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LEVINAS AND THE IMMEDIACY OF THE FACE

Merold Westphal

Although he is a critical of the philosophical tradition as such French colleagues as Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, the work Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is as constructive as it is deconstructive, precisely on the question of ethics, rendered so problematic by the others. His phenomenology of the ethical significance of the face of the Other not only provides an approach to the "foundations" of ethics quite different from that of traditional ethical theory; it also provides a powerful critique of the tendency of religion to lapse into theories about God at the expense of love for God's children.

...the view that there is nothing external to experience—no World of Forms, City of God, independent cogito, a priori category, transcendental Mind, or far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves, but only the mundane business of making our way as best we can in a universe shot through with contingency.

All "homes" are in finite experience; finite experience as such is homeless. Nothing outside the flux secures the issue of it.

Just as much of American culture and society looks like a concerted effort to refute the claim of Jesus that "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15), so much of contemporary French philosophy (often designated by such umbrella names as poststructuralism or postmodernism) looks like a concerted effort to refute the claim that frames the book of Revelation, "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (1:8, 21:6, and 22:13; cf. 1:17-18).

Through loyalty to (or entrapment in) the metaphysical traditions of which they are so sharply critical, philosophers like Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard prefer Greek to Hebrew. So their assault is on the notions of *arche* and *telos*. In its search to establish the primacy of unity over plurality, univocity over equivocity, stability over flux, and so forth, Western metaphysics has regularly resorted to the notion of an ultimate origin to be the foundation of everything or an ultimate goal to be the harmonization of everything, or, typically, both. But there is no pure origin, divine (creator) or human (*cogito*); the only beginnings we can find are relative beginnings, themselves grounded in that which precedes them. Nor is there any goal by which experience or reality can be, to use the official term, totalized. All such ends represent the



wishful thinking of finite parts to be the whole, the effort of centers of force which can see that they are not the *arche* to be the *telos*. The foundationalism of which Descartes is the paradigm, and the eschatological holism of which Hegel and Marx are the paradigms are so riddled with paradox and paralogism that we must eschew the comfort they provide and accept our ultimate homelessness. Neither path leads to Absolute Knowledge, but only to other paths. The earth stands on the back of an elephant and—here's the kicker—it's elephants all the way down.

This line of thought, so nicely summarized in the quotations at the beginning of this essay, can be called contemporary French negativism. It is a series of critiques of pure reason emphasizing the wounded character of reason, its situatedness and thus its particularity, its fractured character and thus its plurality. Reason is always indebted, both to the past, by which it has been constituted, and to the future, which holds all its unfulfilled promissory notes. A number of observations can be made about this French radicalism, whose American enthusiastists sometimes bill themselves as intellectual terrorists.

1) Only the details of its critique are distinctive. For example, the two quotations at the beginning of this essay, which the reader is no doubt quite prepared to attribute to Derrida, or Foucault, or Lyotard, are not about French postmodernism at all. The first is Louis Menand's definition of American pragmatism and the second a quotation from William James in support of it.¹ Furthermore, the repudiation of foundationalism is a staple of American philosophy from Peirce to Plantinga, and the repudiation of Hegelian holism is perhaps the only theme common to all forms of "analytic philosophy" from Moore and Russell to the present.²

2) French negativism refuses, persistently and explicitly, to draw the conclusion its opponents would like to foist upon it, a certain kind of nihilistic relativism. Its exponents are relativists insofar as they make the claim that we have access to no absolute standpoint. But they refuse to infer that every point of view or every practice is just as good as any other. They insist on making distinctions even while admitting that they have no absolute criteria for doing so. Intellectual life is not exempted from the riskiness of life in general.

For example, Lyotard argues that moral judgments can never be grounded or justified. Ought can never be derived from is, that is, prescriptions expressive of justice can never be "derived from other propositions, in which the latter are metaphysical propositions on being and history, or on the soul, or on society."³ This repudiation of justification by derivation can be fruitfully compared with the critique of evidentialism found in *Faith and Rationality*, edited by Plantinga and Wolterstorff. But just as the writers in that volume do not draw nihilistic conclusions from the failure of a particular, exorbitant scheme of justification, so Lyotard does not repudiate the responsibility of

being just and of making moral judgments, but rather asks how to exercise this responsibility in the absence of the kinds of grounding philosophers have traditionally sought to provide.

3) The secularism of French negativism rests upon a rather blatant *non sequitur*. Its proponents often sound like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who says, "if there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods."⁴ They often talk as if from their own confessed inability to embody an absolute standpoint, to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, it follows that there is no such standpoint. Had they looked back behind Nietzsche to either Kierkegaard or Kant they would have discovered another possibility, the more plausible suggestion that from the impossibility of our own finite temporality's ever seeing the world from the perspective of infinite eternity, nothing whatever follows about the possibility that God might be able to see the world from such a divine point of view. Thus Kierkegaard, for whom the phrase 'humanly speaking' is important rather than redundant, has Johannes Climacus claim that reality is a system for God even if never for us as existing individuals, and Kant converts the distinction between the human perspective we embody and a possible divine perspective we do not into the central distinction of the critical philosophy, that between appearances and things in themselves.⁵

Against Hegelian monism, French negativism untiringly insists on the irreducible plurality of human meanings, perspectives, criteria, and so forth. But by never questioning the Hegelian view that the human is the measure of all things they betray how incomplete is their break with Hegel and how dogmatic is the atheistic framework in which they set their thought.

There is a double importance in noting the *non sequitur* underlying what I have been calling French negativism. First, it deprives these traditions of any pretensions, whether by the main characters or their followers, of having shown the preferability of atheism to theism. Second, and more important in my view, it deprives theists of an easy excuse for dismissing their thought. If there were a substantial link between this radical finitism and atheism, the plausibility of theism and French negativism would vary more or less inversely. But if there is no such link, the story is quite different. When the attempt to act as if

A - there is no *arche* or *telos*, no pure origin or ultimate end

followed from

B - we do not preside over or have access to any such origin or end

is explicitly repudiated, that is to say, when B no longer has A hanging around its neck as an albatross, B can be looked at more dispassionately and less defensively by Christian philosophers. And when that happens, the case for

the incorrigible finitude of human knowledge emerges, I believe, with new power and nuance. Theistic philosophers have every reason to take these critiques, as expressed in B, with great seriousness. For they clearly have theological import, and they just might be true.

That deconstructive strategies and insights are not essentially linked to the secular assumptions that seem to prevail in a French negativism with deep roots in Nietzsche and Heidegger has been brilliantly argued by Kevin Hart in *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and brilliantly demonstrated by Jean-Luc Marion in *God Without Being*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991). In other words, if the previous observation suggests that French negativism does not obviously have the nihilistic import often attributed to it by its enemies, this observation suggests that it does not have the atheistic import often attributed to it by both its fans and its foes.

4) French negativism can be fruitfully compared with what I shall inevitably have to call German positivism, though it has nothing to do with positivism in the usual sense. Two major moments in contemporary Germany philosophy, the hermeneutics of Gadamer and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas, share with French negativism a commitment, at once anti-Cartesian and anti-Hegelian, to the ineluctable finitude of human knowledge. Both are as allergic to Descartes as any contemporary philosopher, and while both are deeply indebted to Hegel, they are both closer to Kantian finitism than to Hegelian absolutism. We might call them Hegelians without the Absolute.

There is a good deal of bad blood between French negativism and both of these German traditions.⁶ But looked at closely, the ongoing debate seems to be between two parties who are in essential agreement about how much water is in the glass, but who insist, on the one hand, that it is half empty, and on the other hand, that it is half full. While hermeneutics and critical theory share with French postmodernism a repudiation of both foundationalism and totalizing holism, their tendency is to emphasize what we can have and not to linger as long on what we cannot. For both Gadamer and Habermas the concept of *Verständigung*, of coming to an understanding with others, is important. Of course, no such understanding is final, beyond challenge and revision; but then, neither is it nothing. The homes created by tradition, consensus, and even compromise may be, as James suggests above, themselves homeless; but, insist Gadamer and Habermas, people live in them nevertheless.⁷

What I have called French negativism does not exhaust the scene in contemporary French philosophy. Two major figures, Ricoeur and Levinas, have much in common with Gadamer and Habermas in the sense that they, too, can be called the-glass-is-half-full philosophers. Both share the anti-

Cartesian, anti-Hegelian stance of their French colleagues, but, like their German colleagues, they also insist that philosophical thought can be constructive as well as deconstructive. Perhaps it is not surprising that these two philosophize out of a deep sympathy rather than a deep hostility toward religion. Ricoeur's attempt to develop a philosophical hermeneutics has important links to Gadamer's similar project. Both of these are discussed elsewhere in this issue. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to the constructive themes of Levinas against the background of French negativism, with whose basic negations (proposition B above) he agrees.

Emmanuel Levinas is a Lithuanian Jew who, after high school education in both Hebrew and Russian schools, went to France for his university education and has lived his adult life there. He studied under both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg and was a major figure in introducing their work to France. For decades he has been an important figure in two rather distinct groups in Paris, the philosophers, from Sartre and Merleau-Ponty through structuralism to poststructuralism, and the Jewish intellectuals. Although his most important work, *Totality and Infinity*, was translated into English in 1969, it has been primarily during the 80s that he has emerged as a major figure on the American scene. His impact continues to grow steadily.

The Preface to *Totality and Infinity* opens with the following sentence: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (TI p. 21).⁸ In the next paragraph we find politics presented as "opposed to morality" but tightly wedded both to war and to reason; and before we get past the first page we read, "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy."

Since politics is defined as "the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means," it is not surprising that politics is opposed to morality. But the linkage of politics, so construed, to reason and Western philosophy is, as it is meant to be, shocking.

The clue to the linkage is the notion of totality. In concert with his French negativist colleagues and against the background of Nietzsche and Heidegger, Levinas will develop his own critical narrative of Western philosophy as the will to power dressed up as the Logos. Its attempts to totalize the world and our experience of it, to make everything fit within its conceptual schemes, are seen as a series of attempts to make the world safe for a Self unimpeded by any Other which is not its own other, that is, the necessary condition for its own possibility, something to be used, possessed, enjoyed. While metaphysics is the desire "toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (TI p. 33), Western ontology has systematically reduced the Other to the Same.⁹

Whereas Nietzsche aims his critique of the Western logos at Christianity

and Platonism, and Heidegger aims his at Nietzsche himself, as the one who culminates these traditions by simply reversing their valuations, Levinas directs his critique especially at Husserl and Heidegger, the most powerful recent expressions of the totalizing tendencies of Western ontology.

I shall not give separate attention to Levinas' critique of Western philosophy, which will emerge quite naturally as we focus on his constructive themes. But it is this critique that is the common ground between Levinas and the French postmodernists. In the aftermath of their critiques, the increasingly pressing question during the 80s has become, How is ethics possible if reason is so deeply wounded? It is just this question that is posed by the opening sentence of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, prior to the postmodern corpus of Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard.¹⁰

As his colleagues will do later, Levinas gives a special twist to this question. In the context of the Enlightenment project, the question would be parsed something like this. For an increasingly secular modernity, God cannot be the source and guarantor of moral norms, so reason, make that Reason, will have to take over those responsibilities. But if Reason is deeply wounded, if it turns out to be merely reason, or worse, your reason, my reason, their reason, and our reason, each of which is a bundle of unfulfilled promises, what is to keep the moral life from lapsing into nihilistic cynicism? Or, to use Levinas' own language, what is to keep ethics from degenerating into politics?

The question presupposes that Reason is the ally of the Right and the Good. But, as we have already seen, Levinas challenges that assumption. The ethical life presupposes the ineliminable otherness of the Other, while the Western logos, which calls itself Reason, has consistently sought to reduce alterity to what can be "reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor" (TI p. 33). Thus the wounding of Reason that I have been referring to as negativism is for Levinas not merely the humility that acknowledges that human reason is human, all too human; it is also a necessary moment in making the modern world safe for the moral life. Only when the totalizing assault of Reason on the Other has been withstood is the way open for a genuinely reasonable ethics.

But even if the wounding of reason is seen in a positive rather than a negative light,¹¹ the question remains, How, now that the framework within which Kantians debated utilitarians has collapsed, is ethics possible? In this context the question is an epistemological question. At issue is how I can know the Good, not how I can become good by bringing my actions and feelings into conformity with it.

Levinas' answer, put in a vocabulary not his own, is that our most fundamental moral beliefs are properly basic. He agrees with Lyotard that an evidentialist justification of them is not possible. Not only can the imperatives

of the moral life not be derived from theoretical knowledge of any kind, but the attempt to do so puts us within the very (totalizing) framework that makes ethical transcendence impossible by reducing the neighbor to a moment in our conceptual scheme.

But Lyotard's prescriptivism goes farther than this. It claims that "the 'you must' is an obligation that ultimately is not even directly experienced," that "the 'you must' is something that exceeds all experience."¹²

Levinas bases his ethical cognitivism on a diametrically opposite claim. Not only is obligation directly experienced; it is the only thing that is directly experienced and, as such, it is (or deserves to be) the most fundamental element in all our language games and conceptual schemes. (See section 5, below.)

In spite of his sustained critique of Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas insists, "I remain to this day a phenomenologist," defining phenomenology as "a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world" (FFL pp. 14-15). The claim that we have a direct experience of the "you must" is a phenomenological claim that has, for purposes of the present analysis, five moments.

1) The first is the claim that "the absolutely other is the Other" (TI p. 39; cf. p. 71, LR p. 245). By invoking the difference in French between *Autre*, the other that may be either a person or a thing, and *Autrui*, the other who may only be another person, Levinas situates his phenomenological claim in the domain where instead of being a subject representing objects we are a subject confronted by another subject, one who makes claims on us.¹³ Since a phenomenological claim is always an invitation to look and see for ourselves, this first moment tells us where we should be standing when we do our own looking.

2) Second, it is the face of the Other that expresses this absolute otherness of the Other as an infinity that surpasses all attempts to relativize it by representing it. The face overflows the concept and thereby all my attempts to possess, to use, or to enjoy the Other. It is face to face with the Other that I encounter the claim that puts my project of being the center of the world in question. The immediacy of the ethical relation is not that of intuitionism, for it is not a proposition to which I have direct access. It is the infinity of another person incarnate in a face. Thus violence consists in seeing the Other not as a face but merely as a force (CPP p. 19).¹⁴

3) The next moment concerns the content of the claim placed upon me as I encounter the Other face to face. The "primordial *expression*" of the face of the Other, his or her "first word" to me, is "you shall not commit murder" (TI p. 199; cf. pp. 216, 262, 303). This has the advantage of being very specific, but it seems a bit limited in scope. Have I really satisfied the claim of the Other, whose otherness regularly leads Levinas to use the term 'infinite,' so long as I manage not to kill him or her?

Levinas provides glosses on his basic formula designed to steer us away from such a reading. It is “the face of the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. *Thus* [my emphasis] the face says to me: you shall not kill” (FFL p. 24; cf. p. 38). If indifference to the suffering of the Other compromises my obedience to the command, You shall not kill, it is clear that there is no short and simple way to fulfill it. The concept of infinite obligation returns dramatically.

But Levinas pushes further and suggests that morally speaking I find myself a hostage, “responsible for what [others] do or suffer” (LR p. 101). Being a hostage is “like kinship, it is a bond prior to every chosen bond...a responsibility for the other, and hence a responsibility for what I have not committed, for the pain and the fault of others” (CPP p. 123). In making the claim that I am responsible for the deeds, even the fault of the Other, and not just the suffering and pain, there is not a hint that any paternalistic privilege attends this answerability. The point is simply that prior to any free choice by which I might assume, and perhaps in so doing set limits to my responsibility for the life of the Other, I find myself the bearer of an unlimited obligation.¹⁵

Perhaps the best clue to the meaning of my responsibility for what the Other does is found in Levinas’ preoccupation with Pascal’s notion of “my place in the sun” and his commentary, which Levinas italicizes, “*That is how the usurpation of the whole world began*” (from *Pensées*, Sec. 295). He adds (in the same paragraph which presents the face as “the other who asks me not to let him die alone”), “In ethics, the other’s right to exist has primacy over my own” (FFL p. 24). But if the Other’s right to exist is the right to a place in the sun, then killing, in the literal sense, is the ultimate but not the only violent violation.

Levinas makes this clear when he returns to the same theme in another essay. “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?” Correspondingly, the ethical relation consists in a very specific fear, “the fear of occupying someone else’s place with the *Da* of my *Dasein*” (LR p. 82). There are many forms of repulsing, many forms of excluding, many forms of stripping, each of which denies to the Other that kind of a place in the sun where he or she has the human support needed to act well by all but the super heroes of the human race. I am responsible for what others do as well as for what they suffer, not because I am their moral guardian and supervisor, but because I am responsible for their place in the sun, its mere existence, yes, but also its quality.

4) The fourth dimension of the Other’s claim on me is its double asymmetry.

First of all, the Other is radically above me. The Other's claim comes as a command from "the Most High" (TI p. 34) whom I encounter as my lord and master (TI pp. 72, 75, 101, 213). This is a phenomenological, not a theological assertion. Levinas is not invoking God as the one who commands us to love our neighbor. He is claiming that the face of the neighbor confronts us not as a contractual proposal to be negotiated but as an unconditional obligation. It is unconditional in that its validity depends in no way either upon our agreeing to accept it or in the Other's doing something to evoke or merit our compliance. Levinas' complaint against Buber is that he overlooks this dimension of height in the ethical relation and makes reciprocity primordial (TI pp. 68-70; LR pp. 70-72; FFL p. 31).

At the same time, the Other is as far below me as above me. Levinas stresses the nakedness of the face, the helplessness of the one who has nothing but a face upon which to base such a radical challenge to my own instincts of self-preservation and self-assertion. The Other has nothing to offer me, "no beauty, no majesty to catch our eyes, no grace to attract us to him" (Isa. 53:2). So Levinas insists that the Other is the stranger, the widow, and the orphan with whom the Bible is so concerned (TI pp. 74-78, 215).

Majesty in destitution. This is the double asymmetry of the ethical relation. It may seem contradictory to attribute majesty to the face immediately after having denied it. But the majesty denied is what usually counts as such, beauty and sex appeal, power and strength, wealth and acclaim, and so forth; whereas the majesty affirmed is the majesty of the face as such, the naked face, a majesty possessed by even those faces that lack all those other "majesties."¹⁶

5) Finally, and most importantly, not only do we experience this "you must," we have *direct* experience of the face and its claim. "The notion of the face...finally makes possible the description of the notion of the immediate...The immediate is the fact to face" (TI pp. 51-52).

The Hegelian-Heideggerian claim, against Descartes and Husserl respectively, that nothing is immediate and that everything is mediated, was, in 1961, when Levinas wrote this, and has been ever since, *the* Shibboleth of continental philosophy from existential phenomenology, hermeneutics, and critical theory through structuralism to the varieties of poststructuralism.¹⁷ Especially in France, to be radical has meant to give unquestioning allegiance to this orthodoxy, which has long since passed from sect to church status. Levinas' move could hardly be bolder or more dramatic.

"The fact of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me.... It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but καθ' αὐτό. It *expresses itself*" (TI pp. 50-51; cf. CPP p. 20). In Plato and Aristotle καθ' αὐτό (*per se*, through or by means of itself) often designates the ontological immediacy of forms or substances that are self-sufficient with

regard to their existence. But it can refer to an epistemic immediacy, as in *Republic* 476b.¹⁸ Here knowledge and opinion are being distinguished in terms of the difference between the philosophic few who can apprehend Beauty itself, and the lovers of sights and sounds who never get beyond “beautiful sounds and colors and shapes.” The former must be able not only to apprehend Beauty itself (αὐτὸ τὸ καλὸν), as distinct from beautiful things; they must also apprehend it directly, though itself (καθ’ αὐτὸ) and not through the mediation of those things.¹⁹ It is clearly this epistemic sense to which Levinas appeals.

In the face, he claims, we have “an essential coinciding of the existent and the signifier. Signification is not added to the existent,” as in language where the connection between meaning on the one hand and phoneme or grapheme on the other is arbitrary. Its signification, we might say, is built right into this sign. But this means that what this sign signifies, is itself. Hence the emphatic use of the concept of expression above. In this case, “to signify is not equivalent to presenting oneself as a sign, but to expressing oneself, that is, presenting oneself in person” (TI p. 262).

This notion of being present “in person” lies at the heart of Husserl’s phenomenological theory of evidence. For Husserl the “*principle of principles*” is this: “*that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originally (so to speak, in its ‘personal’ actuality) offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted....*” Statements expressing such evidence provide “an *absolute beginning* called upon to serve as a foundation, a *principium* in the genuine sense of the word.”²⁰ For Husserl perception (ultimately in all its modes) is “the essential possibility of [something] being simply intuited as what it is and, more particularly, of being perceived as what it is in an adequate perception, one that is presentive of that existent itself, ‘in person,’ *without any mediation by ‘appearances.’*”²¹

There are unmistakably Husserlian overtones to the claim that “knowledge in the absolute sense of the term, the pure experience of the other being, would have to maintain the other being καθ’ αὐτὸ” (TI p. 65). And yet the claim that the face presents itself with this immediacy is presented as a critique of Husserlian, which is built on immediacy, as well as of Heideggerian phenomenology, which is built on its denial. Levinas treats these two as an either/or he declines to accept. The one gives a foundationalist, idealist account of representation, the other an anti-foundationalist, anti-idealist account (which Levinas treats as stand-in for the whole anti-immediacy orthodoxy mentioned above, including French poststructuralism).

But for Levinas the task is to get beyond the structure of representation that they share. *Vis-à-vis* the Other, consciousness “does not consist in equaling being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights—this

phenomenology” (TI p. 27). This is because the metaphysical/ethical relation “can not be properly speaking a representation, for the other would therein dissolve into the same.... To be sure...usage objects, foods, the very world we inhabit are other in relation to us. But the alterity of the I and the world inhabited is only formal; as we have indicated, in a world in which I sojourn this alterity falls under my powers” (TI p. 38).²²

The expression of the Other $\kappa\alpha\theta' \ \alpha\lambda\tau\epsilon\delta$ represents, contra Husserl, a “meaning prior to my *Sinngebung* and thus independent of my initiative and my power” (TI p. 51; cf. LR pp. 89-90). This notion of meaning that “does not refer to its constitution” and is “prior to all *Sinngebung*...describes the very structure of a created being.” Here “beings have a meaning before I constitute this rational world along with them. Creation is the fact that intelligibility precedes me.... This is not a theological thesis; we reach the idea of creation out of the experience of a face” (CPP p. 22).

This same point can be expressed in other language. Ethics involves true transcendence “because the essential of ethics is in its transcendent intention, and because *not every transcendent intention has the noesis-noema structure*” (TI p. 29, my emphasis; cf. p. 49 as cited in note 22). Or again, “Here, contrary to all the conditions for the visibility of objects, a being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it; it is present as directing this very manifestation” (TI p. 65; cf. p. 74, where $\kappa\alpha\theta' \ \alpha\lambda\tau\epsilon\delta$ is defined as “signifying before we have projected light upon it....”)

Levinas does not accept the Husserlian notion of a transcendental ego outside the worlds of both nature and history that can be an absolute origin of meaning. But in these passages he does not challenge such a notion. He concedes it for the sake of argument in order to point out that this theory of meaning is but a variation of reducing the other to the same, or, to be more specific, of reducing the Other to the meaning I give him or her. *Like war, Husserlian phenomenology defaces the Other.*

Levinas associates Platonic and Hegelian idealism with the Cartesian-Husserlian variety and arraigns them on similar charges. The Platonic doctrine of the kinship of the soul to the forms and the corresponding notion of knowledge as recollection replace transcendence with immanence. Because the Other’s claim is “‘older’ than the *a priori*,” a “reality that does not fit into any *a priori* idea, which overflows all of them” (LR p. 90, CPP p. 59), “the conversion of the soul to exteriority, to the absolutely other, to Infinity, is not deducible from the very identity of the soul, for it is not commensurate with the soul” (TI p. 61). If the Other is truly incommensurable with my own self-identity, then to welcome the Other is to learn something I didn’t already know. Hence the sustained polemic against the Socratic reduction of teaching to maieutics (TI pp. 43, 51, 171, 180, 204). *Here too, as in war, the Other is defaced.*

Unlike the Platonic soul or the Husserlian transcendental ego, Hegelian spirit is in history, or better, is history. Here idealism is the very opposite of escapism. But when Levinas looks to see whether there is room in this inn for the Other, he finds an all encompassing mediation that excludes the possibility of the face καθ' αὐτὸ. So, against Hegel (and Marx, for that matter) he writes, "When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history.... Interiority is the very possibility of a birth and a death that do not derive their meaning from history" (TI pp. 52, 55). In the Hegelian context, this is equivalent to claiming that the face of the Other "is by itself and not by reference to a system" (TI p. 75), that "the interlocutor appears as though without a history, outside of systems" (CPP p. 43). Or, finally, "The invocation is prior to the community" (CPP p. 41).²³ Since Hegel cannot grant the face this primacy over history, system, and community, Spirit becomes, in one of philosophy's most tragic ironies, the Other's nemesis. Although it is only ink and not blood that is spilled, at least in the first instance, *once again, as in war, the Other is defaced.*

Heidegger's phenomenological destruction of the history of metaphysics puts him in direct conflict with the idealisms of Plato, Hegel, and Husserl. In Levinas' eyes he represents the most powerful alternative account of representation; but at the same time he remains equally deaf to the call of the Other.

"Since Husserl the whole of phenomenology is the promotion of the idea of *horizon*, which for it plays a role equivalent to that of the *concept* in classical idealism" (TI pp. 44-45). This is a surprising interpretation, for post-Husserlian phenomenology (not to mention structuralism and poststructuralism) have waged a sustained assault on idealism's Concept, whether Plato's εἶδος, Hegel's *Begriff*, or Husserl's *Wesen* under the banner of the Horizon and its numerous cousins. In fact, it can be said to be Husserl's own development of this notion that causes his quest for philosophy as rigorous science to unravel before his very eyes, especially in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*. The theme, developed in endless variations, is quite simple. Meaning is neither atomistic nor fixed. Therefore it is never immediate nor complete. This is because every focus of cognitive attention occurs against a background or in a context to which it is relative but which can itself never be fully thematized or turned into foreground. To put the point in terms of physical vision, one can never look at the boundary of one's visual field. Thus the concept can never have the clarity and distinctness that all forms of idealism require of it, or, to put it in a different idiom, experience can never be totalized in the concept. Neither as an intuitionistic foundationalism nor as a dialectical holism can Absolute Knowledge be achieved.

Since Levinas knows all this, why does he say that since Husserl (meaning

most especially Heidegger) “the idea of *horizon*...plays a role *equivalent* to that of the *concept* in classical idealism” (my emphasis added)? It is because he asks whether the difference between Husserl and “after Husserl” makes any difference to the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. The post-Husserlians agree that cognition is always horizontal, incorrigibly contextual. But this is no help to the Other. The “ontological imperialism” (TI p. 44) of the horizon consists in the fact that “to recognize truth to be disclosure is to refer it to the horizon of him who discloses. ...The disclosed being is relative to us and not $\kappa\alpha\theta' \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$.” This is because “we disclose only with respect to a project” and in disclosure we make the Other into a “theme for interpretation,” whereas manifestation $\kappa\alpha\theta' \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$ “consists in a being telling itself to us independently of every position we would have taken in its regard, *expressing itself*” (TI pp. 64-65; cf. LR pp. 89-90). Where disclosure is horizontal, “the possibility of a *signification without a context*” (TI p. 23; cf. CPP p. 65) becomes impossible. But this is the most important possibility of all, for this is precisely what is meant by $\kappa\alpha\theta' \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$. By insisting on its possibility, Levinas renders himself a heretic in the eyes of the post-Husserlian church.

As the previous paragraph suggests, ‘disclosure’ (*erschliessen*, *Erschlossenheit*) is the key term through which Heidegger expresses his orthodoxy on the question of context.²⁴ Levinas’ sustained polemic against Heidegger takes the form of contrasting disclosure with the $\kappa\alpha\theta' \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}$ of the Other’s face, which in this context he regularly names *revelation* (TI pp. 27-28, 61-67, 71-78). *Because disclosure excludes revelation, it defaces the Other as much as the idealism it so deeply opposes.*

Although he regularly employs the notions of transcendence and revelation, Levinas remains clear that these are phenomenological and not theological claims and that they refer to bearers of the human face. What he calls “the Metaphysical” dimension of life is “an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God” (TI p. 78). What, then, is the religious significance of his thought?

It is in this very context that he makes that clear.

“To posit the transcendent as stranger and poor one is to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things. The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face.... God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men...the invisible but personal God is not approached outside of all human presence.... There can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God.... It is our relations with men...that give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of.... Without the signification they drew from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks” (TI 78-79).

In one of his Talmudic commentaries Levinas says that his

“effort always consists in extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason. The rationalism of this method does not, thank God, lie in replacing God by Supreme Being or Nature or, as some young men do in Israel, by the Jewish People or the Working Class. It consists first of all, in a mistrust of everything in the texts studied that could pass for a piece of information about God’s life, for a theosophy; it consists in being preoccupied, in the face of each of these apparent news items about the beyond, with what this information can mean in and for man’s life.”²⁵

In short, Levinas places his philosophy in the prophetic tradition, which asks of religious beliefs (as well as of religious practices), Are they good for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, or do they, like war, deface the Other? At the heart of his phenomenological ethics is a hermeneutics of suspicion that knows how easily ontological theory, including the theological mode he calls “theosophy,” can become the ideology of all the modes of violence against the Other he designates as “war.” In the face of the Other, the sheer face of the helpless Other, he invites us to see the sacrilege of all such orthodoxies.²⁶

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NOTES

1. Louis Menand, “The Real John Dewey,” *The New York Review of Books* XXXIX, No. 12 (June 25, 1992), p. 52. It is, of course, Richard Rorty who has most explicitly developed the link between American pragmatism and French postmodernism. See especially *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

2. The holisms of thinkers like Wittgenstein, Quine, and Kuhn are pluralistic, resisting the Hegelian claim of *the* whole and thus any claim to Absolute Knowledge.

3. Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, translated by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 44-45; cf. pp. 17, 64. The absence of absolute criteria, of any common measure between various language games, or of any unifying metanarrative is the theme of Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1986) and *The Differend*, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1988).

4. *The Portable Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), p. 198 (“Upon the Blessed Isles”). Heidegger is another source of postmodern atheism. His view that whatever one’s “ontic” commitments may be, one adopts an atheistic perspective, outside of religious faith, the moment one begins to philosophize, is a curious remnant in his thought of an Enlightenment rationalism whose chief opponent he purports to be. For his sharp separation of philosophy from theology see especially the lecture, “Phenomenology and Theology” in *The Piety of Thinking*, translated by James G. Hart and John C. Maraldo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976). Cf. *History of the*

Concept of Time: Prolegomena, translated by Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), pp. 79-80 and *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, translated by Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 140.

5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), I, p. 118. That the thing in itself is quite simply the thing for God is quite clear in the Kantian text. See my, "In Defense of the Thing in Itself," *Kant-Studien* 59, No. 1 (1968), pp. 118-41.

6. See, for example, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, edited by Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), and Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

7. Habermas is more sensitive than Gadamer to the degree to which operative understandings are tainted by violence and exclusion. Far more than Gadamer he shares with French negativism a critical spirit for which the legal notion of an "unconscionable contract" would be immediately meaningful.

8. I shall use the following abbreviations for referring to the writings of Levinas in the text and notes. N. B.: Unless otherwise indicated, all emphases are his.

CPP *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987).

FFL *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).

LR *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

NTR *Nine Talmudic Readings*, translated by Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

TI *Totality and Infinity*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

9. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, Chapter III, "The Absolute Paradox." After Heidegger, the name for what is bad about the Western philosophical tradition has usually been metaphysics, or, more particularly, the metaphysics of presence. Levinas makes ontology his whipping boy and reserves the name of metaphysics for the ethical posture he affirms. The reason for this terminological reversal is twofold. First, he wants to preserve the connection between metaphysics and transcendence and he believes that what we usually call Western metaphysics has largely been the attempt to eliminate or at least domesticate transcendence. Second, he believes that giving primacy to the category of being has played a major role in this project that has turned "reason" into the ally of war.

10. Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* was also published, in French, in 1961.

11. It needs to be emphasized that what I've been calling French negativism shares this positive appraisal of critique in relation to the possibility of ethics. The common goal of these writers is not to eliminate the moral life by establishing a world of arbitrary choice, but to see how justice may be possible in a world whose Enlightenment project has failed.

Just because their answers differ significantly from those offered by the American debate between liberalism and communitarianism (and the German counterparts stemming from Habermas and Gadamer), they need to be included in the North American debate. For Derrida, see Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, 1992); for Foucault, against the background of Nietzsche and Heidegger, see Charles Scott, *The Question of Ethics* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1990); and for Lyotard, see *Just Gaming*.

12. Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p. 46.

13. This attempt to resist colonization of the subject-subject relation by the imperialism of the subject-object relation links Levinas with a tradition that stretches from Sartre and Marcel and Buber back through Kierkegaard and Pascal to Augustine. The heart of Levinas' critique of Husserl and Heidegger is that they never really make this move.

14. For a dramatic reversal from force to face, as drawn from *All Quiet on the Western Front*, see my "Levinas, Kierkegaard, and the Theological Task," *Modern Theology* 8, No. 3 (July, 1992), pp. 256-57.

15. Levinas develops this theme very effectively in one of his Talmudic commentaries. See NTR pp. 98-100.

16. A trip through the Art Institute of Chicago, focusing on the portraits, provides an excellent commentary on Levinas.

17. The debate between Apel and Habermas on the possibility of a *Letztbegründung* for ethics is interesting on this point. Apel's hard line can be viewed as a kind of claim for immediacy, while Habermas' reluctant unwillingness to go along, in spite of the strongest constitutional inclination to do so, is an indication of the strength of the philosophical case for the ineluctability of mediation. See *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, edited by Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 9-10, 338-39. Cf. Georgia Warnke, "Rawls, Habermas, and Real Talk: A Reply to Walzer," *The Philosophical Forum* XXI, Numbers 1-2 (Fall-Winter, 1989-90), pp. 197-203. But Apel's claim is theoretical, while Levinas' is experiential.

18. See *Phaedo*, 100b and *Metaphysics* 1017a and 1022a for the metaphysical meaning. The two senses are combined in Spinoza's definition of substance as "*id, quod in se est, et per se concipitur*": *Ethics*, I, Def. 3. Here as throughout the Latin tradition *per se* renders καθ' αὐτὸ.

19. Except in the biographical sense. The movement out of the cave and into the sunlight in *Republic*, Book VII, and the ascent up the "heavenly ladder" in *Symposium*, 211b, are necessary to get to where the true objects of knowledge can be seen. But once there, they are seen directly. We "contemplate things by themselves with the soul by itself" (*Phaedo*, 66e).

20. Edmund Husserl, *Ideals Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, translated by F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), p. 44.

21. *Ideas*, p. 92. Husserl continues, "The spatial physical thing which we see is, with all its transcendence, still something perceived, given 'in person' It is not the case that, in its stead, a picture or a sign is given. A picture-consciousness or a sign consciousness must not be substituted for perception." Cf. *Cartesian Meditations*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), p. 57, where Husserl describes evidence as

“the *self-appearance*, the *self-exhibiting*, the *self-giving* of an affair...or other objectivity, in the final mode: ‘itself there,’ ‘immediately intuited,’ / ‘given originaliter.’”

22. In context, the first of these passages refers to Heidegger, the second to Husserl. But both apply equally to each. Cf. TI p. 49, “To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object.... The distance of transcendence is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations, since the distance at which the object stands does not exclude, and in reality implies, the *possession* of the object.... The ‘intentionality’ of transcendence is unique in its kind; *the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work.*”

23. The priority of the individual to the community in the last formula is not the temporary priority of the Hobbesian war of all against all, the Lockean natural market, or the Hegelian struggle between master and slave but the permanent priority that places every constituted social order in question. In all these formulas we hear a powerful affinity with Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegelian mediation. See note 14 above.

24. See *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 105 in the context of ¶¶116-17. Here Heidegger denies that disclosure involves the mediation of inference, but this is only to make the world safe for the mediations of interpretation. Thus disclosure is central to his accounts of Understanding and Interpretation, ¶¶31-32, 63, 68, of Truth, ¶44, and Conscience and Resoluteness, ¶¶54, 60, as thoroughly contextualized affairs.

25. NTR p. 14; cf. p. 32.

26. For a fuller treatment of this theme, see “Levinas and the Teleological Suspension of the Religious,” forthcoming.