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"I Love People So Terribly": Approaching Affectivity with Levinas, Hillesum, and Christian Theology

Glenn Morrison

PRECIS

Through engaging the writings of two Jewish thinkers, Emmanuel Levinas and Etty Hillesum, this essay sets out to develop a Christian theological approach to affectivity. It begins by introducing Levinas and Hillesum to develop a context for dialogue between Jewish thought and Christian theology. Initiating a phenomenological foundation, the essay suggests that affectivity resonates through the human condition of loneliness and otherness. Building on this perspective and aided by Levinas's thought and the practical expression of Hillesum's affectivity of talking to God, the focus turns to introduce and develop the notions of spontaneity, melancholy, and vigilance. Hence, it suggests the central elements of a theological approach to human affectivity in Christian living. Accordingly, by seeking to be poor in spirit and offering friendship to the poor, affectivity becomes a way for the Christian community to live in unity, signifying the resilience to embrace the turbulence of conversion, the shock of encountering the other's suffering, and the joy of loving others "so terribly."

I. Levinas and Hillesum

A guiding factor throughout this essay as we approach developing affectivity within a phenomenological and theological domain will be the desire to bring together Christian theology with the writings of two different, yet remarkable Jewish thinkers, Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95) and

Etty (Esther) Hillesum (1914–43). Levinas was a French philosopher and Talmudic scholar, who related that his life and work were "dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror."[1] Given his familiarity with Judaism and Western philosophy, one could well ask whether he set out to translate his Judaism and the memory of the Nazi horror into contemporary philosophy. Certainly, his philosophical discourse culminated in a phenomenology peculiarly sensitive to the sufferings of life and contributed to the development of a Jewish humanism. His writings have also appealed to Christian theologians.[2] Moreover, Levinas was quite eager to engage Judaism and Christianity together as he sought to foster Jewish-Christian friendship in the aftermath of the *Shoah*. He realized that the *Shoah* also deeply affected Christianity. The vocation of Judaism and Christianity speaks today not only of finding common ground for dialogue but also of moving forward toward friendship, the sharing of scholarship, and the realization that the other's suffering is my suffering. For example, responding to the question, "What is the contribution of Christianity to the contribution of peace?" Levinas reflected:

> I also believe that the trials undergone by humanity over the course of the twentieth century are, in their horror, not only a measure of human depravity, but also a renewed reminder of our vocation. I have the impression that they have modified something in us. I am thinking notably that the Passion of Israel at Auschwitz has profoundly marked Christianity itself, and that Judeo-Christian friendship is an element of peace in which the person of John Paul II represents a hope.[3]

Levinas's writings, especially as he developed the language of otherness, remains throughout "a renewed reminder of our vocation" to respond to the excess of evil with the stance of peace. We see this equally in the warm intimacy of Hillesum's openness to God from her diary and letters. In contrast to Levinas, who survived the *Shoah*, Hillesum was a young

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 291.

[2] See Adriaan T. Peperzak, "The Significance of Levinas's Work for Christian Theology," in Jeffrey Bloechel, ed., *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 184.

[3] "Who Shall Not Prophesy?" (1985), tr. Bettina Bergo, in Jill Robbins, ed., *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 226.

Dutch Jew from Amsterdam, who died at Auschwitz at the age of twenty-nine in 1943. She left "behind a diary (eleven exercise books) and seventy-eight letters which have drawn responses across the world in the form of books, reviews, articles, documentaries, plays and visual art."[4] In the face of the destruction of the Jews in Europe, her writings unveil an affectivity of the heart that evidences an outpouring of love as a means to respond to the experiences of life and death, as do those of the great mystics and poets. Moreover, her writings evoke questions within us about the intimacy of both life and death.[5] This is all the more compelling, for it reveals how such a private soul can imbue so much light and grace from the spontaneous stirrings and conversion of the heart to the melancholy of the soul's encounter of the moment of another's suffering. Hillesum herself had come to the point of learning to love people so deeply through loving "God within them."[6] Her radical transformation from the chaos of self-interest to other-centered (ethical-spiritual) love came through her relationship with her "spiritual master, Julius Spier" (to whom she refers as "S."),[7] "a Jewish emigrant from Berlin" and "founder of 'psychochirology,' the study and classification of palm prints."[8]

Altogether, Hillesum's affectivity demonstrates the vigilance of love, that is to say that, within the loneliness and suffering of life and her intimate care and sensitivity for others, she could reach out to God and proclaim, "You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands."[9] In commenting upon the value of praying "for persecuted Israel," Levinas provided an insight into the quality and character of Hillesum's prayer when he reflected, "this is a prayer for the people

[4] Alexandra Pleshoyano, "Etty Hillesum: Love Calls for Spiritual Discernment," *Religious Studies and Theology*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2009), p. 241. Moreover, Michael Downey noted that, regarding Hillesum, "not a few Catholic theologians . . . have drawn attention to the importance of her writings" (Michael Downey, "Penning Patterns of Transformation: Etty Hillesum and Thomas Merton," in *Merton Annual: Studies in Culture, Spirituality, and Social Concerns*, vol. 4 (1991), p. 79.

[5] See Ingmar Granstedt, "Etty Hillesum: une parole de Dieu dans la Shoah," *Théophilyon* 8 (June, 2003): 317–319.

[6] Pleshoyano, "Etty Hillesum," p. 242.

[7] Ibid., pp. 242 and 264, n. 2.

[8] Jan G. Gaarlandt, "Introduction," in Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941–1943; and Letters from Westerbork*, tr. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996), p. xiv.

[9] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 332.

who are called to reveal the glory of God. In praying to God, one prays *for* God."[10] Given that "God is the one who suffers the most in human suffering,"[11] we can suggest that, in the outpouring of Hillesum's "true pain"[12] to God, we discover a kenotic element of God's suffering through her prayer, namely, an expiating voice to "love people so terribly."[13]

Keeping Hillesum's resounding voice in mind as much as Levinas's radical call of responsibility, let us now construct a lens to develop a Christian theological approach to affectivity. To this end, we will look first at the relation between loneliness and otherness as the first stage in looking at the very phenomenological and existential foundations of affectivity. In a sense, the tension between loneliness and otherness creates an environment for the self to find a creative and redemptive voice in the midst of pain and sorrow. An affectivity of otherness then begins to emerge from the depths of loneliness. The second stage of developing the perspective of affectivity in theology and Christian living is to put into service three notions drawn from the philosophy of Levinas, namely, spontaneity, melancholy, and vigilance. Utilizing these notions with both Levinas and Hillesum, we will endeavor to approach the affectivity of (1) faith in light of the spontaneity of conversion, (2) hope in the melancholy of encountering the other's pain and suffering, and (3) love by way of the vigilance of loving people from the heart. Together, these three notions provide the central character of affectivity.

Our study then moves toward a third and final stage to begin to touch upon and explore affectivity with regard to Christian living and praxis. Accordingly, we aim to develop a sense of affectivity as the joy of forgiveness (Lk. 15:7), being poor in spirit, living in unity, and possessing the sensitivity and ability to love others so deeply—especially the poor. Altogether, the ethical and spiritual transformation of being spontaneous, melancholic, and vigilant signifies the affectivity of a surprising opening of hearts of the Christian community to the Realm of God, which we find expressed so eloquently in the humane affectivity of Hillesum's warm,

[10] "Who Shall Not Prophesy?" p. 226; emphasis in original.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life,* p. 198.

intimate, and resilient words to God, "I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You."[14]

II. Loneliness and Otherness

Loneliness is "one of the most painful human wounds."[15] According to Levinas, isolation is "rooted" in our "existing" because it cannot be "exchanged"; we remain "all alone . . . a monad."[16] Loneliness reflects an inescapable state of being that we are "not the other."[17] In response, for Levinas, we are called to be "for-the-other,"[18] producing a metaxic, turbulent existence, for we are "weighed down" by our lonely existence as much as placed in a personal drama of truth to create "a new world."[19] In the epiphany of discovering the "darkness and anguish"[20] of loneliness, we may feel the menacing and stirring presence of a "lack of love"[21]—blowing embers, as it were, upon other negative states of mind such as hostility, horror, fear, anxiety, and despair.

Further, the dearth of love may translate into encounters of persecution. Rather than the compassion of seeking to be in the other's skin, as it were, peering stares or even ordinary, everyday smiles may result in stripping the other's skin (human dignity and rights) where "internment" or "[s]ocial aggression" is at hand.[22] Levinas knew this well when he was imprisoned in Stalag no. II B, a camp in northern Germany for military prisoners, containing other Jews and at least two Catholic priests. While doing forced labor in the forest as a woodcutter,[23] he encountered the

[14] Ibid.

[15] Henry J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (London: Image Books, 1979), p. 83.

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1997), p. 41.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 153.

[19] Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforeseen History*, tr. Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 20.

[20] Jean Vanier, *Man and Woman He Made Them* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls, 1985), p. 113.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 153.

[23] Marie-Anne Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 6.

persecution of being bracketed out of existence and reduced to silence. He related, "But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us or gave us work or orders or even a smile—and the children and women who passed by and sometimes raised their eyes—stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, a gang of apes . . . beings without language."[24] However, in spite of the horror of his captivity, there suddenly appeared "for a few short weeks" a sign of hope in encounter of "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany," a dog affectionately named "Bobby."[25] Through his "friendly growling" and "without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives" upon which racism rests, Bobby became the grace and catalyst to remind Levinas and his fellow prisoners "that we were men."[26] For if a dog's life of "jumping up and barking in delight," of greeting in the morning and eagerly awaiting a return affirms the value of affection rather than the "dirtiest work" of humanity's hatred for another, then the experience of the goodness of "animal faith" signifies the need for a "pure nature,"[27] the very temperament of affectivity and language of otherness, to instill an inherent moral, or indeed a spiritual, stance of seeking the good.

I want to suggest that the temperament of otherness is born out of the state of loneliness. The wound of loneliness uncovers the "pure nature" of affectivity and its relation to the language of otherness. The "pure nature" reflects our condition of being made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:27) and of being Children of God, knowing God's forgiveness and love (1 Jn. 2:1–2). Loneliness helps to unveil our need for God as well as uncovering a pathway toward an ethical and spiritual affectivity and solitude. Hillesum knew this well, when she reflected, "Life may be brimming over with experiences, but somewhere, deep inside, all of us carry a vast and fruitful loneliness wherever we go. And sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths, or the turning inward in prayer for five short minutes."[28] Altogether, we can suggest that the "pure nature" of affectivity "deep inside" resonates even within loneliness, animating our deepest need to talk to God. For, while the pain of isolation grows, we feel the vulnerability and fragility of "life

[24] Levinas, "The Name of a Dog," pp. 152–153.
[25] Ibid., p. 153.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., pp. 151–153.
[28] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life,* p. 93.

brimming over with experiences," such as the death of a beloved, conflict, stress, overwork, sickness, and aging. Yet, where the pain and poverty of an "inner emptiness"[29] intensifies, there remains the very need to talk with God, a "fruitful" way forward to respond to the terrifying grip of loneliness. Grieving the death of her beloved Spier, Hillesum exemplified such a need to talk to God, revealing a redemptive pathway of affectivity to assuage the lonely state of her soul:

> "And talking to You, God. Is that all right? With the passing of people, I feel a growing need to speak to You alone. I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You. . . . But now I need so much patience, patience and thought, and things will be very difficult. And now I have to do everything by myself. The best and the noblest part of my friend, of the man whose light You kindled in me, is now with You. What was left behind was a childish, worn-out husk in the two small rooms in which I experienced the greatest and deepest happiness of my life. I stood beside his bed and found myself standing before one of Your last mysteries, my God."[30]

Taking to heart the lonely depths of grief in prayer to God gave Hillesum a robust courage to express, "I love people so terribly." She allowed her emotions to orient and animate her surprising, intimate, and warm words and the "pure nature" of resilience. Her affectivity was thus disposed toward prayerful, humble, and vulnerable expressions of faith, hope, and love. Equally, her spirit recognized God's presence as mystery and the enduring gift of joy. To "love people so terribly" bears all the force of the affectivity of the soul, transfigured into an ethical-spiritual horizon.[31] Hillesum's poverty of spirit and need for God suggest a sense of otherness that seems to orient her emotions (from grief and loneliness to "deepest happiness") to dwell in the goodness and mystery of God's being, "The one-for-the-other."[32] We can learn from Hillesum that the emotivity of agape reveals a heart of mercy, compassion, and joy ("deepest

[29] Vanier, *Man and Woman*, p. 113.

[30] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 198.

[31] See Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), *The Acting Person*, tr. Andrzej Potocki, *Analecta Husserliana: The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research*, vol. 10 (Dorderecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 238–242.

[32] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 69.

happiness"). Such affectivity and gravity of the heart unveil the goodness of the human soul to be humane, giving hope to journey meaningfully through experiences so difficult, unimaginable, and tragic, such as the death of a beloved or the unbearable sadness of loneliness.

We can begin to appreciate that, where the emotional life is affected by a spiritual life of ethics, experiences such as grief, loneliness, or even forgiveness begin to take on value. Commenting on how "to facilitate a good experience of forgiveness," John Monbourquette explained, "The most important part of this experience is to follow the movements of your heart closely, to learn about yourself as you are in your journey."[33] We can add that, by following the movement of loneliness in "your heart closely" through otherness, the weight of existence becomes bearable. Such beginnings of transformation could signify some spiritual vertigo, as it were, where God's inner word evokes the heights of mystery, as Hillesum reminded us in her need to talk with God: "I feel so dizzy. 'You have placed me before Your ultimate mystery, oh God. I am grateful to You for that, I even have the strength to accept it and to know there is no answer. That we must be able to bear your mysteries.'"[34]

Within the "difficult adoration"[35] of bearing God's mysteries, we can begin to see that, where the anguish of loneliness is met by an affectivity of prayer and loving others, the search for the deepest source of life takes on an ethical and spiritual quality. Such affectivity—in all its expression of emotivity, meaning, and relationality—implies a movement of the self toward the grace and "pure nature" of faith, hope, and love.

III. Spontaneity, Melancholy, and Vigilance

We have affirmed that the state of loneliness acts as a catalyst to bring affectivity and otherness into a movement toward revealing the ethical and spiritual nature of our human condition. As we seek to highlight three forms of affectivity—spontaneity, melancholy, and vigilance—we can also think of them as taking up a position toward the state of loneliness, to draw

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[33] John Monbourquette, *How to Forgive: A Step-by-Step Guide* (Toronto: Novalis, 2000), p. 69.

[34] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 199.

[35] Emmanuel Levinas, "Loving the Torah More than God," in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 145.

out its pain, wound, meaning, and transformation into the realm of otherness, a Realm of prayer, mercy, and love wherein the word of God comes to mind. Spontaneity marks the first movement, inasmuch as it helps to orient and animate the affectivity of faith and conversion.

A. Spontaneity

Let us turn now to Karol Wojtyla, whose writings on emotional experiences may help to offer some direction and clarity toward drawing out the sense of spontaneity from Levinas's writings. Wojtyla wrote:

> Emotional experiences—stirring emotions or excitements and in their wake also the particular emotions and even passions—only happen in man as subject. Their happening is spontaneous, and this means they are not a product of personal efficacy and self-determination. We have thus to assume that at the root of the emotive dynamism there must be a special psychical efficacy, as otherwise it would be impossible to explain all that in an emotive way happens in the man-subject. In a sense *emotivity* itself signifies that spontaneous efficacy of the human psyche.[36]

Wojtyla pointed out that emotions are stirred spontaneously rather than through the self's control and actions. In other words, something otherwise or beyond a person's essence stirs emotions and passions. In terms of emotions that reach an ethical and spiritual level, we can suggest with Levinas that, through the other's face, God's word works in such a way as spontaneously to stir the emotions, rupturing time into diachrony ("the to-God of time")[37] and prophecy ("time itself in its patience").[38] Hence, where loneliness assumes spontaneity, we have the foundation for the self to take on the affectivity of conversion: an outpouring of ethical and spiritual transcendence, a "spontaneous efficacy of the human psyche," or simply possessing the very need to talk to God. Just as meaningfully, Bernard Lonergan related affectivity of spontaneity to falling in love, pointing out, "the human subject … was transcendent affectively when he fell in love, when the isolation of the individual was broken and he spontaneously

[36] Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, p. 243.
[37] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 118.
[38] Ibid.

functioned not just for himself but for others as well."[39] For Levinas, such transcendent affectivity translates as "the devotion of a theology without theodicy,"[40] that is to say, the "ultimate intimacy" of being-for-the-other without "preachment" or "any shadow of a consoling theodicy."[41]

Let us look further at the affectivity of the psyche, in order to give more clarity to the sense of spontaneity. We can suggest, for example, that, where the affectivity of the psyche is oriented through a spontaneous stirring of love and compassion, the self can come to a point of understanding suffering such as loneliness "as a gift,"[42] facilitating the need to talk to God, as we find in Hillesum's intimate sharing with God: "To think that one small human heart can experience so much, oh God, so much suffering and so much love, I am so grateful to You, God, for having chosen my heart, in these times, to experience all the things it has experienced."[43] We see here Hillesum's "interhuman perspective"[44] of nurturing suffering into the otherness of love and compassion rather than any rationalizations or thematizations of experience that speak more of the futility or the "uselessness"[45] of suffering. In a sense, then, where we conceive of spontaneity as the emotional stirrings of development in the soul, we have the foundation for the affectivity of the psyche to take on an ethical and spiritual horizon of faith, hope, and love. Such a horizon begins with the integration and transcendence[46] of conversion. Importantly, spontaneity helps to bring out the connection between the emotions and the psyche (the process of development, transformation, and conversion) of the soul.

For Wojtyla, the psyche referred to the integration (transcendence) of the acting person, and, although distinct, it remains in unity with the *soma* (body), whereas the notion of the soul is highlighted as the enigmatic "principle ["ultimate source"] of transcendence and integration."[47] In com-

[39] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 289.

[40] Levinas, *Time and the Other*, p. 120.

[41] Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 99 and 100.

[42] Philip Roderick, *Beloved: Henri Nouwen in Conversation* (Norwich, U.K.: Canterbury Press, 2008), p. 8.

[43] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 198.

[44] Levinas, "Useless Suffering," p. 100.

[45] Ibid., p. 98.

[46] Wojtyla, *The Acting Person*, pp. 220 and 256–258.

[47] Ibid., p. 258.

parison, Levinas was quite biblical in his tone by characterizing the psyche as prophecy: "Prophecy would thus be the very psyche in the soul: the other in the same, and all of man's spirituality would be prophetic."[48] We can begin to perceive that the other, through God's word's arising as an ethical command of responsibility in the other's face, plays an exacting role to move the self spontaneously toward psychical change, patience, and conversion. Prophecy, in the sense of hearing and holding the other's fears, needs, and hopes in the heart and mind, also takes the form of witness to the In-finite (God-in-the-finite). Levinas described the state of witness as "humility and admission," adding, "it is made before all theology; it is kerygma and prayer, glorification and recognition."[49] We can suggest, then, that spontaneity grounds and initiates the affectivity of the emotions in the diachrony of God's grace of conversion. Therefore, spontaneity signifies the affectivity of faith as we relate to the world through our "action" and "attitudes" toward others.[50] Further, spontaneity also helps to challenge theology to be grounded in prayer and to be wary of any totalizations of experience that seek to explain evil and suffering.

Taking up a Christian theological lens, we can imagine that, where a spontaneous affectivity of faith emerges, the self seeks the Realm of God, adoring and glorifying the Creator in prayer, participating in Christ's kerygma, and recognizing the role of the Spirit as the One who provokes the epiphany and outpouring of revelation. Thus, spontaneity evokes an ethical-spiritual integration and formation of God's word's bonding in the psyche to open a pathway toward the integration and transcendence of prophecy, namely, the humility, patience, prayer, and witness of the Realm of God. In sum, we can deduce that spontaneity signifies the affectivity of faith and conversion.

B. Melancholy

Reflecting on theodicy and suffering, Levinas portrayed a tone of melancholy to show the failure of using theodicy to explain suffering and genocide. He lamented:

[48] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 149.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Early Works on Theological Method 1*, ed. Robert M. Doran and Robert C. Croken (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), p. 204.

> Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness—but it is also an event in Sacred History—is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought's explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century. This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.
>
> Among these events the Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to me the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror. This is perhaps not a subjective feeling. The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity.[51]

Thus, evidencing a pensive sense of sadness about humanity's "barbaric" ways, Levinas set out to criticize and deconstruct the totalizing forces that strive to explain evil, suffering, and God's existence. These impersonal rationalizations reveal more absurdity and horror than the hope of encountering God's word in the other's face. Fittingly, Levinas has taken us beyond the totality of being toward an immemorial (spiritual) "ethical bond"[52] of an outpouring of responsibility and compassion. Moreover, where his thought takes the form of "ethical sensibility"[53] in the realm of "the Kingdom of God,"[54] we may describe his mood as an ethical or spiritual melancholy, an interior loneliness, as it were, that transcends into otherness, as we see in Hillesum's patient search for God's word to grow inside of her "*thinking heart of the barracks*":[55]

> But I still suffer from the same old complaint. I cannot stop searching for the great redeeming formula. For the one word that sums up everything

[51] Levinas, "Useless Suffering," p. 97.

[52] Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings,* ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 141.

[53] Levinas, "Useless Suffering," p. 98.

[54] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being,* p. 52.

[55] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life,* p. 199; emphasis in original.

> within me, the overflowing and rich sense of life. "Why did You not make me a poet, oh God? But perhaps You did, and so I shall wait patiently until the words have grown inside me, the words that proclaim how good and beautiful it is to live in Your world, oh God, despite everything we human beings do to one another."[56]

Both Hillesum and Levinas evoked insight into the outpouring of melancholy in the face of the "evil" and "diabolical horror" of the *Shoah*. Their ethical-spiritual character of melancholy uncovers an encounter with the other's pain[57] and almost, as we can imagine, the voice of hope in Ps. 133:1, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Signified within the melancholy of hearing God's word in the other's face are the desire and confidence to oppose inhumanity as well as the hope and courage to respond with substitution and compassion. In Christian theological terms, the mood of melancholy signifies the hope to hear and respond to the cry and outrage of "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Lk. 14:13). As a result, the integration of melancholy into a spiritual and ethical domain also gives rise to an eschatological expression of affectivity and otherness: the very hope to feast at Christ's table in the Realm of God and to hear Jesus' word: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt. 25:35–36).

C. *Vigilance*

Levinas's ethical metaphysics also generates a sense of vigilance. Vigilance (also identified as insomnia and wakefulness) oozes out like a wound from his writings, unveiling a haunting starting point: a "stranglehold"[58] of evil provoking fear, threat, and insomnia.[59] Comparably, Anthony Kelly provided an apt description of the subject's collision into "extinction":[60] "The nihilistic view of reality is fixated in autistic materialist objectivism

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[56] Ibid.

[57] See Levinas, "Useless Suffering," p. 98.

[58] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), p. 67.

[59] Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 90.

[60] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 67.

that refuses to allow the reality of the personal subject in oneself or in others."[61] Where the self's being is reduced to competitive self-interest, for example, mutating into "forms of idolatry and cultural atheism," it receives the very "wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23), namely, death.[62] Levinas characterized this state, provoking the death of subjectivity (existence without being an existent), as an anonymous and depersonalizing presence that he named the "there is" [*il y a*].[63] He wrote:

> We are, thus, introducing into the impersonal event of the *there is* not the notion of consciousness, but of wakefulness, in which consciousness participates . . .
>
> Wakefulness is anonymous. It is not that there is *my* vigilance in the night; in insomnia it is the night itself that watches. It watches. In this anonymous nightwatch where I am completely exposed to being all the thoughts which occupy my insomnia are suspended on *nothing*. They have no support. I am, one might say, the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought.[64]

We see that the "I" experiences a breakdown in which horror, threat, and fear become so overwhelming that consciousness abandons the "I." As a consequence, the "I" takes up a "twilight" character of existence, more object than subject—or, more radically, neither object nor subject.[65]

Even further, the "I" experiences a horrible transcendence, a surrealism of sorts, where phenomena stop and melt in time, as in Salvador Dali's 1931 oil painting, "The Persistence of Memory." Where the objects of consciousness melt and disappear, the subject's "extinction" becomes insomnia's curse.[66] The horror of such surreal-like insomnia—the state where, for example, flowers and trees, faces and friends, books and smart phones melt from consciousness—premises a world of depression, forsakenness, and worthlessness. As a result, an anonymous and depersonalizing state of existence, which Levinas defined as the "there is," makes its haunting presence known. Writing from the Westerbork transit camp in Holland, we

[61] Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), p. 106.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 65.
[64] Ibid., p. 66, emphases in original.
[65] Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, p. 89.
[66] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 67.

could well imagine that Hillesum saw this firsthand when she stated, "We are being hunted to death all through Europe . . ."[67] Nor is it surprising that Levinas's development of the notion of the "there is" in his programmatic book, *Existence and Existents*, came only a few years after the end of World War II. For Levinas, the "there is," tearing subjectivity away into anonymity, left the self in a state of lostness, "a sum of negativities,"[68] where "suffering, guilt, failure [and] disgrace"[69] equaled the hell of "personal worthlessness"[70] and the destruction of hope. We can surmise that the "there is" plays a part in accentuating the fear and horror of loneliness, an existence without the fellowship of existents.

The effect of the Levinasian "there is" could also be compared to the haunting authority of a dystopian society's enforcing "an identity of being the same."[71] In such a dystopian world, we could imagine that the self falls into an insomnia of darkness, blind to the beauty of God's creation.[72] Here, yet nowhere, the self is further lost in a vigilance of a consciousness overwhelmed with an insatiable hunger for the presence of its consuming, totalizing thoughts and rationalizations as a means to leash the emotions for its idolizations of experience. The self, now escaping into expressions of acedia and the utter darkness of loneliness—having maxed out its credit, so to speak—longs to rest in the false optimism that life is "all good." However, as such optimism reaches "the end of its tether,"[73] there remains hope yet to rise out of its spiritual torpor and loneliness. For example, Levinas wrote, "We can be more or less close to this limit situation. In certain awakenings of delirium, in certain paradoxes of madness, we can surprise this impersonal 'consciousness' into which insomnia sinks."[74] Hillesum was just as grave in her attitude to human suffering amid the totality of Nazism. Instead of falling into acedia, she wrote:

[67] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 348.

[68] Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, p. 9.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Levinas, "God and Philosophy," p. 134.

[72] This is brought out in the dystopian movie, *The Giver* (2014), where the beginning of the film is in black and white to portray how people do not notice colors and the beauty the world has to offer. The affectivity of seeing and enjoying colors is thus programmed out of existence.

[73] Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, p. 5.

[74] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 67.

> Sometimes I might sit down beside someone, put an arm round a shoulder, say very little and just look into their eyes. Nothing was alien to me, not one single expression of human sorrow. Everything seemed so familiar, as I knew it all and had gone through it all before. People said to me, "You must have nerves of steel to stand up to it." I don't think I have nerves of steel, far from it, but I certainly stand up to things. I am not afraid to look suffering straight in the eyes. And at the end of each day, there was always the feeling: I love people so much. Never any bitterness about what was done to them, but always love for those who knew how to bear so much although nothing had prepared them for such burdens.[75]

Hence, where resilience and hope emerge in spite of bitterness or a blind optimism that falls into depression, the state of insomnia or wakefulness paradoxically becomes a place of formation and transformation. This is where the self, facing "the excess of evil,"[76] begins to emerge to the near side of ethics, namely, to the affectivity of prayer and love, waiting vigilantly for the revelation of God's word of truth, beauty, and goodness. Levinas explained that the catalyst for this change is the disturbance of the other:

> Insomnia—the wakefulness in awakening—is disturbed in the core of its formal or categorical *equality* by the *other,* which tears away at whatever forms a nucleus, a substance of the Same, identity, a rest, a presence, a sleep. Insomnia is disturbed by the other who breaks this rest, breaks it from this side of the *state* in which equality tends to establish itself. . . . Insomnia is wakefulness, but a wakefulness without intentionality—dis-interested.[77]

As with Hillesum's state of wakefulness and disinterestedness "to look suffering in the eyes," Levinas invited us to re-think our notion of "*equality* by the *other.*" In spite of political, social, economic, and even religious agendas that seek to reduce the other to the same, there remains the call of the In-finite (God-in-the-finite) to learn to "love people so much" through disinterestedness—that is to say, an ethical-spiritual vigilance of being-for-the-other before the mystery of God. Consequently, rupturing the self's consciousness, the affectivity of such vigilance (insomnia) takes on

[75] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life,* p. 227.

[76] Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Evil," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers,* tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 179.

[77] Levinas, "God and Philosophy," pp. 132–133; emphases in original.

the quality of "a wakefulness in awakening"—to be present to God's word in the other's face, transforming bitterness into the endurance of love.

Beyond the presence of power over the other there arises a fecund time for the formation of the self's ethical and spiritual life. Levinas described such awakening as "the spirituality of the soul,"[78] which we can exemplify in the warm intimacy of Hillesum's prayer to God. Her ethical-spiritual awakening of affectivity underlines that loving others so profoundly is one and the same as loving God. In Christian theological terms, we could suggest that the state of insomnia offers possible insight into the experience of Holy Saturday, where the dead Christ, overflowing with the affectivity of ethical-spiritual insomnia (vigilance and wakefulness), disturbs and ruptures the consciousness of those lost in God-forsakenness with the disinterestedness of a responsibility (expiation) accentuated through the compassion of "loving people so terribly."

It would not be surprising to imagine that to be disinterested—responsible for the other—is demanding and difficult, especially where one is touched by God to face the gravity of being-for-the-other. This is because the nature of responsibility requires the formation of a spirituality of the soul through the vigilance of not being silent about the other's suffering, loneliness, and hunger. In 1957, Levinas wrote the essay "Freedom of Speech"[79] to criticize Western culture for divorcing itself from the "meaning of language."[80] Highlighting the need to be vigilant to speak otherwise in the language of otherness, Levinas stated:

> We have a closed language, and a civilization composed of aphasiacs. Words have once more become the mute signs of anonymous infrastructures, like the implements of dead civilizations or the abortive acts of our daily lives. By being coherent, speech has lost its speech. From this point on, there is no longer any word that has the authority necessary to announce to the world the end of its own decline.[81]

Levinas wrote these haunting words in response to the threat of communism's spreading in Europe, to a political totalitarianism resting on an

[78] Ibid., p. 132.

[79] Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 26.

[80] Emmanuel Levinas, "Freedom of Speech," in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 207.

[81] Ibid.

ontological horror of "an impersonal universe, a universe without language."[82] In response, we may ask what words may help to overcome the threat of aphasia's reducing human language to the horror of an anonymous presence of nothingness. Or, again, what words have "the authority to announce" hope, healing, and the promise of peace and forgiveness "to the world"? Let us suggest that, for example, Hillesum's affectivity of talking to God, "I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You,"[83] bears the authority to "announce to the world" that, "at the very moment where all is lost, everything in possible."[84]

IV. Affectivity in Theology and Christian Living

Moving toward a sense of Christian praxis and living, let us look first at some of the challenges that remain to even reflecting on such an existence. Pope Francis has warned of the temptation of acedia (torpor), "a distaste for spiritual things,"[85] among pastoral workers and religious men and women, such "agents of evangelization" who "pray."[86] In contrast, Hillesum advised, "Things come and go in a deeper rhythm, and people must be taught to listen; it is the most important thing we have to learn in this life."[87] We can envisage that blocking the will to listen speaks of "a heightened individualism, a crisis of identity and a cooling of fervour,"[88] which stands in stark contrast to Hillesum's openness to share God's beauty, as she wrote from the Westerbork transit camp not long before her death at Auschwitz: "My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue."[89] In Christian theological terms, we can suggest that affectivity in human living arises in "a renewed personal encounter

[82] Ibid.

[83] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 198.

[84] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 92.

[85] Karl Rahner, *On Prayer* (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 104.

[86] Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (hereafter, E.G.), no. 78; available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[87] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 332.

[88] E.G., no. 78.

[89] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 332.

with Jesus Christ,"[90] animated by the joy of the gospel (2 Cor. 6:10) "to bring good news to the poor" (Lk. 4:18).

Let us imagine that one of the ways to appreciate the theological sense of affectivity is to look at how it nurtures the Christian community to become a place "to commence on the path towards forgiveness."[91] The internal, formative effect of affectivity calls forth a desire to learn from Christ to be poor in spirit and to talk to God. The desire to seek the Realm of God underlines further "the "trinification" of human existence as it is drawn into the love life of the divine persons, as members of Christ, temples of the Spirit, and children of the Father."[92] As we stand before God's mystery of love, our condition of loneliness transforms spontaneously into otherness, enabling an affectivity of being a gift of self for others—as we find in Jesus' statement, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Mt. 7:12).

Jesus' language of the heart proclaims and witnesses to the formation of Christian faith and hope for the divine Realm. From the spontaneity of conversion from loneliness to otherness comes the outpouring of melancholy, of "searching for the great redeeming formula,"[93] namely, to encounter the other's suffering with the wisdom of the gospel that opens toward the vigilance of love for others. We can suggest, then, that Jesus' words invite a Christian affectivity: adoring God the Father (a spontaneous moment of transfiguration, initiating conversion and a renewed intimacy of talking to God), breathing hope through the Holy Spirit (allowing the gift of melancholy to facilitate the encounter of the other's outrage, pain, and suffering), and walking in the light of Christ (to love others vigilantly and joyfully from the heart [Ps. 19:2 and Mt. 18:35]). Given that Jesus the Christ is the forgiveness of sins, the challenge emerges to face the difficult path of forgiveness and to learn to love people "so terribly" through a habitus or praxis of otherness that expresses the affectivity of resilience and the deepest happiness of giving the promise of peace and healing to those who are near and far (Is. 57:19 and Eph. 2:17).

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[90] E.G., no. 3.

[91] See Roger Burggraeve, "The Difficult but Possible Path towards Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Louvain Studies* 41 (January, 2018): 42.

[92] Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, p. 210.

[93] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 199.

The appeal of affectivity in theology and Christian living signifies how the joy of the gospel rather than, for example, the fear of loneliness or "the slavery of sadness"[94] "fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus,"[95] for the affectivity of being joyful in spite of sorrows (2 Cor. 6:10) unveils courage and resilience to achieve, for example, unity in the midst of conflict. Given that Christian communities will experience tension and conflict, the challenge is to work toward achieving "a joy which is shared" and to "face conflict head on" as a means to work toward forgiveness and reconciliation and not lose one's bearings.[96] However, for many, mutuality and the bodiliness of sharing joy become impossible. Impulses arise simply to walk away from the conflict, "wash their hands of it and get on with their lives."[97]

People become imprisoned within the bitterness of loneliness and end up following a compass of "confusion and dissatisfaction,"[98] rather than allowing the melancholy of the moment spontaneously to nurture loneliness into the vigilance of love. Accordingly, where we open our hearts to the peace of Christ (Eph. 2:14), made possible "through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20), we discover a common ground to nurture the promise of forgiveness and the hope for reconciliation.[99] Francis, guiding the Church toward hearing the joy of the gospel, exemplifies such a search for a common ground. Reflecting on how "unity prevails over conflict," he stated in *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 228, "In this way it becomes possible to build communion amid disagreement, but this can only be achieved by those great persons who are willing to go beyond the surface of the conflict and to see others in their deepest dignity. This requires acknowledging a principle indispensable to the building of friendship in society: namely, that unity is greater than conflict."

Francis has set out vigilantly to see "others in their deepest dignity." In effect, I want to suggest here that, in the affectivity "to go beyond the surface of the conflict," we see the stirrings of an affectivity of vigilance to build friendship in community. For Levinas, developing a sense of

[94] Vanier, *Man and Woman*, p. 29.
[95] E.G., no. 1.
[96] Ibid., nos. 2 and 227.
[97] Ibid., no. 227.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., no. 229.

vigilance implies having suffered a stupor or trauma or overwhelming surprise, namely, something unheard-of in everyday consciousness.[100] Inspired by Levinas, we can think of the encounter with the risen Christ's word in the face of the other, producing a traumatic and turbulent shock—a spontaneous stirring of emotions—orienting the affectivity of conversion and otherness, the very offering of oneself "for-the-other."[101] From spontaneously responding to the overwhelming surprise of God's word—"that unity is greater than conflict"—the self can feel the melancholy, shock, and threat of "fragmentation and breakdown,"[102] as we see in Hillesum's resilient words of faith:

> "How great are the needs of Your creatures on this earth, oh God. They sit there, talking quietly and quite unsuspecting, and suddenly their need erupts in all its nakedness. Then, there they are, bundles of human misery, desperate and unable to face life. And that's when my task begins. It is not enough simply to proclaim You, God, to commend You to the hearts of others. One must also clear the path toward You in them, God, and to do that one has to be a keen judge of the human soul."[103]

Facing the shock and turbulence of encountering the other's poverty and need, Hillesum was close to Francis, who would lament in E.G., no.229, "If hearts are shattered in thousands of pieces, it is not easy to create authentic peace in society." The experience of melancholy, as we learn from Hillesum and Francis, signifies together a prophetic hope and demanding task to uncover God's presence and "beauty,"[104] to give good news to the poor. As a result, we may begin to sense the overwhelming force of affectivity to orient forgiveness and reconciliation within a Christian community and to exhort the necessity to be "a keen judge of the human soul."

In conclusion, where forgiveness is deepened by an affectivity of learning to appreciate the dignity, beauty, and value of the poor, the Christian community takes courage to overcome the temptation to fall into a "closed

[100] Levinas, "God and Philosophy," p. 132.
[101] See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 50.
[102] E.G., nos. 228 and 229.
[103] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, pp. 204–205.
[104] Ibid., p. 332.

language ... of aphasiacs."[105] Such affectivity transforms into a promise where we seek from the heart (Mt. 18:35) to offer the friendship of Christ and the joy of the gospel to "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Lk. 14:13). Altogether, through the turbulence of conversion to the Realm of God (the spontaneity of faith); the shock and trauma of bearing the other's pain, suffering, and outrage (the melancholy of hope); and the transcendence and joy of loving others (the vigilance of love)—Christian theology can learn much from such Jewish thinkers as Levinas and Hillesum. Accordingly, we can suggest that "human" affectivity becomes a "humane" affectivity and existence, coming to rest in the simplicity of talking to God and being open to nurture the grace of such intimacy in the love of the poor and in listening and responding to their fears, needs, outrages, and hopes. In this way of following "the movements of your heart closely," [106] to be attentive even to the vulnerability of our isolated, lonely condition, the poor "call us to love and waken within us what is most precious: compassion."[107]

The more the Christian community learns to talk to God and listen to the poor, the more it may be open to an affectivity of being poor in spirit and living in the union of love rather than the discord of fear. We may then, as a community of faith, growing in "greater maturity, compassion and acceptance of self and others,"[108] discover "the greatest and deepest happiness"[109] of life, namely, the affectivity, humility, and joy of talking to God: "I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You." We can hope that a catalyst for such joy can be the fruit and goodness of Jews and Christians who sit down together, learn from one another, and listen to the experiences and encounters of one another's affectivity of human living and talking to God.

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[105] Levinas, "Freedom of Speech," p. 207.

[106] Monbourquette, *How to Forgive*, p. 69.

[107] Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (Ottawa: Novalis, 2004), p. 173.

[108] Ibid., p. 188.

[109] Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life*, p. 198.

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