alterity. In wishing to maintain the alterity of the other,

the radical asymmetry of the other and the same, Levinas denies the availability of a *tertium quid* and speaks of an otherness which is "otherwise than being". This other "calls into question the exercise of the same" (T.I.p.43/13), an exercise which is an integral facet of the human understanding. The self cannot but domesticate otherness and render alterity familiar, but we "name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics" (T.I.p.43/13). In this encounter ethics enters the realm of being, Levinas's 'ontology': "The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced in being itself" (T.I.p.48/19). And so the revelation of the other places the realm of the human, its world-view, its psychology and its history, under a transcendental judgement: "History is worked over by the ruptures of history, in which judgement is borne upon it" (T.I.p.52/32).

For Barth also, the asymmetrical relationship between human beings and God means the denial of any *tertium quid*, any ontological relation. "God is known only through God . . . [and such knowledge] does not have either its basis or origin in any understanding of the human capacity for knowledge" (II.1,p.44/47). The relation established in encountering this God by revelation is over-against "[t]he totality of our human will and intelligence" (R.p.191/170). Nevertheless, as human beings, in order to grasp the otherness of this revelation we have to have some conception of it and "the concept of revelation, too, is obviously a general human concept" (II.1,p.245/277). So we are inevitably drawn back into "the immanent truth of a metaphysico-anthropological relation" (II.1,p.245/277). But it is an immanent truth which revelation is continually calling into question. The claim of God's revelation "does not annul our human situation . . . [but] it brings our impotence home to us, and . . . therefore puts this judgement of ourselves in our mouth" (II.1,pp.211-2/238). Ethics ("which I regard as the doctrine of the command of God" [I.1,p.xvi/xii]), issues from the revelation or righteousness which is beyond ontology (the "Word is the ground of our being beyond being" [I.1,p.444/467]). "*Er, seine Existenz, ist ihm zur Frage geworden, indem er von Gott, wirklich von Gott, reden hörte: von Gott d.h. von dem Herrn über den Gegensätzen*" (C.D.E.pp.96-7). In the encounter "the wholly irremediable questionableness of life from beginning to end" (R.p.196/176) is rendered explicit and God is heard to speak. By encountering us "in the creaturely form of a historical occurrence (*Ereignis*) or a succession of such occurrences, we are invited and summoned to know Him as the One who acts and rules in these occurrences and relationships" (II.1,p.201/225). There lies the grace of such a judgement, which renders everything meaningful, which constitutes the significance of all signification. The value of history "lies in the *Krisis* within which all history stands" (R.p.146/123).

Beneath the differences in idiom, there are parallels in the structure of Barth's and Levinas's thought. For both, the human-God relation is asymmetrical, and the revelation that institutes otherness-in-the-same reveals an otherness beyond being. For both thinkers the effect of what Levinas calls

“diachrony” and Barth first calls “diakrisis” and later “the second plane which falls upon [the first] perpendicularly” (II.1.p.404/424), is a separation and a judgement which is also a summons to recognise the other as other. The call to obey and respond is prior to a metaphysics of being or an anthropology. Yet both thinkers need to describe some relationship to a metaphysics and an anthropology in order for the call to be heard at all, in order for there to be any knowledge of this other as other. We now need to examine, then, on what basis such a description can take place for each of them.

Representation and rupture

For both Barth and Levinas, this primordial separation of self and other (human nature and God), with the implication that “Correlation does not suffice as a category for transcendence” (T.I.p.53/54) radically qualifies the adequacy of language to refer, in particular the employment of analogies. Where totality is fissured and there is no *tertium quid*, then grounds have to be sought upon which valid representation of what is communicated can be made. For both thinkers this entails a close examination and subsequent redefinition of analogy.

Levinas, while insisting “There is no natural religion” also wishes equally to insist “The idea of infinity is *revealed*, in the strongest sense of the term” (T.I.p.62/33). The advent of this revelation (whose nature will be examined later) is the rupturing of logos from within logos, from within the order of reason and the representation of reason in discourse. The infinite cannot become an object of our knowledge, but the *idea* of the infinite, while constituting the separation of significance from signs, also constitutes their relation. That is, the Saying (*le dire*) is incommensurate with the said (*le dit*), but without the said there can be no knowledge of the Saying. Levinas writes about “a veritable conversation” (T.I.p.70/42), of “revelation [a]s discourse” (T.I.p.77/50). In the manner of dialogical philosophers like Rosenzweig, Marcel and Buber, who have greatly influenced his work, he writes: “language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation” (T.I.p.73/45). And it is this irreducibility that testifies to the revelation, the diachrony that strikes through all representation. Language is instituted where there is a lack of relationship; language emerges because of this very lack. For this reason what is said is unreliable, equivocal: “the words and actions that are addressed to me . . . are always still to a certain extent rhetoric and negotiation” (T.I.p.71/43). And “access to the Other [is] outside rhetoric” (T.I.p.72/44). The questionable nature of the said points to an absence: “[E]xpression . . . presents the signifier. The signifier, he who gives the sign, is not signified” (T.I.pp.181–2/157). But this very absence calls forth and promotes discourse; the absence, the incommensurate otherness that cannot be assimilated, is the very origin and dynamic of representation. This absent one who gives the sign, the transcendence of the infinitely other which cannot

be signified, dismantles and sublates the immanence of discourse, the correspondence of sign with signified within a totality. Representation, then, is always and necessarily open to the dismantling "trace" of the other that is its condition for being.

The analogy that is transcendently established by the Saying in the said, the divine Word within words ("This first saying is to be sure but a word. But the word is God" [C.P.p.126]), is the "apperceiving in discourse of non-allergic relation with alterity" (T.I.p.47/18). It is, following Husserl, an analogy of apperception.⁴ The apperception only becomes perceptible because it is framed by representation, by discourse which gives it context, by the face "in which he [God] is disincarnate . . . [and] is revealed" (T.I.p.79/51).⁵ Otherness can never be "presented", for it is always the condition for signification, for dialogue, for re-presentation.

For Levinas, then, within discourse otherness is appresented; *within* discourse there is an appresentation of the conditions for discourse.⁶

In a more recent essay by Levinas ("Transcendence et intelligibilité"), the Saying and the said are described in terms of two forms of logos, '*logos du fini*' and '*logos d'infini*'. Barth's own preoccupation with language and the transcendent began with a similar distinction. In his 1919 lecture "*Der Christ in der Gesellschaft*", he will distinguish between the Word of God "the *dunamis*, the meaning and might of the living God who is building a new world" and society "which is now ruled by its own logos" (W.W.p.280). In the move from the existential expression of his theology to the theology of the Word as it is developed in Chapter five of *Church Dogmatics*, the problematic of the Word in human words remains central. And as with Levinas the rupturing of representation is fundamental for defining the presence of the Word; "*In dieser Diakrisis offenbart sich das Wort Gottes*" (C.D.E.p.107). Representation is both necessary and requires deconstructing (Barth uses the Hegelian verb *aufheben*).

Representation is necessary because the Word of God is not immediately available and it is this absence of the immediate which preoccupies Barth in the early volumes of *Church Dogmatics*. "He is not objective directly but indirectly, not in the naked sense but clothed under the sign and veil of other objects different from Himself" (II.1,p.16/16). The Word can only be the Word for us insofar as it is words. The Word is always compromised by its necessary incorporation within a semiotic system – a system of object-signs that is "different from" the Word, which reveals the Word as it simultaneously conceals it. Barth speaks of a primary and a secondary objectivity, and of how the "secondary objectivity is fully true, for it has its correspondence and basis in His primary objectivity" (II.1,p.16/16). The questions are, How do "different from" objects reveal? and What is the nature of this "correspondence" that the "fully true" is available for us?

Barth wrestles with these questions, as Levinas does. He writes of God meeting us "in, with and under the sign" (II.1, p.16/16),⁷ where the broad

spectrum of all correspondence theories of language is proffered. But, despite the toning down of the language of "*Diakrisis*", Barth returns to the idea of penetration as the constituting principle of revelation and its representation. Creaturely reality "represents (*eintritt*) God in so far as it is determined, made and used by God as His clothing" (II.1,p.17/17).⁸ Representation is defined by the 'entrance into' objects, an entrance which makes such objects truly meaningful. "Revelation means the giving of signs . . . the representation ('*Darstellung*') of His truth" (II.1,p.52/56). Furthermore, it "has to be understood as an event (*Ereignis*) outstanding in its relationship to other events (*des sonstigen Geschehens*)" (II.1,p.29/31). The 'entrance into' is described as *Ereignis*,⁹ a distinct and rupturing event that 'stands out' among other 'happenings' (*Geschehen*) within a narrative.

Outside revelation any representation of "creaturely reality" is, then, only rhetoric, a free flow of signs without significance: "We use our words improperly and pictorially" (II.1,p.229/259). It is revelation that establishes analogies, as the signs become signifiers of an absent signifier, that is, one who makes signs signify. *Ex nihilo*, analogies are established within "creaturely reality" of God's difference from "creaturely reality" – analogies seen and read by faith. Furthermore, these analogies use objects "as they ought to be used" (II.1,p.18/18). Thus revelation establishes the ethics of "creaturely reality".

For Barth, "the exclusiveness and uniqueness of the revelation and reconciliation [are] enacted in Jesus Christ" (II.1,p.424/446). He is God's Word and "God gives Himself to be known in His Word, and therefore to be known mediately" (II.1,p.12/11). Earlier Barth had written that only in Christ does "sin-controlled flesh become[s] a parable or likeness" (R.p.280/263). Only in the scandal of Christ does the "human wordly and historical and 'natural'" become a sign. "But that it IS a sign (*Hinweis*) and a parable is surely in nowise trivial" (R.pp.281/263–4). And it is the burden of Barth's later *analogia fidei* to work out the significance of that observation. Christ as Word is the condition for language becoming meaningful, for the proper use of words; the incarnation of Otherness makes meaningful by revealing itself as the condition for all meaning. His advent "can find force and expression only in the shipwreck of their [men's] words, conferring suitability upon their words, which are impotent as such" (II.1,p.221/249). The miracle of the Word institutes the *analogia fidei* whereby there is true communication between human beings and their Creator.

It is evident at this point in my analysis of the parallels that Levinas and Barth are both haunted by the possibility of a sovereign encounter, of a transcendence entering into, constituting the reality of and yet not being domesticated by the immanent; a transcendent that remains other, essentially concealed and yet an eternal command. Their espousal of analogy, their commitment to a metaphysical (on Levinas's part) or theological (on Barth's part) realism, provides ground for both of them to articulate the

possibility of what is impossible, an encounter with otherness that cannot be thematized. In fact, this ground – Levinas's philosophy of saying and Barth's theology of the Word – becomes the *Grundriss* (with all the connotations of that word) upon which the rest of their work is constructed. In both the analogy of appresentation and the *analogia fidei* it is the rupturing or the wrecking of representation that enables the expression of the transcendent; the transcendent itself can never be represented.

Furthermore, and most significantly, the revelation which disrupts the immanent values of what is "creaturely reality" for Barth and "totality" for Levinas, is understood theologically by *both* of them. For Levinas it is the "eschatological notion of judgement" which "institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history" (T.I.p.22/xi). This theological expression is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Levinas regards his analogy of appresentation as theologically important. It is this move from phenomenology to theology that Derrida criticizes Levinas for in the essay "Violence and Metaphysics". Having concluded that Levinas's analysis proceeds "in the form of a negative theology," Derrida continues:

"The Other resembles God" . . . Via the passageway of this resemblance, man's speech can be lifted up towards God, an almost unheard of *analogy* which is the very movement of Levinas's discourse on discourse. Analogy as dialogue with God . . . Discourse with God and not in God as *participation*. Discourse with God, and not discourse on God and his attributes as *theology* . . . Presence as separation, presence-absence as resemblance, but a resemblance which is not the "ontological mark" of the worker imprinted on his product . . . a resemblance which can neither be understood in terms of communion or knowledge, nor in terms of participation or incarnation. A resemblance which is neither a sign nor an effect of God . . . We are "in the Trace of God".

(W.D.p.108)

Levinas moves then through phenomenology into the meta-discourse of theology and this move, as Derrida also points out, is an act of faith: "independent of its 'theological context' does not this entire discourse collapse?" (W.D.p.103). The analogy of appresentation as Levinas conceives it is, then, an *analogia fidei*. A description of Barth's theological realism by a recent scholar could apply to both of them: "Faith can only believe in the event of analogical correspondence".¹⁰

Once more the structures of their thinking are closely aligned. The details which give meaning to the structures of their thinking are not. Levinas does not espouse the particularism of Barth's Christology, and we will develop this later. But for the moment let us continue to sketch the extent of the parallels between them – with the question *Why is it that the structure of their thought is so similar?* always in mind.

Revelation and new grammars of self and God

Both Barth and Levinas establish a dialectic between immediacy and mediation, between presentation and its rhetorical clothing as representation. Revelation for Levinas is the placing in question of the Cartesian *cogito*, the Kantian unity of apperception, the *oeuvre hegelienne* which "*est une philosophie a la fois du savoir absolu et de l'homme satisfaire*" (D.V.I.p.214) and Husserlian intentionality. More concisely, in Barth, "God reveals Himself as the Lord" (II.1.p.306/323). Revelation, for both, questions the meaning of all human acts, perception and discourse. Revelation, for both, requires as a consequence a new grammar of the subject-object relation, a grammar which necessarily works within while deconstructing the ordinary grammar of human discourse. This new grammar is a theology – for it maps out how the term "God" is given to us and how, consequently, it is meaningfully employed.

For Barth, the "*Wort Gottes . . . ist ein Reden Gottes, ein Akt, dessen Subjekt Gott und Gott allein ist*" (C.D.E.p.128). God Himself is "the Subject who absolutely, originally and finally moves, produces, establishes and realises" (II.1.p.3/1). Yet, in "His revelation He is considered and conceived", so that "He enters into the relationship of object to man the subject" (II.1.p.9/8). Within Barth's all too human syntax "God" is both subject and object, twisting between active and passive tenses and nominative, accusative, genitive and dative cases. Human beings are accusative within their own testimony to God, or as Levinas can put it in French, "*Me voici!*". As accusative a human being's identity, her selfhood, is both a gift from God (subject to object) and accused. Human beings realise their true nature in an encounter which brings both grace and judgement.

This map of God and self is the groundplan of Levinas's own redefinition of subjectivity. Though more philosophical, Levinas too describes the self as sub-ject to the Other, a self which must necessarily substitute itself for the Other for which it is and towards which it is, primordially, responsible. Levinas defines this position as *ipseity*, because this is "the signification of the pronoun *self* for which our Latin grammars . . . know no nominative form" (O.B.p.112/143). The self is, in itself, divided for Levinas between the "I" – "I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired" (O.B.p.114/146) – and the ego – "the ego is an equality with itself, and consequently the return of being to itself is a concrete universality" (O.B.p.115/147). Therefore the "self is out of phase with itself" (O.B.p.115/147).

There seems at base, therefore, a similar conception of selfhood in Barth and Levinas; a selfhood interpreted ethically in the light of the revelation of otherness. A selfhood understood existentially as caught between authenticity and inauthenticity. Where a difference unfolds is in how each thinker is understanding the incarnation of otherness, which we will have to examine more closely. Put briefly, Levinas conceives otherness in terms of Others, or

more accurately the "face" of an Other person (*l'Autrui*). It is in the light of this alterity, evidenced within *socialité*, that the ethics and identity of selfhood are constituted. Barth, on the other hand, from his early work on, conceived otherness in terms of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. In the "face" of Jesus Christ "I recognise myself to be confronted paradoxically by the vast pre-eminence of a wholly different man – which I am not" (R.p.272/255). As with Levinas, the self is composed of "The EGO which *practises* what I – the other EGO – contemplate with horror" (R.p.262/244). But it is Jesus Christ who "is – what I am not – my existential I – I – the I which in God, in the freedom of God – I am" (R.p.269/252). Later, when much of the existentialist idiom is expunged and the move has been made from first to third person discourse, the same anthropology is evident: "In relation to Him [the Son or Word of God] man . . . is always, and for the first time properly, the one he is" (II.1.p.449/471). Despite this christological difference, both thinkers describe this living for the Other (the ability to surrender the ego I am for the ego of the Other) as a state of being "inspired", as living in the Spirit of God. "[T]his 'not-I' is, in fact, the Spirit of God that dwelleth in me beyond the catastrophe in which the 'I' . . . am helplessly engulfed" (R.p.290/273). Or, more succinctly in *Church Dogmatics*: "God's freedom to be present in this way to man, and therefore to bring about this encounter, is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit in God's revelation" (II.1.p.451/473).

Laying aside, for the moment, the difference we have uncovered in the nature of the incarnation of alterity, we see that these new maps of subjectivity-in-God outline, for both thinkers, a call for submission to an overriding Lordship; a theology and an ethics of the kenosis of the human "I".

Levinas conceives the epiphany of the face, the entrance of the absolutely other, as a calling of the self to responsibility. In revelation the I discovers itself obliged, already in service to the Other. In the face of the Other the I recognises both its dispossession and its justification. Its freedom, then, "is inhibited, not as countered by a resistance, but as arbitrary, guilty and timid; but in its guilt it rises to responsibility" (T.I.p.203/178). A reorientation is involved – from accusation and humiliation issues the "gift of self" to the Other. In Barth's theological idiom, repentance becomes a testimony to grace. In Levinas's phenomenological idiom, "The consciousness of obligation is no longer a consciousness, since it tears consciousness up from its centre, submitting it to the Other" (T.I.p.207/182). The call of transcendence is to an emptying, a giving gratuitously and without worrying about reciprocity, to "the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated" (T.I.p.215/190). In his later work, Levinas calls this "the state of being hostage" (C.P.p.124). It is the "ethical event of 'expiation for another'," an "incessant event of substitution" which constitutes the "'egoness' of the I, its exceptional and strange uniqueness" (C.P.p.124).

As we have seen, for Barth this "uniqueness" is predicated of Jesus Christ. In the event of Jesus Christ there was a "self-abasement of God in His only

Son . . . a self-emptying, in a complete resignation not of the essence but of the form of His Godhead, He took upon Himself our own human form – the form of a servant, in complete likeness to other men” (II.1,p.397/447). The revelation, then, is a kenotic act on behalf of the Revealer. Adopting the form is both pragmatic – that the Godhead might be known – and an expression of God’s nature: “the disposition of God in which He acts towards us as the same triune God that He is in Himself” (II.1,p.51/55). Kenosis is the fundamental operation of the Trinity, but whilst it institutes the revelation, the giving of God by Himself, it is also the content of the revelation – the form of a servant which is the true likeness, the true nature of human beings. Jesus Christ is the revelation of true human nature. In Jesus Christ God presents “the original and creative I, from whom the I has received and as it were leases its I-ness” (II.1,p.59/63).

Kenosis not only institutes the revealing event (*Ereignis*), then, but it is the content of that event and, furthermore, promotes the recognition that that content is the primary ethical and existential disposition of human nature (its very I-ness). The commandment to love my neighbour issues from the revelation of Christ in my neighbour’s suffering, and this revelation distinguishes him as my neighbour rather than my fellow-man: “What Is. 53 says of the suffering Servant of God is true at any level of any man so far as it simply speaks of his suffering. In the reflection of the prophecy about Christ there is a reflection of my neighbour, if I have the grace to recognise him in my fellow-man. And in recognising my neighbour in my fellow-man, I am actually (*faktisch*) placed before Christ” (I.2,p.429/474).

Jesus, then – the “otherness of man . . . his truth, his unveiled reality: the truth and reality also of his cosmos” (II.1,p.110/122) – “actually encounters us in our neighbour, and . . . we decide for or against Him in making this decision in relation to our neighbour” (I.2,p.429/474). The human being only fully realises her identity in recognising Christ in the neighbour and serving Him, by being a hostage (in Levinas’s language) to the otherness which constitutes her true self.

Ethically and anthropologically, again, we discover the close parallels between the structure of Barth’s thinking and Levinas’s. Barth’s economy of living unto God is structurally close to Levinas’s phenomenological account of substitution, of living-for-the-other. For both, the humanism of egology, of Kantian anthropology, of transcendental reasoning – the humanism of logocentrism – is ruptured by the new humanity of the Other so that “the new invisible title of all humanity is made manifest in the ‘Now’ of revelation (*im ‘Jetzt’ der Offenbarung unanschaulich anschaulich wird*)” (R.p.421/407). It is the particularity of Jesus Christ as the revelation of the triune God which distinguishes theologian from philosopher. But we now need to consider carefully, first this christological and, as a consequence, this trinitarian difference – for as we will see, parallels in the structure of their thinking still remain.

The Christological difference

Levinas often appears to model his description of this primordial disposition towards kenosis, this Saying betrayed in representation, on Isaiah's account of the suffering servant and the gospel accounts of Jesus Christ. He will frequently employ terms like "incarnation" and "resurrection"; he will describe ipseity as "the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself" (O.B.p.11/14). Speaking of accusation, persecution and responsibility for others, he describes the self as "expelled from his place and has only himself to himself, has nothing in the world on which to rest his head" (O.B.p.121/155). This human destiny to suffer and to serve, this phenomenological analysis of *passio*, is viewed in terms of "the God who suffers both through man's transgression and through the suffering by which this transgression can be expiated" (L.R.p.234). Derrida has noted "the messianic eschatology from which Levinas draws inspiration" (W.D.p.83). Levinas is Jewish and profoundly schooled in Talmudic exegesis, the language of expiation and redemption is as traditional for him as for Barth. But for Barth "It is in fact the suffering Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53 who is rediscovered in Jesus" (I.1.p.387/407). The Servant becomes an historical event in Jesus Christ.

This is exactly the point where care especially needs to be taken – because, to an extent, Barth's particularism, the unique revelation in Jesus Christ, is paralleled by Levinas's own particularism.

In Levinas's acceptance of "*le logos de l'infini*" there is the acceptance of a pre-existing logos, Saying which is the offspring or manifestation of what he terms *illeity*. *Illeity*, for Levinas, names God. It is "the possibility of a third direction of radical irrecititude which escapes the bi-polar play of immanence and transcendence that is proper to Being . . . The profile that belongs, by the trace, to the irreversible past is the profile of *Il*" (E.D.H.H.p.199, my translation). It is described as "preoriginary saying" (O.B.p.151/193), prior even to Saying. It is the Absolute which "detaches itself absolutely" (O.B.p.147/188). The "Infinite passes in saying" (*ibid*) – Saying bears the trace and is the epiphany of the infinite, the ineffable, the concealed. But a particularism is inherently characteristic of the transcendence of this saying. For Saying is an event in the face of the other person which signifies "an exceptional sonority, which, in its irreducibility, suggests the eventuality of the word of God" (T.O.p.114). The pre-existing logos is, then, according to Levinas, also an event within our history. It is not simply a rhetorical event of discourse, but one occurring now in the actuality of the neighbour's proximity. In the factual encounter with the neighbour as Other lies the factual encounter with the diachrony (or to use a New Testament term "*skandalon*") of God's Word.

In the period of Barth's engagement with the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, the particularity of Jesus Christ would have closely paralleled the particularity of Levinas's proximity. Jesus Christ is described as the

“existential I”, the not-I which I am. He is encountered in the “Now”, in suffering, deprivation and negation. The “‘other’ man, the man of the world, the outsider, the Gentile, who, unlike the Churchman . . . appears before us in visible poverty, evidently abandoned and without protection . . . in him the forensic righteousness of God is revealed in all its glory . . . God has determined to reveal His glory and His mercy in this ‘other’ man” (R.p.48/429). The neighbour’s ‘otherness’ “reminds us of the WHOLLY OTHER” (R.p.444/429). In language culled from Barth’s own early association with Rosenzweig and Buber, this is to “see in every temporal ‘thou’ the eternal, contrasted ‘thou’ apart from which there is no ‘I’” (R.p.495/479). A hegemonic encounter is implicit which parallels Levinas’s own grammar of the self and the neighbour: “Infinity presents itself as a face in the ethical resistance that paralyses my powers and from the depths of defenceless eyes rises firm and absolute in its nudity and destitution” (T.I.pp.199–200/174).

In the development of his theological realism (through the doctrine of *analogia fidei*), Barth’s Christological particularism is considerably sharpened.¹¹ In *Church Dogmatics* (I.1,pp.458/480–1), though “the Son of God is the prototype of the sonship of believers”, Barth distinguishes between Jesus Christ as *Filius Dei natura* and believers as *fili Dei adoptione* (cf.I.1,pp.458/480–1). Barth’s believers-as-sons stand and remain at some distance from the original and proper sonship (which is distinctively the character of Christ). But, significantly, this distinction is the cause of much tension in Barth’s Christology. For a causal relation associates God with His Son: “As the Son of God made his own this one specific (*bestimmte*) possibility of human essence (*Wesen*) and existence (*Dasein*) and made it a reality, *this Man came into being*, and He, the Son of God, became *this Man*” (I.1,p.150/164). But no such relationship associates the original Son with adopted sons. There is much ambiguity in this particularism, then, concerning the economic operation of the Trinity as it affects the salvation of creaturely reality. In terms of the grammar of personhood expressed in II. 1, p.59, and quoted above, how does Jesus as “the original and creative I” relate to or correspond with, “the created I [who] has received and as it were leases its I-ness”? How can the humanity of Jesus Christ be different from and yet identify with our humanity in order to affect the redemption and our adoption by the Godhead?¹² The proposed answers to this question and the details of Barth’s theology of reconciliation lie outside the parameters of this essay. I merely wish to point out the ambivalence that emerges from Barth’s particularism. It emerges from the ontological difference between the “creative I” and the “created I” which the repetition of the pronoun “I” masks. The two “I”’s are not the same and not naming the same objects. Barth’s particularism verges upon, if it does not express, an ontological disparity.

This ambiguity is significant because Levinas’s particularism runs into a counter form of ambivalence. It is an ambivalence that is the polar opposite of Barth’s – as a comparison with Barth’s particularism highlights. In the

section on "The Ego as a Singularity", in his essay "The Ego and Totality", Levinas insists: "The other purely as interlocutor is not a content known and qualified, apprehendable on the basis of some general idea which governs it." The ego is an "irreplaceable singularity" (C.P.p.36). But Levinas's concept of ipseity-as-sonship (developed in *Totality and Infinity* and detailed later in "The Ego and Totality") effectively means that each person is the Messiah, each stands in an original and proper messiahship that demands one substitute oneself for the Other. For the other (*l'autre*) is always an Other (*l'autrui*). The other is not, as it is with Barth, always and only Jesus Christ. The neighbour, for Barth, is she or he who, by grace, has put on Christ – the form of which "will always be the form (*die Gestalt*) of the death of Christ" (I.1,p.458/481). Levinas's self recognises in the hungry and the destitute its own sonship, its own ipseity, its own state of being a hostage to God and responsible for others. And Levinas describes this condition in terms of recognising the Suffering Servant. Barth describes this condition in terms of recognising the death of Christ. But whereas for Levinas each is called to be the Suffering Servant pouring out her life for others, for Barth the believer only enters "the form of the death of Christ". No human being approximates to the uniqueness of Christ, they only approximate to the "form" of such uniqueness. Another way of putting this would be to say that sonship is a mode of being, an existential condition for Levinas. The sonship of believers for Barth is living in the form of a mode of being, living as a figure of a person whose own living is original and proper.¹³

There is, therefore, a secondariness, a level of mediation in Barth that is absent from Levinas. As I have pointed out, this level of secondariness presents the spectre of a disparity that renders the redemption of creaturely reality disputable. But Levinas's lack of such a secondariness, Levinas's concept of the Suffering Servant as the proper mode of one's being, presents the spectre of a parity, as Derrida's major criticism of his work makes clear. For, in wishing to insist upon a "discourse with God in the face to face" (W.D.p.116), Levinas, as Derrida tells us, "is resigned to betraying his own intentions in his philosophical discourse" (W.D.p.151), because he must return to the metaphysics of presence and the *analogia entis*.

The christological difference, therefore, is a parting of the ways between Barth's thinking and Levinas's. But their common emphasis upon forms of particularity means that there is a certain symmetry in the parting of those ways. Their parting moves in diametrically opposite directions – towards equivocation, on Barth's part, and towards assimilation, on Levinas's.

The Trinitarian difference

The particularism of Barth's Christology is inseparable from the economic operation of the Trinity. His theology issues from an interpretation of the concrete "events of revelation" in Jesus Christ (I.1,p.299/315). As we have

seen, Levinas too emphasizes the particularity of the Saying and his philosophy issues from a phenomenological analysis of the revelation of this Saying. For both, their work emerges from a reflection upon the phenomenon of a determining revelation. Though, therefore, Levinas has no belief in, nor need for, the Trinity, it is significant that the structure of his analysis is also trinodal and Levinas is aware of that: "Desire . . . is a plot with three personages" (C.P.p.72). We now need to examine this structure carefully to assess the nature of its similarity to Barth's.¹⁴

Levinas's work is situated between "a philosophy of transcendence . . . and a philosophy of immanence" in which is described "the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence" (T.I.p.52/23). His work describes an economy of separation, or difference, for "to be economically" is "[t]o separate oneself, not to remain bound up with totality" (T.I.p.175/pp.149–50). In the separation there is the apperception of exteriority, of finitude located in infinity: "the being situated in a subject field . . . *deforms* vision, but precisely thus allows exteriority to state itself" (T.I.p.291/267). Thus transcendence becomes the condition for immanence.

Levinas argues that the dynamic of this economy is Desire: "to apperceive infinity as the Desire for infinity" (T.I.p.292/268). The Desire for the other *constitutes* the relationship and it proceeds by way of an "inspiration, beyond the logic of the same and the other". This inspiring Desire is "the very pneuma of the psyche" (O.B.p.141) that gives birth to the recognition of being-for-the-other. We have seen this earlier in Levinas's grammar of the divided self. In the later parts of *Totality and Infinity*, however, he develops this in terms of the family as "a metaphysically ineluctable structure" (T.I.p.306/283) and "[r]esurrection constitut[ing] the principle event of time" (T.I.p.284/260). Here lies the heart of what Levinas understands by "economic existence".

The economy of separation, the "relation of rupture and a recourse", is manifest in the "converse of paternity" which is "filiality" (T.I.p.278/255). The unicity of the I, the son, is owed to the father. This is the paradox of created freedom – the repudiation of the father in order to be the elected son. This is "the permanent revolution that constitutes ipseity" (T.I.p.278/255). We are all, then, elected to be sons, predestined to sonship. Ipseity is the nature of our election, our election by that which is wholly other. In theological terms, what Levinas is describing is the nature of *imago dei*. In paternity, then, the I prolongs itself in the other and enters a time not governed by ageing or fate. Levinas juxtaposes the "discontinuity of Cartesian time" (T.I.p.58/29) – time as the struggle of the ego to get beyond itself, to be redeemed from its totalizing by grasping the instant; time, therefore, as the experience of postponement, of the "not yet" – with "the primary phenomenon of time in which the phenomenon of the 'not yet' is rooted" (T.I.p.247/225). This is "to go back to paternity", where the I is other while also being itself, where the I recognises is sonship or ipseity. This is the

"time of fecundity . . . an existence as entirely pardoned" (T.I.p.282/259). Levinas describes this as the resurrection of the instant that had died and the very process of continuation – "death and resurrection constitute time" (T.I.p.284/261). Resurrection is the institution of sonship, while the nature of sonship is to recognise its *sub-jectum*, its incommensurate kenosis. This resurrection is the fulfilment of time "where the perpetual is converted into the eternal" (T.I.p.285/261). Levinas is aware his thinking here is eschatological (c.f. his Preface to T.I.).

In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas develops a notion of the feminine found in *Totality and Infinity* in terms of "maternity". Maternity signifies that process of Desire which enables the "gestation of the other in the same" (O.B.p.75/95). Levinas writes, "Incarnation is not a transcendental operation of a subject that is situated in the midst of the world it represents to itself; the sensible experience of the body is already and from the start incarnate. The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self" (O.B.p.76/96). This maternity completes the metaphysics of the family – it is "the very signifyingness of signification" (O.B.p.108/137).

Levinas's trinodal structure, then, functions as three modes of being in the economy of time and Desire – the paternal, the filial and the maternal which gestates the other in the same in a way that relates whilst separating. These three modes are arrived at through a phenomenological analysis of revelation – the paternal is betrayed in the filial: for the "idea of infinity is revealed, in the strongest sense of the term. There is no natural religion" (T.I.p.62/33). The revelation is primary. The family is not a *vestigium trinitatis*,¹⁵ but the trinodal economy of the family is the structure of the revelation. There is *disclosure* of paternal *illeity*, that which forever *transcends*, in the *ipseity* of the son and this is *mediated* through the maternal Desire.

For Barth the logic of revelation demands "the three elements of unveiling, veiling and impartation (*die Mitteilung*)" (I.1,p.332/350). The three elements parallel the disclosure, that which transcends disclosure and the mediation in Levinas's work. For Barth, as Chapter 2 of *Church Dogmatics* illustrates, this doctrine of revelation is inseparable from the doctrine of the triune God, God's three modes of existence. His dogmatics issue from an interpretation of this "event (*Ereignis*) of revelation" (I.1,p.299/315). The verticality of this soteriological "event" is related to the *Now* or the "Moment" in the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*. In this earlier work, Barth distinguishes between "unqualified time" – time spent in ignorance and sin – and qualified time – the eschatological *Now* in which eternity dissolves all past and future (R.p.500/484). And though *Krisis*, which is the content of the *Now*, is expunged in *Church Dogmatics*, and the "event" is read more positively, still "the so-called 'inner logic' of the *Church Dogmatics* is the axis of eternity and time unfolded through the motif of the 'analogy of faith'."¹⁶ The concern with time in Barth's early work, as in his mature

dogmatics, is with a distinction between time as a string of successive moments bearing unborn potential and the eternal *Now* of revelation which can actualize the potential of such moments. Revelation occurs as "completed event (*das abgeschlossene Geschehen*), fulfilled time, in the sea of the incomplete and changeable and self-changing" (I.1,p.116/119). This *Now* is the revelation of the Word, of Jesus Christ, in the world. The dialectic of time and eternity is bridged by the incarnation, which is a God-event, the economy of which is trinodal. The incarnation, then, reveals time as the creation of the Triune God. "God's love requires and possesses eternity both inwards and outwards for the sake of its divinity, its freedom. Correspondingly, it requires, creates and therefore possesses in its outward relations what we call time" (II.1,pp.464-5/523). "Our time" – or "the time of our sin" – is only understandable on the basis of "His time for us, revelation time". Through the "perpetually fresh giving (*das immer neue Gewähren*) of revelation" (my translation) our time becomes a sacramental reality (II.1,p.62/67): "our time is conditioned by the Spirit" (R.p.457/441).

I do not wish to enter the troubled realms of the logic of this time and eternity relationship, other than to say a disparity is seen to operate founded upon the disparity we have seen concerning Barth's concept of analogy. I simply wish to show the parallels between this mode of thinking and Levinas's. For both, there is the establishing of a transcendent or authentic time within an immanent or inauthentic time. A third form of time emerges which Levinas calls the time of fulfilment and resurrection. Barth, too, will draw attention to the forty days of Resurrection as a time of "the concrete demonstration of the gracious God" (III.2,p.450/540) and speak of "fulfilled time".

For both, history is a predicate of revelation, time of eternity; so that, outside the operation of God or *illegitimacy* there is no real understanding of time, only the empty appearance of time. Levinas could concur with Barth's statement that the advent of the Word "does not remain transcendent over time, it does not merely meet it at a point, but it enters time; nay it assumes time; nay, it creates time for itself" (I.2,p.50/55). For both, the revelation is explicable in time only in terms of a trinodal operation.

The dynamic of this operation for Barth is God's love in the work of the "Spirit [which] guarantees man . . . his personal participation in revelation" (I.1,p.453/475), just as between the Father and the Son it "is the active mutual orientation and interpenetration of love" (I.1,p.487/511). In the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth describes this love in terms of Agape. The ethics of Agape is "to seek and serve the One in the others . . . to be related to the Primal origin . . . AGAPE is the KRISIS in which the others stand" (R.p.454/438). Agape is the dynamic of trinitarian perichoresis and our inclusion within it. It is also the kenotic spirit of Christ, whose disciples Christians are and whose life Christians imitate. The mutual orientation towards the other is rooted then in the Trinity and revealed in the

'event' of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of His Word in the Church. Furthermore, "[T]he work of the Spirit in revelation is presented as a work of creating and begetting" (I.1,p.485/509) and so "begetting is originally and properly a divine not a creaturely mystery" (I.1,pp.432–3/455). For Levinas, as we saw, the dynamic of the trinodal operation is Desire and the family as a "metaphysically ineluctable structure". For him "Fecundity is to be set up as an ontological category." "The fecundity of the I [its sonship, its *ipseity*] is its very transcendence" (T.I.p.277/254).

For both Levinas and Barth, then, an analysis (what Barth calls "exegesis") of the event of revelation leads to similar structures in their thinking of the relationship between time and eternity and the three-fold economic that accounts for that relationship. Levinas, I repeat, is not accepting the Christian Trinity, but he is, like Barth, "read[ing] off from revelation . . . statements about the being of God" (I.1,p.480/503), or what he terms *illeity*. And the structure of those statements constitutes a trinodal logic.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning of this essay, I do not wish to collapse the difference between Barth's theology of the Word and Levinas's philosophy of Saying. There are differences, as we have seen, and they emerge from the particularism of the content of "revelation" for each of them. On the other hand, neither, in the parallels we have traced, are we simply observing a translation from one idiom into another. (Although, "Goodness" in Levinas closely corresponds with "righteousness" in Barth; "apology" in Levinas to "repentance" in Barth; "fecundity" in Levinas to "resurrection life" in Barth.) The fact that so many terms remain the same for each – sin as atheism and egology, "revelation", "God", "prophet", "Messiah", "eternal", "creation", "born again" – testifies to their common idiom: the Scriptures. The similarity in the structures of their thinking return us to Derrida's search for "discerning the repetition or permanence, at a profound level of discourse, of certain fundamental schemes and certain directive concepts. And then, on this basis, of formulating questions" (*Op. cit.*). Starting from an investigation into "revelation" as the manifestation of the eternal and totally other which is perceived indirectly (or apperceived), both thinkers are led to discuss the same problematics and arrive at similar models of language, self, ethics, time and participation in a triadic economy. And it is important to ask not just *how* they relate to each other, but *why*. The essay from its inception has been detailing the *how* in order to uncover the *why*.

To answer that question we must return to the point from which they both begin. What is being investigated by each is a phenomenon (Barth, reading this through the *a priori* of faith, speaks of a "theologoumenon"). The phenomenon is not the otherness of God, but a revelation, an unveiling of what remains veiled and hidden. Both analyse how the revelation can be, already

has been, significant for human beings; how human beings have been addressed by it. For it becomes significant because as it is revealed it reveals; in its manifestation it becomes significant *for* us. It announces something about our human condition (its culpability or sinfulness). This hegemonic encounter has existential meaning. What we are tracing in both Barth and Levinas, therefore, is the grammar of signification itself – the syntax of revealer, revealed, revelation. Their theology, on the one hand, philosophy on the other, are readings of this syntax. That is, how something appears as meaningful given the constraints of a Kantian anthropology where “transcendence means not appropriation of *what is*, but its respect” (T.I.p.302/279), and what the consequences of that “meaningfulness” are in terms of the categories that govern Christian theology, on the one hand, and metaphysics on the other (ethical and soteriological categories). The logic of this signification is the logic of the possibility for their own discourses – how their own discourses are meaningful because they represent the passing of the meaningful. Both thinkers establish that discourse is only possible when understood in terms of its difference-in-relation to a meta-discourse. For both, divine *fiat* institutes a signifying phenomenon and the phenomenology of signification that is thereby constituted is excavated in order to give some account of this theological economy. Both suggest there is, in the logic of signification, what one contemporary theologian has described and defended as “the critical non-avoidability of the theological.”¹⁷ The parallels between Barth’s theology of the Word and Levinas’s philosophy of Saying issue from this fundament: both wish to present an an-archaeology and ethics of meaning.

Abbreviations

Wherever possible the page reference to the English translation is followed by the page reference to standard editions of the text in its original language. Where texts have not yet been translated I have kept to the original language. Following what has now become the custom in translating Levinas’s terms *Autrui* and *Autre*, Other with a capital is used for the former, while other in the lower case for the latter.

K. BARTH:

- R. *The Epistle to the Romans*, tr. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: O.U.P., 1933). *Der Römerbrief* (Munich, 1924).
- I.1,I.2, *Church Dogmatics*, (Edinburgh: T.&T.Clark), volumes I.1 (1936, revd. edn. 1975),
- II.1,III.2 I.2 (1956), II.1 (1957) and III.2 (1961). *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I.1 (Evangelischer Verlag A. G. Zurich: Zollikon, 1952), I.2; (1948), II.1 (1948) and III.2 (1948).
- C.D.E. *Die Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf*, Gesamtausgabe: Erster Band (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1982).

- W.W. *The Word of God and the Words of Men*, tr. D. Horton (London, 1928).
- E. LEVINAS:
- T.I. *Totality and Infinity*, tr. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969).
Totalité et infini (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1961).
- E.D.H.H. *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1967).
- O.B. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981). *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1974).
- D.V.I. *Le Dieu qui Vient a L'Idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1982).
- E.I. *Ethics and Infinity*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1984).
- C.P. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. and tr. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987).
- T.O. *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1987).
- L.R. *Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
- OTHERS:
- P.S. *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel), tr. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).
- C.M. *Cartesian Meditations* (Husserl), tr. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1960).
- W.D. *Writing and Difference* (Derrida), tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

Notes

- 1 *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1982), p. 153.
 - 2 An important question concerning the continuity of Barth's theology, arises at this point. More particularly, between the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* and *Church Dogmatics* there is Barth's shift from dialectical to dogmatic theology. Of course, care must be taken in assessing what is understood by both "dialectical" and "dogmatic" and one must not see them as either distinct theological methods or antithetical. As Gerhard Sauter has recently pointed out, "*Karl Barth hat dreimal einen Zyklus dogmatischer Vorlesungen vorgetragen*" (C.D.E.p.xi). The first attempt – between the summer semester of 1924 to the summer semester of 1925 – was entitled *Unterricht in der Christlichen Religion*. Furthermore, as William Nicholls points out, "in Barth's later thought, this characteristic dialectical idiom also falls into the background, though he never wholly loses it" (*Systematic and Philosophical Theology* (Penguin: London, 1969), p. 90).
- The question is, in what relationship does Barth's dialectical thinking stand to Barth's dogmatic thinking, and especially in the period I am exploring, from the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans* to *Church Dogmatics* II.1? The dialectical thinking emphasized the infinite distance between God and man, a

distance that called into radical question man's experience and knowledge. It seems to me that such thinking remains pivotal to the structure of Chapter five of *Church Dogmatics*, where the Word in words is explored in terms of the *analogia fidei*. The three sections of Chapter five are subdivided into two parts, each part viewing the theme of the section first from God's side and then from man's. Furthermore, what is termed *Die Erkenntnis Gottes in ihrem Vollzug* in section 25 is both balanced and radically qualified by *Die Grenzen der Erkenntnis Gottes* in section 27. If the word *Krisis* is no longer used, the idea of bringing all that has been understood in the exploration so far under God's judgement certainly is the dominant note of the final pages of Chapter five: "If there is a final consolation and security here, it must definitely consist in a simultaneous insecurity and destruction" (p. 246); and "we can end our heroic career with a hari-kari" (p. 248).

Of course, there is a shift away from the existential analysis of the man-God dialectic in *Der Römerbrief* and *Die Christliche Dogmattik im Entwurf* (where *Krisis* and *Diakrisis* are still employed), as Barth makes plain in his Preface to *Church Dogmatics* I.1. There is a shift from rupture as *Krisis* to rupture as *Ereignis*, and a movement too from a negative to a more positive theology. But in that famous Preface, two points seem significant for my argument. First, Barth describes the difference between his work in 1927 and his work in 1932 as "saying the same thing, but in a very different way" (p. xi). It is the vocabulary that changes rather than the underlying theology. And part of the reason that vocabulary changes is Barth's wish to disassociate his work from "those who are commonly associated with me as leaders or adherents of the so-called 'dialectical theology'" (p. xv). Secondly, he draws attention to his exclusion of "anything that might appear to find for theology a foundation, a support, or justification in philosophical existentialism" (p. xiii). It is this foundation for theology in philosophical existentialism evident in, say, Bultmann's employment of *Krisis* in his 1931 essay "*Krisis des Glaubens*", that Barth wishes to disassociate from his own work. But Barth's statement does not mean a rejection of existentialist anthropology – as the concern with being questioned, being insecure and the repeated use of *Dasein* in the closing pages of Chapter five illustrates. The Jesus of *Krisis* and the Jesus of the later *Ereignis* are closely related – though there is a development in the direction of particularism. Barth seems to realise in the ten years between 1922 and 1932 that his earlier existentialist vocabulary has been read as the philosophical foundation for what William Nicholls calls "a negative natural theology" (*Systematic and Philosophical Theology*, p. 102). Existentialism cannot ground a theology of the Word in this way. But this reading of his earlier work is all too possible, even if it is not the reading Barth intended. Barth's later work, with Jesus as the event (*Ereignis*) of the Word, clarifies his thinking: existentialism cannot ground a theology of the Word, but a theology of the Word still requires the metaphysico-anthropological structures of thought and language in order to exist at all. There is, then, as Barth says in I.1, "a way from Christology to anthropology, but there is no way from anthropology to Christology" (p. 131). Both *Krisis* and *Ereignis* are descriptions of rupturing read Christologically and anthropologically and, as one Barth scholar has recently said in criticism of Torrance's emphasis upon dogmatics as revelational objectivism, "the sense of rupture . . . was always so important to Barth" (George Hunsinger in *How to Read Karl Barth* (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991), p. 11).

- 3 Reference must be made here to Steven G. Smith's highly stimulating book, *The Argument to the Other* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), which, as its subtitle states, concerns "Reason Beyond Reason in the Theological Thought of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas". Smith's purpose in the book is two-fold. First, to

outline the historical development of Barth's and Levinas's thinking about the Wholly Other, and secondly, to draw attention to "their common gesture of arguing to the Other" (p. 242). Insofar as the book focuses upon the method by which Barth and Levinas construct their argument to the Other – the kind of logic that governs their thinking – it differs from this present study. The book does not compare the structures of Barth's and Levinas's thinking with reference to how each understands representation, analogy and the economy whereby representation and analogy become significant for us. While drawing attention to their similar ethical positions, Smith's book does not examine, as this essay intends to, the phenomenology of signification which, I will argue, is the fundamental concern of both thinkers and the source of their subsequent similarities.

- 4 The analogy of appresentation or apperception is developed by Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations* (lectures given at the Sorbonne in 1929, published in Germany in 1933, but translated by Levinas and Gabrielle Peiffer for the French in 1931). Husserl develops this form of analogy in an attempt to answer how, given his own commitment to a transcendental subjectivity, there can be the experience of and acknowledgement of someone else. "A certain mediacy of intentionality must be present here," Husserl writes, otherwise "he himself and I myself would be the same" (C.M.,p.109). The question is the nature and status of this mediacy – for that which cannot attain actual presence needs to be mediated and yet comprehensible as an object exterior to the mediation. Husserl concludes that, aware of "the difficult problem of making it understandable *that such an apperception is possible*" (C.M.,p.113), "[T]he body over there . . . must have derived this sense by an apperceptive transfer from my animate organism, and done so in a manner that excludes an actually direct and primordial showing of the predicates belonging to an animate organism specifically, a showing of them as perception proper. It is clear from the very beginning that only a similarity connecting, within my primordial sphere, that body over there with my body can serve as a motivational basis for the 'analogizing' apprehension of that body as another animate organism" (C.M.,pp.110–11). Husserl is quite plain about the difference between this form of analogizing and any other, for it "by no means follows that there would be an inference from analogy" (C.M.,p.111). He perhaps has in mind here the form of analogizing that we might call inductive reasoning and which Hegel labels as "analogy" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel too, having spoken about how, from the evidence of one experiment, "we can then by *analogy* draw an inference about the rest", goes on to compare "probability" with "truth" and concludes: "analogy . . . on account of its nature contradicts itself so often that the inference to be drawn from analogy itself is rather that analogy does not permit an inference to be made" (P.S.,p.152). Analogies do not give access to the universal, for Hegel; they remain arbitrary comparisons drawn in the realm of the contingent. Husserl takes this further – analogies are "conceivable only as an analogue of something included in my peculiar ownness . . . [They] occur[s] necessarily as an '*intentional modification*' of that Ego of mine . . . or as an intentional modification of my primordial 'world': the Other as phenomenologically a 'modification of myself'" (C.M.,p.115). Levinas would agree, his own analogy of appresentation is the understanding of a co-presence. Where he would disagree is in the priority given to the Ego in Husserl's account. The priority is given to the Other (the eternal Ego rather than the existential Ego, as Barth would say). It is Husserl reversed: the Ego is now the modification of the infinitely other. But the concept and method of "analogy of appresentation" remains the same. The Other is recognised as an analogy of apperception by the Ego. For Levinas, the infinity of this Other requires a

submission because of the disymmetry of the relationship. Husserl would wish to know how this is recognised as disymmetry – how one determines that the Other is not only that Other body over there but is an incarnation of an infinity that is absolutely other. Within Husserl's thinking there is no room for an absolutely other that can be recognised as such.

With this we come to a problem at the heart of Levinas's thinking and method, a problem Derrida succinctly put his finger on in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. The complexity involved in elucidating this methodological problem lies outside the scope of this essay, and is the subject of a future work. For the moment, I wish only to highlight the problem. Put simply, how can appresentation determine? Husserl would say it could not because of two factors. First, and primarily, the appresentation is a deduction based upon the experience of another body over there by my body over here. It is a recognition that "points back to a '*primal instituting*', in which an object with a similar sense became constituted for the first time" (C.M.,p.111). Otherness can only be recognised "as phenomenologically a modification of myself" (C.M.,p.115). The Ego constitutes it as Other, but cannot constitute it as absolutely other. The Ego determines the recognition and the appresentation; the appresentation cannot determine itself and its recognition by the Ego. Secondly, and intimately related, is the fact that no inference can be drawn about the actual presence of the other from the analogy of appresentation because "what is *appresented* by virtue of the aforesaid analogizing can never attain actual presence" (C.M.,p.112). The question with Levinas's work, then, is how can the appresentation present itself and still remain ap-presented? How can Levinas reverse Husserl? Does not Levinas require in his analysis of the non-relationship between the infinitely other, its Saying and its said, some overarching synthesis that allows there to be communication of the other to the self, the significance for the self of the other? Is he not using the phenomenological method against itself? And while beginning from one point, the experience of the Ego, does he not wish to suggest that the beginning is really another point, the modification of the absolute other? How is this principle of "modification" to be understood analogically? These are the questions that will preoccupy Derrida.

By contrast, the same questions are obviated in Barth by his emphasis on faith, knowledge which is a not-knowing and the operation of the Trinity. What is appresented can be presented and articulated in analogies of appresentation (or *analogia fidei*), in Barth, because of the Spirit that facilitates the Revelation of the Revealer. The same questions do not arise because faith is *a priori* for Barth – his discourse is frankly theological, whereas Levinas's pertains to being philosophical.

- 5 Levinas writes: "*le dialogue de la transcendance... est le dia du dialogue*" (D.V.I.,p.225), and "*a tout jamais, je n'accède que par apprésentation*" (D.V.I.,p.221).
- 6 Derrida's observation, in his most recent essay on Levinas's work, is helpful: "*le tout autre... négocie le non-négociable avec un contexte, négocie son économie comme celle de l'autre*". "*En ce moment même...*", in *Psyché* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 160. Representation *qua* context within which Saying occurs draws attention to itself as only context, i.e., the absence of the text of the other draws attention to the inevitable substitution, the endless contextuality that such absence provokes.
- 7 It has been pointed out to me that Barth is playing here on the core-formulation of the Lutheran doctrine of consubstantiation in the Lord's Supper. Barth, throughout the *Church Dogmatics* draws attention to the relation between the Word in words and the sacraments: "At every point, the divine sign-giving in

which revelation comes to us has itself something of the nature of a sacrament" (I.2,p.231).

- 8 One notes how Barth's rhetoric of the triple clause and the three-fold reference occurs throughout *Church Dogmatics* and one wonders how far this clarifies of obfuscates what is being said. Is this a stylistic re-presentation of the operation of the Trinity within revelation or merely rhetoric?
- 9 Interestingly, this "entrance into", which Barth earlier terms "the absolute Moment", is called, in *Church Dogmatics* by the very Heideggerian term "*Ereignis*". This is a term Heidegger developed his understanding of between 1936–38 according to the seminar which followed his 1962 lecture "Time and Being". There are many points of similarity between Heidegger's later use of this word and Barth's, but the hidden conversation is not between Heidegger and Barth, it is between Barth and his older brother Heinrich, the Professor of philosophy at Basle. The move from the negativity of *Krisis* and *Diakrisis* in R. and C.D.E. to the more positive *Ereignis*, reflects Barth's development of the doctrine of analogy, which was able to constitute a mediation for the ontological difference between human beings and the Creator. See later in the essay for how this doctrine relates to Barth's Christology.
- 10 *How to Read Karl Barth*, George Hunsinger (Oxford: O.U.P., 1991), p. 68. The question of whether Levinas would accept that one needs to be already working with theological assumptions in order to grasp the validity of his form of analogy, is a different question altogether. That question would have to treat more fully the differences between Levinas's and Derrida's thinking and how each has replied to the other's work since the early Sixties.
- 11 Barth's Christological particularism and its relationship to his theological realism has been recently examined in two important books: Bruce Marshall's *Christology in Conflict* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1987) and George Hunsinger's book. The former details the logic of Barth's particularist Christology and the latter describes its nature.
- 12 Bruce Marshall, in outlining the consistency of Barth's Christology – Barth's answer to the question who is Jesus Christ, the particular person, *heilsbedeutsam* – does not touch upon this. It is outside his very specific task which is to clarify the grounds upon which Jesus Christ can be consistently named as unique and "alone the definitive bearer of that which is ultimated significant" (p. 12).
- 13 This similarity-in-difference reflects, to some extent, their "different" starting-points for the analysis or exegesis of revelation. Barth's theological starting-point is the *a priori* of faith in God and Levinas's philosophical starting-point is the structure of intentionality. But, again, we cannot make too much of this "difference" insofar as Barth is aware that the tools he employs are metaphysico-anthropological ones and that outside the *a priori* of faith all his thinking might constitute a lesson in human psychology (c.f. II.1, pp.244–5/276–7).
- 14 Raimundo Pannikar might recognise here "The Trinity . . . as a junction where the authentic spiritual dimension of all religions meet", *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man*, (New York: Orbis, 1973), p. 48. But in this essay I am simply drawing attention to similarities in the structure of Barth's and Levinas's thinking.
- 15 Barth examines *vestigia trinitatis* in the first volume of *Church Dogmatics*. His concern is to dismiss "an essential trinitarian disposition supposedly immanent in some created realities quite apart from their possible conscription by God's revelation" (p. 334). Levinas's 'family' is not such a *vestigium trinitatis*, but the structure of the hegemonic revelation that only the revelation itself reveals.
- 16 "The Doctrine of Time in Karl Barth" by Richard Roberts in *Karl Barth: Studies in his Theological Method*, ed. Stephen Sykes (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1979).
- 17 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 3.

EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Edith Wyschogrod

Source: *The Thomist* 36(1) (1972): 1–38.

Emmanuel Levinas is a French phenomenological thinker with deep roots in Jewish tradition. His work shows an extraordinary thematic unity; it is an attempt to ground the view that the advent of other persons is a primordial upsurge of language. Thus he attacks one of the most vexing and fundamental concerns of contemporary religious thought: the primary meaning of language as a human phenomenon. The novelty of Levinas's investigation lies in its assumption that both language and morality rest upon non-rational foundations. Together with the question of language, Levinas develops an account of the responsible self as an infrastructure prior to all decision-making processes, that is, prior to the activation of responsibility in the world of freedom. Working in the tradition of Edmund Husserl, Levinas seeks to uncover for phenomenological investigation not only the moral self but such diverse phenomena as need, knowledge, and work.

From Levinas's point of view the method of phenomenology makes possible an analysis of what is present to consciousness by revealing the structures of consciousness in its various spheres of operation. The work of consciousness presupposes existing entities, a world; it presupposes the relation with an object, with what is posited, with the being which is before consciousness. Levinas does not question the adequacy of Husserl's phenomenological method in its power to uncover the structures of cognition. But at the heart of Levinas's thought is the question: does consciousness, as phenomenological philosophy understands it, exhaust the data of all experiencing? Is not phenomenology itself more than a method, that is, does it not, like the entire tradition of Western metaphysics to which it belongs, eventuate in relations of dominance, power, and egoity?

To discover the answers to these questions we must not only identify thematizing consciousness, consciousness which intends its object, but reveal its essential operations. We must find out what is accomplished in thematizing and what sorts of experiences are distorted when brought into its purview. As Husserl had already shown, a method arises naturally from a particular region of being and is a powerful instrument for the discovery of the meaning of the being from which it originates. But the misapplication of a method falsifies an ontological realm into which it has been transplanted but from which it does not derive. For Levinas, thematizing consciousness is exercised in a particular way; it is not activated neutrally to do its cognitive work but as power, violence, and domination. When the self is identified exclusively with the work of reason, when cognition is invoked as the paradigm for all experiencing, some domains of actuality are falsified. Particularly when the relations in existence between the self and other persons are assumed to be only variants differing in object but not in kind from the cognitive model, the experience of the alterity of other persons is distorted. There are for Levinas experiences such that they contain at any given moment more than consciousness can hold. These are the metaphysically significant experiences of the infinite, of transcendence, of the face of the other as something alien and rich, something foreign to one's own being. The task of metaphysics is to attest the reality of these experiences which resist conventional analyses of consciousness and to bring these experiences into relation with the totality of existence.

Totality and infinity: setting the question

In his major work, *Totalité et infini*, Levinas undertakes to show that all psychic life, even in its infra-cognitive structures, tends to incorporate the world into a totality, a network of functional relationships with others which betrays the interiority of personal life by reducing persons to their social roles within a complex network of socio-economic relationships. Totality devours individuality by failing to recognize the sphere of inner life. The totality is the whole into which individual lives are incorporated. From his earliest work, Levinas assumes the inevitability of this process. Within totality the activities of separated being, that is, of man as he differentiates himself from being as such, are capable of providing the conditions for human contentment. Unlike Heidegger's Dasein for whom existence is an ek-stasis towards the end, a being-towards-death, man is satisfied to "live on" the world in which he finds himself. To dwell, to work, to exchange, to meditate—these are the modalities of life as separated being. The world of separated being is the domain of economy; within the confines of economy the products of human endeavor are subject to exchange and therefore to usurpation. Yet inner life persists although it cannot recognize itself in this context. Thus, in Levinas's thought, economic life is more than merely

precarious; it is experienced as tyranny. This tyranny is represented by the state which betrays rather than expresses the personal sphere.

All work is symbolic within the totality, for totality conceals the original intention of the work in question. In this sense work is as deceptive as the dream of Freudian psychology. But, from Levinas's point of view, once we have penetrated the facade of work no better understanding of subjectivity ensues. We have only revealed the intention of the work but not the inner self of the worker which remains absent from it no matter how subtle the interpretive scheme we devise, since work is not a devious project of concealment but the *modus operandi* of totality. What is not at once obvious with regard to work can be brought to light, but the realm of work can never reveal interiority, the inner lives of men which transcend totality. Only the word in its pure function as a calling forth to responsibility can break into totality.

How is the authentic self called to responsibility? How is the monadic solidarity of the whole broken? Separated being is the being who inquires, who asks what a thing is. This question already implies that the thing is not what it seems to be. The something more which is implied in the question can often be answered in terms of psychology. But no questions of this type are identical with the question: of *whom* do we inquire. Such a question is nonpsychological in origin; indeed it wrenches us free from the realm of psychology. For psychology still implies a further content belonging to the given which demands that we bring it to light, but the one to whom we address our inquiry can never be presented as a content. The reply to the question: who is it, is always presented as a face. There is no question anterior to this question; its ultimacy precludes all further interrogation. Indeed the "who" intended by the question cannot be the object of cognitive inquiry but is something given to an affective intention, that is, the "who" of the question "who is it," is the object of desire. Thus Levinas writes:

The who correlative to desire, the who to whom the question is asked, is in metaphysics as fundamental and universal a notion as quiddity, being and existing, and the categories.¹

When we inquire, "who is it" the answer to the question and the person interrogated are identical.

Only when we have perceived a person's exteriority, an exteriority radically different from that of things, do we perceive a human presence beyond ontology. With the appearance of true exteriority the totality reveals its phenomenal character, its inability, quite literally, to do justice to the other. We do not experience this inadequacy as discontent, for lack of contentment is at least theoretically satiable, whereas the feeling aroused by exteriority is incommensurable with satiety for it cannot be reduced to a feeling of need. The hunger experienced in the presence of other persons feeds upon itself.

It is lived as a hunger for the other which can neither be consummated in pleasure nor bypassed and forgotten:

Desire does not coincide with an unsatisfied need; it lies beyond satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The relation with the other person, or the idea of the infinite fulfills it. Everyone can experience it in the strange desire for the other person that no pleasure comes to crown, to terminate, or to put to rest. . . . Because of it, because of the presence before the face of the other, man does not allow himself to be deceived by his glorious triumph as a vital self and, distinct from the animal, can know the difference between being and phenomenon, recognize its phenomenality, the deficiency of its plenitude, a deficiency not convertible into needs, and which beyond plenitude and emptiness cannot be filled.²

The face resists our power to conceptualize it, not because the resistance of the face to conceptualization is so great that we cannot overcome it but because the face breaks with the sensible form which appears to contain it. Addressing us as persons, the face solicits a relationship with it which cannot be expressed in terms of enjoyment or knowledge. This means not that the other person is invulnerable to power but that the power which we have over him is transformed. We now have before us a being whose being cannot be put out of operation, "neutralized," so to speak. The being of the face is such that a negation of its being involves its annihilation.

The grounds upon which Levinas argues that the face conveys a moral imperative are experiential, that is, every experience of the face of the other yields more than a perception of the flesh, more than the appearance of a face in the world: it yields a command. The face itself is the only coercive argument for such imperatives. Indeed the recourse to argument is an option made available only after the face has erupted into the continuity, the smoothness, the indifference of the world. There are no grounds other than those of experience upon which Levinas rests his case. Once the face is experienced it transcends the categories of interpretation applicable to surfaces: form, texture, color, palpability, the idea of a field of interlocking planes, and is experienced as the foundation of moral life.

For Levinas "the epiphany of the face is the ethical." The relationship with the other may turn into conflict, but such conflict can only arise after one has already taken cognizance of the face. The expression we read on the other's face does not convey information about his inner psychological state but is always a primordial revelation of destitution and distress. The face bespeaks a basic inequity between self and others, for others appear as if from on high. It is possible to speak of Levinas's interpretation of the face as the topography of a moral universe which appears as a series of cantilevered planes in which the self reaches towards the other but remains always below the other. We cannot refuse to respond to the appeal of the

other who is above us, for he arouses our kindness and call us forth to responsibility.

The link between the expression of the other and our responsibility to him represents a function of language anterior to every unveiling of being:

It is a question of perceiving the function of language not as subordinate to consciousness one has of the other or of his nearness or of community with him but as the condition of this consciousness.³

Language does not serve a thought which precedes it and which it somehow "translates" in order to make known the content of inner life. Its upsurge is simultaneous with that content. The language of the face is such that upon its appearance we are obligated to enter into discourse with it. The existent who expresses himself is prior to being which reveals itself and forms the basis for knowledge.

The event of expression consists in bearing witness and in guaranteeing the witness which it bears. All language refers to the face, which, as Levinas puts it, is its own "word of honor." The one who speaks is the guarantor of what he says even though he may lie or be mistaken. There is no word for which someone is not ultimately responsible, which does not revert to a speaker whose face as such commands.

The pivotal point of Levinas's ethical metaphysics is conveyed in the notion that the face of the other conveys the idea of the infinite. Only the idea of the infinite transcends the self who thinks it. The formal structure of the Cartesian analysis of the idea of the infinite provides the means for a break with ontology. Levinas argues that for Descartes the self who thinks maintains a relation with the infinite. This relation is not one of that which contains to the content contained, since it is impossible for the self to contain the infinite. The content is not attached or united to the containing since the infinite to be what it is, infinite, must be separated from the self. It differs radically from other objects of consciousness in that the "ideatum" exceeds any idea that we can have of it. Consciousness which intends the infinite differs from all other intentional structures insofar as it intends more than it can encompass: indeed it intends precisely what cannot be encompassed. The infinite is placed in us; it never arises from any structure of the self. It is experienced in the most radical sense for we cannot reduce its alterity to the same. It emerges in social relations when we are addressed by a being absolutely exterior to our own.

The face of the other reveals the injustice of the totality and of all the phenomena which derive from human freedom. One's own freedom is ashamed of itself before the other, for it has discovered in itself the possibility of murder and violence; it discovers itself as injustice. Levinas maintains that the relation with the other which is preceded by neither representation nor comprehension is "invocation" or "prayer." The essence of such invocation

is *religio*, but *religio* of a very special order for it arises within the framework of ethical relations:

If the word "religion" must nevertheless indicate that the relation with men, irreducible to understanding, is equally distant from the exercise of power but unites to the infinite in human faces—then we accept the ethical connotation of the word with all its Kantian echoes.⁴

Language and discourse

In a half dozen essays which comprise Levinas's most strategic recent work, the problem of language is discerned as the central issue of his thinking.⁵ While philosophers of similar temperament such as Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, to whom Levinas is indebted, refrain from analyzing the structure of thought, for Levinas the process itself holds considerable interest. According to Levinas, the process of thematization does not consist in perceiving a "this" or a "that" but in *understanding* something by the given. That is to say, something is not first given and then understood but, in accordance with Husserl's interpretation, by the given such and such is already meant. Although thematization means something by the given, it in no sense prejudges the content of what is given. The act of meaning a "this" insofar as it is a "this" does not distance one from the object, from "being in the original"; it simply means that in understanding a "this" insofar as it is "this," not the object but its meaning is understood. There is no mere object; there is only an object meant:

The intending of "this" insofar as it is "that," does not intend the object but its meaning. Being neither has to fill nor to falsify meaning. Meaning, neither given nor non-given, is intended. But it is starting with meaning that being is manifested as being.⁶

Levinas does not deny that for Husserl the world is immediately present to consciousness, a presence guaranteed by its being. But this being is not subject to subsequent recreation or reconstitution by consciousness. The presence of being cannot be interpreted as a weighing down upon the subject of the being of the world, nor as the impact of the manifold sensible upon a passive consciousness. If any lesson has been learned from Husserl, it is that to be present to consciousness is not the equivalent of filling an empty container, that the notion of a "this" unwinding before a passive gaze is happily defunct. Every "this" which is experienced is already a "this" which is intended.

What Levinas derives from Husserl's understanding of intentionality is its function in designating something as one, "something insofar as it is something." For Husserl "to understand something as . . ." lies at the foundation

of consciousness; it operates as an a priori of consciousness without which consciousness would not be what it is. Every designation of truth or falsity already presupposes it. Such apriority is neither "temporal anticipation" or "logical anteriority." To proclaim meaning is first and foremost to name, to proclaim that the object intended is a "this" or a "that." When Levinas writes that the "apriority of the a priori is a 'kerygma,'" what he means is the still strictly Husserlian supposition that the apriority of the a priori is that by virtue of which a simple proclamation that the object is what it is becomes possible because of the intention which animates it, bestows upon it its unity. Thus Levinas understands the object to maintain an identity, an ideality through its multiform and vanishing appearances precisely as Husserl understands it. Levinas writes:

Everything, if you will, is imaged in experience except the identity of individuals, which dominates the instants of the images. It (identity) can only happen as intended.⁷

In short, experience presupposes identity through multiplicity, "to-mean-as-the-same," "to-take-as-the-same." Thus, for Levinas, while Husserlian phenomenology reinstates the primacy of being so that the object is interpreted as fully present, as being, it also and primarily understands thought as conferring an ideal meaning. Being could not show itself without this ideal meaning. To put it otherwise, Levinas sees Husserl as having meant that to bestow a meaning upon being is neither more nor less than letting being be. If this is indeed Husserl's standpoint, it is, from Levinas's point of view, correct. There is no appearing beyond meaning or outside of it. The consequences of this approach to phenomena are, according to Levinas, extremely significant, for now *every* phenomenon is discourse or a fragment of discourse.

Levinas agrees that to avow that a thing is a "this" or a "that" as Husserl has done is a function of judgment. Thus, not only are all phenomena "language," even if only in a rudimentary way, but all saying is already judgment. It is not a subsidiary or accidental feature of language but belongs to speech as predicative. It is as proclamation that language is signifying. The contiguity of linguistic signs is not an arbitrary event. Language signifies because it is, as kerygma, the avowal of an identity. Thus, thought and other processes of conscious life for which thinking provides the model are correctly understood by Husserl to implicate human existence in the discursive realm, but these processes for Levinas can never provide the foundation for moral life.

We have now seen that Levinas's interpretation of Husserlian intentionality enables him to show that every phenomenon does not merely bear a freight of language but is already a fragment of discourse, that to appear is quite literally to have been spoken for. Levinas arrives at a second equally

critical conclusion: the individual can only be attained in discourse through "the detour of the universal." The universal is a priori and precedes the individual. When thought thinks itself to be most concrete, to have achieved the truth of sense certainty, to have attained the particular, it reaches only a "this" or a "that." Thus from the Husserlian supposition that all thinking is the conferring of an identity, the thinking of a thing as a "this" or a "that," Levinas is led to a Hegelian conclusion, viz., that cognition can never attain particularity. To discern the remarkable proximity of Levinas's view to that of Hegel one need only examine the following passage from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*:

It is as universal, too, that we give utterance to sensuous fact. What we say is: "This," i.e., the universal this; or we say: "it is," i.e., being in general. Of course we do not present before our mind in saying so the universal this, or being in general, but we utter what is universal; in other words, we do not actually and absolutely say what in this sense we really mean. Language as we see, however, is the more truthful; in it we ourselves refute directly and at once our own "meaning"; and since universality is the real truth of sense certainty, and language merely expresses *this* truth, it is not possible at all for us even to express in words any sensuous existence which we "mean."⁸

Levinas's conclusion that thought thinks the universal sheds new light upon what has already been uncovered in the phenomenological analysis of totality and its modes of operation. We have seen from *Totalité et infini* that thought proceeds from self to same. In his successive investigations of the problem of language Levinas shows that the self of totality not only intends the same but that the same which is intended is an empty universal. Now we find that the problem of uncovering true alterity which is first brought to light in *Totalité et infini* is deepened, for we are compelled to ask: if thought thinks the universal, if it cannot intend the individual in his concrete particularity, how can genuine particularity be attained? We must inquire, if language is the work of thematization and identification: how can singularity without universality be understood.

It might be argued, Levinas admits, that this very universality means that the truth which appears is a truth for all. We could then argue that universality as the truth for all opens the possibility of communication. Does not the truth as universal, as equally true for all, mean that the content of truth can be shared? But singularity cannot be found by pursuing universality as the truth for all; the "all" which is evoked is merely formal. "True for all" means that what is true is available as *theoria* to everyone; it is available through the bestowal of meaning, through thematizing consciousness. The truth for all can never attain unique subjectivity for it does not found the logical work of discourse but is rather the consequence of that work.

The relation with a subjectivity, an interlocutor, is in no way presupposed by the universal essence of truth. The difficulty with the concept of "universal essence of truth" is lodged in what it presupposes viz., that everything can be known. When the interlocutor is himself an object of knowledge, discourse belongs to the impersonal level of thought. But, Levinas contends, what is kerygmatic in thought carries more than universality, more than the proclamation that a "this" is a "this": it is "proximity between self and interlocutor." Whatever the content of discourse, genuine speech is contact presupposing a relation with a particularity which lies outside the message which it transmits. The bearer of the message is impervious to thematization; he can only be approached. Discourse is not subsidiary to knowledge because the interlocutor can, as such, never be known. Discourse emerges only out of prior proximity. The imperviousness to thematization arises not because there is a being such that its being is too rudimentary, too insignificant to be brought into plenary presence. The being which cannot be thematized, which is incommensurable with being, must be understood as a meaning coming from beyond being.

The notion of proximity which Levinas develops is not a diminution of the distance between beings; it has nothing to do with spatial contiguity. Proximity is rather the immediacy of human presence. It "means" in and of itself. "Proximity is in and of itself signification." Levinas writes:

Proximity is thus a relation with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality. Concretely my relation to one who is near me, his significance anterior to the famous meaning bestowal, corresponds to this description.⁹

We have seen that universality belongs to knowledge as its infra-structure. But is the idealizing intentionality of cognition the only access to reality? In his earlier work Levinas show that feeling (sentience) is a unique mode of relating to the world which does not subvert the credibility of intelligence. It is neither a thought lacking in clarity and distinctness nor a representation not brought into sharp focus. It is an altogether novel mode of relating to the world, sufficient unto itself and satisfied with the felt. The immediacy of the sensible is an event of nearness. The sensible is never known; it is approached. The sensible does not bring before consciousness elements refractory to consciousness, nor does it offer what cannot be integrated into the structure of the world. But the sensible establishes a unique access to the real.

Sensible intuition is not a thought thinking itself; such a view stems from the primacy of vision among the senses. Yet vision itself, Levinas argues, signifies in ways not immediately apparent. It is common to say that one eats something up with one's eyes. Such an expression is more than metaphorical, since it shows the primacy of consuming, of devouring,

incorporating into oneself. The sense of taste clearly transcends the cognitive model for the object is pierced and demolished. The real meaning of the sensation of taste lies not in the information received but in its penetration into the intimacy of things. If sensation is read as the fulfillment of an intention by the given, it is misunderstood for it is then modelled on an aspect of vision cognitive in its intentionality and false to the sensuous itself. In sensation something *happens* between the feeling and the felt in the strongest sense. To feel the world in Levinas's thought is to consume it.

The primacy of touch has also been subverted by the cognitive aspect of the visual. In touch what has been primordially revealed is not the quiddity of the existent, although touch can turn into a mode of knowledge by transforming the palpable into information, into knowledge of the surface of things. Touch is "pure approach, pure proximity," before it eventuates in information or understanding. The act itself is not an experience of the act; the caress, for example, is contact, not a metalevel experience of it. Proximity in the caress remains what it is although it may express something in addition to contact and nearness. The way in which these things are given in their "flesh and blood reality" is through proximity. The felt is defined by this relation; it is, according to Levinas, "tenderness." The concreteness of the sensible is language. But intentionality bypasses the concreteness of the sensible, fails to take account of the nearness of being. From the point of view of understanding what the sensible contributes to understanding may seem superficial, but the ethical relation to the real is rooted in the lived reality of the sensible. The sensible is an engagement in life. In Levinas's view one sees in the way that one touches rather than touching in the way that one sees.

Moral relations circumvent intentionality; they are relations of nearness. The moral relation is the relation with the next one touching rather than intending the next one in his non-ideal unity. There is an absence of horizon against which the identity of the other is revealed. He is the other who means prior to the bestowal of meaning. To have a meaning before all meaning is bestowed is to be other.

The temporalization of nearness, of proximity, reflects its difference from consciousness as a mode of access to the real. Proximity is an anachronism to consciousness; it has vanished before consciousness can take cognizance of it. Consciousness is always "behind" human presence, arrives too late upon the scene, and is therefore at the outset already bad conscience.

For Levinas the notion of proximity is not merely an exception to intentionality so that consciousness still retains a privileged standpoint with regard to the formation of values and *praxis*; it undercuts the importance of consciousness as a privileged mode of entry into the real. It is through approach that the face emerges and the manifestation of being is transfigured into ethical relation. "Consciousness," writes Levinas, "returns to obsession." Similarly:

It is a summoning of the self by the other, a responsibility with regard to men that we do not even know. The relation of proximity . . . is already summoning, extreme urgency—an obligation anachronistically prior to all engagement. It is an anteriority older than the *a priori*. This formulation expresses a way of being touched which in no way allows itself to be invaded by spontaneity; the subject is moved without the source of movement being made into a theme of representation. The term “obsession” designates this irreducible relation to consciousness.¹⁰

The term obsession has been overlaid with psychological nuances so that it is generally taken to mean pathological exaggeration, but its original import implies a nearness of being. The near one summons and commands, places upon one the onus of a responsibility without choice.

Proximity is not a simple coexistence of two existents. In the presence of the near one an absence wells up which is the very reverse of serenity, a hunger which Levinas designates in much of his work as “desire,” a proximity which could not be nearer and an appetite which remains insatiable. That which is absent is the presence of the infinite which cannot be put into words. Elusive, ineluctable, it “contests its own presence.” It is absence “at the edge of nothingness,” always in flight but leaving behind it a trace as the face of the near one.

An alternate view of language

Levinas claims that the view of language which we have just disclosed is far from exhaustive. Language thus understood only serves to communicate what has already been fixed in intuition. Expression plays no role in constituting these meanings. While Husserl recognizes that the given is situated against a horizon or world, these horizons do not play a role of great importance in understanding the function of language. It remained for later phenomenologists, particularly for Merleau-Ponty, to show that meaning itself is situated in relation to a language or culture, that meaning is always contextual. Words do not have isolated meanings but already refer to other words rather than to givens. Language itself refers to the one who hears and the one who speaks, to the contingency of his history. One can never summarize all the contexts of language and all the positions in which interlocutors find themselves. Like language itself, experience is no longer made of bits and pieces locked into Euclidean space. The elements of experience “signify” starting from a world, from the position of one who looks. Customary definitions of words cannot be trusted for significations are not limited to any special realm of objects, are not the privilege of any special content. Spring, for example, can refer to the season and to the speaker with equal primordially as Michel Dufrenne has shown. Meanings refer to one another, can arise within the totality of being all around the one who speaks and perceives.

A "this" insofar as it is a "this" is not a modification brought to a content apart from language but lives in a world whose structure resembles the order of language. The "this" is not given outside of that order; signification does not emerge from a being which lacked signification. Objects become meaningful starting with language and not the reverse; the figurative sense takes priority over the literal.

The essence of language now belongs to the illumination of what is found beyond the given, of being as a whole. The given itself takes on its meaning from this totality. The totality itself is not composed of isolable elements but is chameleon-like in its fluidity and instability: it is the product of a "creative gesture of subjectivity." Signification thus understood is a free and creative arrangement. The eye itself is embodied, that is, it is ensconced in a body which is also hand, sound emitting, etc. The one who looks does not introduce relativity into a congealed totality from a fixed vantage point, for the look itself is already a look belonging to a body and therefore a look relative to a position. The fact that the totality inundates the sensible given and that vision is embodied is not an accidental feature of receptivity. Nothing is given, according to this view, apart from the ensemble of being which illumines it. The one who is receptive to this illumining totality is not a passive spectator but helps bring the ensemble into being. The subject is not one who is vis à vis that which is; instead he is within and alongside of that which is. He participates in its assemblage. This "ubiquity" is what it means to be body.

This assemblage is one of non-natural entities, that is, of cultural objects; paintings, poems, etc. But it is also the less studied effect of all linguistic gestures. These cultural objects gather up otherwise dispersed entities into meaningful configurations which are themselves totalities. They express a period, a historical era; they make meaning possible. Expression is not organized in terms of thought anterior to its exteriorization but is the expressive gesture itself. Meaning moves into a preexisting cultural world. Corporeality itself means that one is plunged into that world, that one expresses it as soon as it is thought. The corporeal gesture is itself a kind of poetry, a celebration of the world. One becomes subject and object at the same time imitating the visible and coinciding with the perceived movement kinesthetically. Levinas writes:

It is obvious that in this whole conception expression defines culture, that culture is art and that art or the celebration of being constitutes the original essence of incarnation.¹¹

Art is not a project to make something beautiful but part of the ontological order.

To accept such a modification of standard phenomenological thought as offering a possibility for attaining genuine alterity would run counter to the

very presuppositions upon which Levinas's own enterprise is based. For Levinas art can never be the foundation of the ethical, since art represents a return to pagan sacrality, to a position in which one is overwhelmed by undifferentiated being. Clearly a point of view which exalts all gesture, all language as art, cannot, in Levinas's view provide the basis for an apprehension of genuine alterity. To express is the very opposite of celebration. He notes that the present view of language rests upon the assumption that truth is inseparable from its historical manifestations. He concedes that this view of language provides rich and novel insights for understanding the conditions which language fulfills when it is the language of activity and event, when it is metaphor, but it simply explicates and makes panoramic the role of the creative self. In this regard it is important and valuable, but its insights are limited to the relationships which obtain within the totality; yet such insights can never become ultimate.

Levinas attacks this view of language as a foundation for ethics on Platonic grounds. He is able to formulate a rejoinder in these terms by reducing this view of language to a theory of becoming and therefore making it subject to Platonic correctives. It is a theory in which intelligibility is lodged in becoming itself, in the historical process. For Plato the world of genuine meaning is *prior* to the world of language and culture in which it is expressed; indeed there *is* a privileged standpoint from which all historical cultures can be judged. This transhistorical angle of vision which judges all cultures expels the mimetic poets from the realm of being, the realm from which the transhistorical standpoint originates. The language of the poets leads not to a "preexistent signification" but to the imitation of existing cultures. For contemporary philosophies of language as well as for the unfortunate poets of the *Republic*, meaning cannot be separated from the bearer of meaning.

But Levinas is himself required to account for the experience of meaning in human existence. If he wishes to remain within the boundaries of phenomenology he too must find a locale for meaning as it appears in the context of human concerns. He must show how meaning is introduced into totality to reveal a transhistorical dimension within history itself. He must uncover an experience which is not subject to the kerygmatic structure of thinking which we have just examined, for this structure provides a hermeneutical tool only for the understanding of the totalizing self. Despite the fact that thought fails to provide a viable ground for the founding of values, there is a type of experience which introduces the transhistorical into totality itself. This experience is work. We have seen that there is a kind of work which *belongs* to totality as proper to it, work which allows man to take account of his needs and to provide for them. But work in the authentic sense is the very opposite of work in the domain of economy. No longer is it protection against possible adversity in an unknown future. Instead it expects no realization in its own time. Such work is not an expenditure of energy which eventuates in

commodities. Work, thought through radically, is a movement of the same to the other which never returns to the same. It demands that the other be ungrateful, for gratitude would reverse the movement of the same to the other by returning what was given to the self from which it derives. Nor is work the accumulation of merit, for merit is always acquired on one's own behalf. Authentic work is possible only as patience; the one who works does not seek a personal soteriological goal. He renounces all hope of being contemporary with the successful outcome of his labor. To intend a work whose victory lies outside of one's own time is to establish an eschatology without hope. It is being in the mode of being for what comes after oneself. This is the sacrifice of personality demanded of personality within the framework of history and cannot be understood as an expression of cultural multiplicity. Levinas does not deny that meaning begins in a cultural context, but he denies that it ends there. Culture in his view is the scaffolding which falls away leaving the transhistorical dimension of work.

*The trace*¹²

How is an authentic philosophy of language possible apart from cultural multiplicity? Is there a being such that its being is the same for all cultures? Levinas claims that the being of the other revealed within the totality signifies transhistorically and transculturally. This being is seen as a human face. Levinas claims in *Totalité et infini* that the face functions as the corporeality of spiritual existence, just as the hand is the corporeality of effort or the eye of vision. In his recent work the question of the origin of the face comes into prominence in its relation to language. If its origin lies beyond being, beyond the possibility of appearing within the limits of a horizon, then the beyond is not a simple background against which the face appears, from which it emerges as things emerge in the world. Levinas is careful to disclaim a world behind the visible world. The face is not a symbol, which through its very upsurge brings what is symbolized into the discursive realm. The face is "abstract." This does not mean that its appearance leads from the particular to the general, nor does it mean that eternity has entered into time. The face which enters into the world disturbs the order of the world and is reflected in the destruction of immanence; the face cannot be placed against a horizon within the world. It comes from elsewhere without symbolizing something other than itself. It is indicative of itself alone; it is not a mask which hides the truth of its existence.

In one of his infrequent references to Sartre, Levinas cites Sartre's observation that the other person is a pure hole in the world. For Levinas this is so not because one's own world drains away through the other but because the other bears a relationship to the absolutely Absent. This is the "whence" from which the other comes. Yet the other does not reveal his origin as the sign reveals what is signified; that which is absent is not unveiled as being

through the appearance of the face, for the Absent is beyond both being and revelation. It is a mistake to assume that the elsewhere which is evoked by the face can yield a meaning for investigation; to assume that is to assume that the "elsewhere" is world. It is also to ignore the fundamental lesson of phenomenology: there is no world behind the world which appears.

Nevertheless the face belongs to the world of immanence as a thing in the world while it retains its alterity and its origin beyond appearance. It is experienced as a disruption of the correctness of the world, as though no impropriety belonged to the world as such but only emerged with the entrance of human categories. The beyond from which the face comes appears as a "trace." The face is as an absolutely completed past, a heretofore which is completely irrecoverable. Through the face alone transcendence appears without being destroyed as transcendence. Transcendence, as it erupts disturbs the surface of the world as a stone thrown into a pool ruffles its previous serenity.

The meaning of the trace issues from an immemorial past, a past impervious to memory. This past is also according to Levinas, "eternity." Eternity belongs to the past as its irreversibility; this eternity is the "refuge of the past." When Levinas speaks of eternity he means a dimension which cannot be converted into the present as the act of beginning, commencement, origin, for these are the lived modes of egoity. Levinas is careful to preserve certain modalities of the past and the future as impervious to cognition and to historical knowledge so that the temporal dimension of the beyond of being, of the elsewhere, is not eroded by the historical process.

The beyond of being opened by the face is a personal order. It is an order of the third person of a "He" who cannot be defined. The profile that the irreversible past takes on through the trace is the profile of the "He." The third person is the beyond. He is as absolutely unavailable, withdrawn into an irreversible past. This irreversibility is designated as his "illeity." Levinas maintains that the trace "means," that is, that it puts one in touch with illeity, establishes a relation with the third person. Levinas's third is a presence in absentia. His view is perhaps best expressed in the lines from T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land":

Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you. . . .¹³

Since the trace is not a bringing forth into light, an unveiling, is recalcitrant to phenomenological analysis because it cannot be integrated into the order of what can appear, what approach can we properly take to it?

One can locate the meaning of the trace in the phenomenal world which it interrupts. Levinas insists that the trace is not a sign. Yet he also claims that

it can play the role of a sign, just as the track of the prey which leads the hunter to his quarry, or the work of the criminal which serves as a trail leading to his apprehension are characteristic marks which point to the one who has left them behind. But the trace differs from other signs; the track or trail is emblazoned in the order of being and becomes part of that order, but the trace "means" while retaining its transcendence. It means without meaning to mean.

Nowhere in Levinas's work does the problem of avoiding a world behind the scenes appear more pressing. In the attempt to bypass Kantian noumenality Levinas reads a double meaning into already present instantiations, that is, into what already exists phenomenally. What is present is all that *is*. What lies beyond being intrudes into the world of phenomena, but its meaning wells up from the phenomenon itself and eliminates the need for intermediate idealization. Meanings lie hidden yet are available to immediate moral awareness rather than to thematizing consciousness. It is not difficult to see that Levinas has given ethical weight and import to Heidegger's notion of forest trails. To those who understand forest lore these trails are meaningful, just as, in Heidegger's view, there are signs for those who seek a retrieve of being.

Wood (*Holz*) is an old name for forest. In the wood there are paths that are mostly overgrown and ending in the untrodden. They are called wood trails. Each runs separately but in the same forest. Often it seems as if one were the same as the other. But it only seems so. Woodcutters and forest rangers know the paths. They know what it means to be on a wood path.¹⁴

Heidegger's idea becomes *religio* in Levinas's thought, since for Levinas there is no interrogation of being guided by traces but an instant upsurge of transcendence in the field of the other's presence.

Unlike those activities which are planned to leave tracks or which leave tracks inadvertently but which can be integrated into the order of being, can be made to appear, the authentic trace disturbs the order of the world. It is like the trail of the criminal in this respect: it is the imprint of one who wishes to erase his tracks, as though a master criminal who wished to commit the perfect crime attempted to extirpate all marks of his presence. The English reader may be struck by the resemblance Levinas's view bears to that of John Wisdom with regard to the ambiguity of divine presence in Wisdom's essay "Gods."¹⁵ In Wisdom's parable two observers return to a long-neglected garden where some plants are still seen to be thriving among the weeds. Investigation yields no positive evidence that anyone has been working in the garden, yet one of the observers perceives the trace of purposeful activity, of beauty and arrangement, while the other sees nothing but the work of chance.

In Levinas's thought the one who has left his tracks has no wish in effacing his presence to leave behind his work or his word. The tracks neither say nor do anything. The order of the world has been upset in the absoluteness of someone's passing. "*To be as leaving a trace*, is to pass, to leave, to pardon."

The trace is the weight of being beyond "its acts and its language." Levinas speaks of the weight of being because being is irreversible, cumulative, cannot be limited or encompassed by a self:

The trace would be the very indelibility of being, its all powerfulness with regard to every negativity, its immensity incapable of being enclosed in itself and in some way too great for all discretion, for interiority, for a self . . . the trace would not put one into relation with what is less than being, but obligates with regard to the infinite, to the absolutely other.¹⁶

Things, Levinas maintains, do not leave traces; they only leave effects. Cause and effect do not belong to the same order of existence. Things are exposed to cause and effect without any awareness of this fact. It is always possible that the intervention of human consciousness may attribute trace to mere effect. The history of things is without a past, that is, events in the world are contemporary insofar as the world of cause and effect are concerned, but the order of causal efficacy can be reinstated through human agency. A cause can be brought into the present through memory or through inference. The trace as trace, however, does not lead to a past which can be elicited but is the past of an extremely ancient past impervious to all effort to bring it into the light of the present. The other is *in* the trace of illeity; this is the origin of its otherness. All seeming alterity betrays the origin of true alterity, of the trace.

What comes to mind in Levinas's discussion of the trace is the classical conception of the *imago dei*. This is indeed the perspective from which Levinas writes: the face is in the image of God. But what does it *mean* to be in the image of God? It is not to be an "icon" of God but "to find oneself in his trace." The God of Judaeo-Christian tradition retains "all the infinity of his absence." He shows himself only through his trace as it is written in Exodus 33: . . . "Thou shalt see what is behind me: but my face shall not be seen."

The approach to God cannot be effected by following the trace. Levinas means that to do so is to make the trace stand for a world. To approach the divine is to turn to others who are "upheld in it." To follow the trace is not to be guided by a map to an outlying region but to be commanded by a unique language. In diplomacy what is said by one representative to another can be taken to mean some entirely new proposal that could change the course of world affairs or which could signify absolutely nothing. Words themselves are always open to interpretation: language is, as we have seen, by its very nature equivocal. Language is oracular: a God was revealed upon a mountain or in a bush that was not consumed. These events are

attested in sacred literature, yet what is attested can just as properly be interpreted as a natural phenomenon or as a projective human fantasy. Other persons solicit recognition in the same way as events recounted in the biblical text. This mode of self-manifestation is the reverse of phenomenon. Levinas calls it "enigma."

The crucial question for Levinas remains: how is it possible for a meaning beyond meaning to slip into the meaning-structure of the phenomenal. Is the trace really amenable to two interpretations, both equally satisfactory? The situation is peculiar since the primary meaning is already effaced as soon as the trace appears. The phenomenon itself refutes the very meaning it conveys, for phenomenality contradicts the non-phenomenal character of "illeity." The God who is revealed as persecuted and misunderstood is revealed in this way because to be dominated, to be beyond understanding, are the very characteristics of non-phenomenality. For Levinas the truth of Judaism and of Christianity, persecuted truth, is only possible in a world where atheism has proffered the best imaginable reasons for rejecting them.

The self of responsibility

In Levinas's most recent work he directs his attention not only to the recovery of the other person for metaphysical inquiry but also to the question of the responsible self. According to Levinas, "language is the obsession of a self besieged by others." This obsession is a responsibility prior to all choice. Choice belongs to "consciousness of," to the thinker who broods in splendid isolation, to the solitary *cogito*. Genuine language is, however, responsibility, not only in the ordinary sense of the word but beyond it, because one is not only responsible for what one has done but for what one has not done. One is responsible for the other's suffering, for that for which no responsibility accrues in the ordinary sense. Responsibility arises from proximity and not from freedom. Thus Levinas:

It is a condition of the creature in a world without play, in the gravity which is perhaps the first advent of signification of being beyond its brute "it is as a that." It is the condition of being hostage.¹⁷

Genuine subjectivity arises precisely at the point where the full weight of the world is experienced. The individual as absolute interiority is not born in self-reflection, for the self which is being reflected upon is precisely what must be explicated. The reflexive pronoun (the French *se*) provides a clue to the meaning of self. It cannot be interpreted as a distance-making manoeuvre. It is rather totally passive. Levinas notes that the "*se*" is not merely the grammatical accusative but already qualifies the self as guilty. The ownmost self is indeed the very fact of being weighed down in being.

The authentic self cannot get rid of itself. Driven into itself it becomes the non-being of being. It is important to distinguish Levinas's understanding of the self from Sartre's view of *pour-soi*, being-for-itself, the being of consciousness, which at first glance it might seem to resemble. Sartre's for-itself is a non-being at the heart of being, an emptiness of in-itself; it exists for the object. It seeks endlessly to found itself through relations of identity with being. These operations are doomed to failure, for the for-itself can never be anything nor coincide with itself. It is what it is not and it is not what it is. It posits itself as not being the in-itself, as being lack, desire.

Levinas's philosophical anthropology, on the other hand, begins with man's experience of satiety. The drama of need and replenishment fully commensurate with need is enacted against the backdrop of a world which provides the subject with his requirements. Want does not go beyond the possibility of its fulfillment. The sphere of ontology is precisely the sphere in which the world and the structures which intend it are sufficient to one another. For Levinas, desire, genuine lack, intends what is beyond ontology; it does not intend a coincidence with what is, seek the fullness of the in-itself. Desire cannot want to be what it is not, as in the case of Sartre's *pour-soi* for genuine alterity, which is the object of desire in Levinas's thought cannot even be sought. In order to seek it, one would have to know in advance what one seeks. Since the other cannot be known this quest is impossible. The lived modalities of the for-itself inventoried by Sartre belong to the realm of ontology. What then is the meaning of the non-being of being as the structure of the ownmost self in Levinas' work? "The ethical event of expiation for another is the concrete situation that is designated by the verb 'not to be.'" The non-being of subjectivity is the emptying of an already pre-existent fullness for the sake of the other. One substitutes for the other, becomes his hostage. The notion of substitution is central to Levinas's latest thought.

Expiation for others can never be undertaken as a task. The ownmost self is the primordial form of this expiation. The notion of substitution, of atoning for the sins of another, is, of course, fundamental to the Judaeo-Christian view of sacrifice. To cite at random one contemporary version of the meaning of full humanity as being for others Karl Barth, in a chapter entitled "Jesus the Man for other Men," writes:

There is not in Him a kind of deep inner secret recess in which He is alone in Himself or with God, existing in Stoical calm or mystic rapture apart from His fellows . . . His relationship to His neighbors and sympathy with them are original and proper to Him and therefore belong to His innermost being.

.....

It means that He interposes Himself for them, that He gives Himself to them, that He puts Himself in their place, that He makes their state and fate His own cause, so that it is no longer theirs but His. . . ."¹⁸

Substitution is possible only for a moral consciousness obsessed with the other person, with what is strange, unbalanced, escapes all principle, origin and will. The non-being of subjectivity is an-archy, an absence of principle prior to sheer disorder, for disorder always appears upon a background of order and is explicable in terms of a fundamental coherence of being. The non-being of subjectivity arrests ontology in this sense: insofar as consciousness is the arena in which being loses itself and finds itself again, it remains beyond recovery. It is always irrevocably past and therefore irrecoverable. Its irrecoverability can however become language:

Its incapacity is however spoken. The an-archy does not rule and is thus maintained in ambiguity, in enigma, leaves a trace that discourse in the melancholy of expression tries to say. But the trace only.¹⁹

The other interrupts the smooth flow of the same leaving it speechless. One is "obsessed" with the other; the other disrupts the web of conscious life as responsibility which cannot be justified, for which no ground exists. Levinas is not afraid to say that the other is "presecutor" not in the sense in which the other devises strategies antagonistic to one's own interest but because the moral self is persecution. This obsessive interiority is not a pathological delusive system. It is the self's way of abnegating itself as egoity. The anarchy of which Levinas speaks belongs in this context.

For Levinas there is an ipseity (selfhood) underlying moral consciousness and which accounts for the "living recurrence of subjectivity," the unity of self which does not stem from temporal flux. It is a living unity which unlike consciousness never slackens. It is not a movement of loss and recovery which characterizes consciousness, nor does it enter into appearances. The selfhood of the ownmost self is not the consequence of an intention to maintain itself as unitary; rather it belongs to the self as not needing justification.

The moral self is in itself in the sense of "being in its own skin." It is the very opposite of the personal pronoun "I" which masks singularity. It is the reflexive pronoun which, as we have seen, is in the accusative voice, the very opposite of power and domination and which belongs to the anteriority of the ownmost self. Genuine ipseity is a retreat into the ownmost self without foundation elsewhere. It is always previously identified and so does not bear the onus of having to identify itself; it is always older than consciousness. The identity of singularity is not the essence of the existent nor the result of a synthetic operation of the intellect. Singularity is an identity which cannot even be asserted and therefore certainly cannot be vindicated:

These negative qualifications of subjectivity, of the ownmost self do not sanction an I-know-not-what ineffable mystery but confirm the pre-synthetic, pre-logical and, in some way atomic unity of the self which prevents it from splitting up, from separating from itself, and consequently from manifesting itself as if it is not beneath a mask and from naming itself other than by a promoun. This impediment is the positivity of the one.²⁰

The model of negative theology underlying Levinas's description of the ownmost self is clearly visible. Having already shown that thematizing consciousness guarantees that a being be what it is by bestowing a meaning upon that which is profiled in its numerous appearances, Levinas is compelled to insist that the ownmost self lies beyond the conferring of identity, beyond the function of intending the quiddity of a thing through its manifold appearances. What appears to be a denial of selfhood is as William James puts it, "a denial made on behalf of a deeper yes." Indeed it is Levinas's purpose not to diminish the self by defining it which is precisely the point of the *via negativa* in theology as William James points out:

Whoso calls the Absolute anything in particular, or says that it is *this* seems implicitly to shut it off from being *that*—it is as if he lessened it. So we deny the "this" negating the negation which it seems to us to imply, in the interest of the higher affirmative attitude by which we are possessed . . . qualifications are denied . . . not because the truth falls short of them, but because it so infinitely excels them. . . ."²¹

Levinas seizes upon the metaphors of everyday language to express the relation of being in oneself. Living in one's own skin, or the dead time between heartbeats, or the time between inhalation and exhalation convey the sense that Levinas has in mind. These metaphors are not arbitrary, for the body is not incidental to the ownmost self but its lived modality. Body is the in-itself of the deepest level of the self; it is the self's vulnerability.

It might be argued that the radical passivity which Levinas claims belongs to genuine subjectivity destroys all possibility of a subject. He concedes that this is true of the self if it is understood as thematizing consciousness, as cognitive, as pure egoity, for all of these functions originate activities of one sort or another. But prior to the upsurge of the world, of freedom, Levinas posits a primordial (*pre-originaire*) self. The paradox of the interiority described lies in the fact that there is a being such that its being precedes beginning.

Interiority is the fact that in being beginning is preceded but what precedes does not present itself to the free gaze which would assume it, does not make itself present, nor representation. Something has already

passed "above the head" of the present, has not crossed the cordon of consciousness, does not allow itself to be recovered, something which precedes beginning and principle, which an-archically, *in spite of being*, reverses or precedes being.²²

The something which lies outside the logos structure of reality precedes the formation of all values; it is a "sensitivity" through which the subject is responsible. This "responsibility" makes the subject accountable for responsibility itself. It is anterior to all intentional structure.

If this conception of the moral self is justified, how can the *de facto* condition of the world, the radical evil which meets the eye everywhere within the totality he accounted for? Levinas suggests that the very nature of responsibility makes one vulnerable to what lies outside of the self. One is vulnerable to exteriority by virtue of being in the world as body. Being as body is what it means to be present in the world. Levinas sees the *telos* of body itself as lying in the necessity for maintaining the duality of structure required by a world of self and other. Responsibility is always prior to the realm of choice which responsibility makes necessary. Evil belongs to the realm of choice and is therefore a secondary phenomenon. Levinas is profoundly antimanichean in his insistence that evil is a falling away from a prior realm of responsibility rather than an independent phenomenon. It derives from a being's very need to preserve in his being which belongs to all beings. Indeed it is this very fact which undercuts the uniqueness of man: in the realm of ontology man is like all other beings. It is only when the self is brought back to itself that it dares to undermine the right to persist in being and thereby introduce meaning into being.

Conclusions

We have seen that, for Levinas, the moral self is anterior to all positing even when such positing is axiological; it is anterior to all decision-making processes. Levinas is compelled to put the matter in this way not only because the source of values lies outside consciousness itself but because consciousness as positional is destructive of the very exteriority from which all values derive. To insist that consciousness is, among other things, axiological, is to destroy the foundations of all valuing by uprooting its source: the alterity of the other. Consciousness is intentional; intentionality is an *activity*. For Levinas this is Husserl's great discovery. Once valuing is construed as an act, it commandeers the other for its own purposes, makes him part of the same, destroys his uniqueness, etc. Thus the moral self must be pure passivity. It cannot become anything else as Aristotelian matter through the imposition of form becomes a "this" or a "that." The moral self must be passivity without potency. Levinas has thus put forward a radical version of the view that values are objective, founding all objectivity beyond consciousness itself.

It might be argued that there *is* nothing beside what is or becomes a given for consciousness. Levinas would agree. Therefore the objectivity of values lies beyond ontology. This assumption forces Levinas to account for their presence without reintroducing a noumenal realm beyond the world which appears. To introduce such a realm would be to overthrow one of the fundamental insights of phenomenology: that there is no "backstage" behind the proscenium, no world behind the world with which we are confronted. If this is so, we see why Levinas is compelled to concede that there are foci within the phenomenological realm, gathering points or knots of value which are known in all their phenomenality, but which in their very upsurge attest the transcendence of ontology. Such a concentration of value *is* the face of the other person who appears not as spiritualized but as embodied. Indeed his carnality becomes the source of his vulnerability. It might be conceded that the other is indeed a given and a veritable presentation of sense, "there" in his *Leibhaftigkeit*, his flesh and blood reality, through sensory intuition. It might even be conceded that this presence appears at once in its very upsurge as a source of value, as an object of an axiological intuition. But it might reasonably be objected: why does Levinas insist upon the transcendent, that is, upon the supraontological origin of the other as a source of value, as the object of such axiological intuition. Is this not to disguise theology in phenomenological garb, to slip a new natural theology into what is presumably a phenomenology of the moral self? The answer to this question can only be affirmative, yet it is a qualified affirmation in a sense which I shall try to show directly.

Levinas has taken pains to establish the notion of "trace which attests ill-leity, the third presence whose past can never be made present. To speak of a trace is to attest what cannot be spoken about, reduced to the same or unveiled. It can never be brought to the full and plenary presence of the being of objects or made clear and distinct as concepts and their relationships. To say that the trace can neither be brought into full presence nor made clear and distinct is not to say that we intuit the interstices of phenomena, perceive the coda rather than the sound of the theme, for the negative aspect of a phenomenon in Levinas's thought belongs to the phenomenon itself. It is rather to refuse all discourse which attempts to attribute either positive or negative qualities to God. It is to theologize by reinaugurating the *via negativa* of the mystics, which is a refusal to attest the existence of God as a "this" or a "that."

Does the trace lodged in the phenomenal world, which is more than what is presented, whose meaning can only be shown negatively and which enigmatically always remains only what it is, justify designating Levinas a natural theologian? To the extent that the phenomenal realm provides empirical foundation for affirming a realm which transcends it, Levinas can be viewed as belonging to this tradition. But he is far from asserting that there is a design in nature which reflects divine purpose and which can be ascertained

by a careful scrutiny of the operations of nature. When we look at the face of the other we know that we are commanded to honor the alterity of the other by recognizing an asymmetry between us. We also know that something has "happened" in the intersubjective "space" between us which transcends any knowledge we may have of it. But far from gaining an objective knowledge of God's purpose, we feel a deepened sense of responsibility, the weight of the other's suffering, an enhanced sense of the other's creatureliness. We do not interpret what we feel as belonging to a teleological nexus but as bearing a moral imperative. Moreover, it is a moral imperative lodged within the particularity of encounter and which cannot be made into a universal law. What is absent from the perceptual field of moral encounter in Levinas's thought is beauty, order, and arrangement, which lie at the foundation of classical conceptions of natural theology. It is important to note that Levinas prescinds all aesthetic elements from this broken natural theology, confining himself to attesting transcendence only within the field of human relations.

If Levinas eludes classification as a natural theologian, there are obstacles no less serious in interpreting his work as that of an "ethical thinker." Indeed it could be argued that Levinas by separating the moral self from rational life has undercut the very basis upon which all moral disputes can be settled including those which arise from his own position.²³ Yet to do so would be to misunderstand the crucial role which reason, as evinced in law and institutional life, plays in Levinas's thought. Man lives within totality and must be subject to the prudential rules which govern the political order. These rules are subject to formalization in accordance with the laws of thought. They are vital to the governance of affairs within the totality. The totality is the realm in which the universal is legitimately ensconced, that is, the sphere in which we must think out appropriate measures of conduct for all men. But these rules of conduct must not be mistaken for the moral order anterior to the appearance of any and all rules, an order which in its very nature we have seen to be an-archic. This is not, however, to deny three serious considerations which are entailed by the separation of the moral from the discursive self. First, it makes impossible any but oblique references to the moral self (what I have called a *via negativa* of the moral self) since what is truly moral lies beyond discursive language. Second, it may lead to a conflation of moral issues with legal issues. What *can* be argued is whether or not our actions conform to a law. What determines whether the law is a moral law cannot be argued, since all human laws stand under judgment as products of the politico-historical complex of totality. Third, there is an assimilation of reason to actual violence which puts reason, the desire to know and experience, under somewhat the same condemnation as outright violence.

In reply to the first objection, Levinas could claim that, in accordance with phenomenological principles, language arises from the phenomenon.

We cannot commandeer language from other realms of being to suit the demand for clarity and precision but must be true to the opaqueness of the phenomenon itself and the phenomenon of the moral self requires this *via negativa*. To the second objection, Levinas could reply that the weight of what lies beyond discursive language is not to be interpreted as an incentive to irrational action. It is to realize that the value of the other absolutely transcends the possibilities of discursive language and cannot be incorporated into any legal framework. Moreover, we ought to discuss practical moral questions. There is no logical necessity whatever which should make us conclude that thoughtless and irrational action follows from the assumption that the self of responsibility cannot be described. On the contrary, with the growth of responsibility of the self an ever increasing caution in the conduct of life affairs is a more likely outcome. The third objection would constitute for Levinas no objection at all, since the point of his work is to elicit the violent substructure of reason itself.

But the problems arising from separating discursive language from the foundations of the moral self cannot be dismissed summarily. We have seen that for Levinas genuine language "expresses," that is, the bearer of language ultimately both conveys and limits the meaning of language. Beyond the content of discourse language is in its very foundations ethical. This approach to language raises problems on two levels: first, while placing a high premium upon language not merely as the milieu of the ethical but as the ethical itself, this approach nevertheless regards language as the onset of violence and, second, it in effect makes Levinas's own program unsayable. Let us examine these difficulties more closely. For Levinas, human communion does not bypass language. Rather, the face of the other opens up the right to the spoken word because it is the *sine qua non* and warranty for the authenticity of language. But language is an original phenomenon. Heidegger insists on the simultaneity of thought and language and the impossibility of predicating any sequentiality in their emergence; thought and language are born together. Language as an original phenomenon means that the possibility of metaphysics is the possibility of the word. Metaphysical responsibility is already a responsibility for language. Thus Levinas:

Modern investigations in the philosophy of language have made the idea of a profound solidarity between thought and word familiar. Merleau-Ponty, among others . . . will show that disincarnate thought thinking the word before uttering it, thought constituting the world of the word joining it to the world, previously endowed with significations in a transcendental operation, was a myth.²⁴

What is critical is that there is not first the face, then language, but a simultaneous upsurge of face, language, and responsibility. Language wells up with the appearance of the face. Yet, in its very appearing, the face

undergoes a primordial act of violence. We have seen that for Levinas the other is a drawing of his alterity into the light. But no discourse can evade the necessity of the other's appearing to us, a drawing forth through violence into discursive possibility. Violence is inherent in phenomenality as such.²⁵ When Levinas attempts to found metaphysics upon ethics, the ethical foundation itself is shaken by the necessity of language to become phenomenal, that is, by the necessity of the face to appear. The emergence of true peace can only appear as an end to language, as deferred to the "not yet" of an indefinite future. Such a peace must be silence. Thus, the *telos* of language would not lie in its very upsurge which is an act of violence but in something other than itself, in silence.

The second problem relates to the difficulty of philosophizing itself. We have seen that, for Levinas, there is an inherent incompatibility between the Greek *logos* and the prophetic word. For this very reason he seeks to uncover nondiscursive phenomena, phenomena of appearing which found language so that the worn-out metaphors of philosophical discourse can be avoided. Heidegger has achieved this by seeking to recover the original meanings of a philosophical language traduced by its history without discarding the language itself. Levinas's rejection of ontology closes this possibility, for the language of being which such an enterprise recovers is, for him, not a genuine rebirth of language but an efflorescence of the same. He therefore works through metaphors which essentially convey a sense of the infinite through descriptions of epiphany. This is the very meaning of the face, the trace, enigma etc. The divine appearing, elusive and enigmatic, is recovered by bringing to discursive clarity this very obscurity and vagueness, by opening to interpretation what the phenomenon itself guides but does not legislate. In this task Levinas has no alternative but to use the outworn language which for him is the language of totality. It is a language of spatiality, of inside and outside, which is irreducible. It might be argued that such language served negative theology well, but it must be recalled that negative theologians did not ground the possibility of ethics in the upsurge of language and did not consider the word spoken between men the foundation of ethical life. Thus language itself is undermined by the requirements of what Levinas calls "formal logic," that is, the structure of language which brings into correlation the intending with what is intended.

Notes

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961), p. 152.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–155.

3 Emmanuel Levinas, "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 1 (1951), p. 93.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

5 These essays are: "La trace de l'autre," "Enigme et phénomène," "Langage et proximité," all in *En Découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, (Paris:

- Vrin, 1949), pp. 187–236; “La signification et le sens,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Vol. 69 no. 1, pp. 125–156; “Humanisme et An-archie,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, nos. 85–86, pp. 323–337; “La Substitution,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 66, Aug. 1968, pp. 487–508.
- 6 Emmanuel Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1949), p. 218.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, p. 220.
 - 8 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* tr. J. B. Baillie (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 152.
 - 9 Levinas, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 66 (Aug. 1968), p. 448.
 - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 489.
 - 11 Emmanuel Levinas, “La signification et le sens,” *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 2 (1964), p. 133.
 - 12 I have chosen to translate “*la trace*” by its English cognate “trace” rather than by track, trail, spoor, footprint, etc., so as to allow the widest possible meaning. The English “trace” conveys not only the evidence of a passing presence but can also mean the “residue” of a once fuller presence (“a trace of blood” etc.). Moreover, anything may leave a trace or residue of itself whereas tracks refer more specifically to an imprint left by creatures.
 - 13 T. S. Eliot, “The Waste Land,” *Collected Poems, 1909–1935* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), p. 87.
 - 14 Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Kostermann, 1957), p. 3.
 - 15 John Wisdom, “Gods,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1944–1945).
 - 16 Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1949), p. 200.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 233.
 - 18 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, part 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), p. 212.
 - 19 Levinas, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, vol. 66 (Aug. 1968), p. 489.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 494.
 - 21 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), p. 319.
 - 22 Levinas, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, nos. 85–86, p. 331.
 - 23 Jacques Derrida, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 69, no. 4, p. 427, argues that Levinas gives us neither ethical precepts nor a theory of ethics but an “ethic of ethics.” Let us not forget that Levinas does not wish to propose laws or moral rules to us; he does not wish to determine a morality but the essence of the ethical relation in general. But, since this determination does not give itself as a theory of ethics, it is a question of an ethic of ethics . . . Is this ethic of ethics beyond all law?”
 - 24 *Totalité et infini*, p. 180. See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 177 ff.
 - 25 See also Derrida, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 69, no. 4, p. 444–446, and Maurice Blanchot, “Connaissance de l'inconnu,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1961), p. 1092.