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978-0-521-14106-2 - The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas

Michael L. Morgan

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THE CAMBRIDGE INTRODUCTION TO EMMANUEL LEVINAS

This book provides a clear and helpful overview of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most significant and interesting philosophers of the late twentieth century. Michael L. Morgan presents an overall interpretation of Levinas's central principle that human existence is fundamentally ethical and that its ethical character is grounded in our face-to-face relationships with other people. He explores the religious, cultural, and political implications of this insight for modern Western culture and how it relates to our conception of selfhood and what it is to be a person, our understanding of the ground of moral values, our experience of time and the meaning of history, and our experience of religious concepts and discourse. The book includes an annotated list of recommended readings and a select bibliography of books by and about Levinas. It will be an excellent introduction to Levinas for readers unfamiliar with his work, even for those without a background in philosophy.

MICHAEL L. MORGAN is Chancellor's Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Studies, Emeritus, at Indiana University in Bloomington. He is the author of numerous books, most recently *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge, 2007) and *Beyond Auschwitz* (2002), which was a finalist for the Koret Book Award in the category of Jewish Thought. He has also edited several collections of essays and editions of Spinoza's writings, and his articles have appeared in journals including the *Review of Metaphysics*, the *Journal of Religion*, and the *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*.

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[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	I
1 Responding to Atrocity in the Twentieth Century	16
2 How to Read Levinas: Normativity and Transcendental Philosophy	36
3 The Ethical Content of the Face-to-Face	59
4 Philosophy, Totality, and the Everyday	85
5 Subjectivity and the Self: Passivity and Freedom	114
6 God, Philosophy, and the Ground of the Ethical	136
7 Time, History, and Messianism	161
8 Greek and Hebrew: Religion, Ethics, and Judaism	183
Conclusions, Puzzles, Problems	237
<i>Recommended Readings</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	253

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[More information](#)

Preface

In 2007 Cambridge University Press published my book *Discovering Levinas*. In that work I sought to accomplish two tasks: to provide an overall interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy and to do so by placing Levinas in conversation with the so-called analytic tradition in contemporary Western philosophy. The virtue of the method I used is that it aimed at presenting Levinas in as clear a vocabulary as possible. I tried to explain Levinas's philosophical terminology and to translate his arcane, obscure style into language that could be understood by readers familiar with Anglo-American philosophy and with other developments in modern religious and philosophical thought. At the same time, my first and foremost task was to make a case for reading Levinas in a certain way; I presented a Levinas whose claims about ethics could be appreciated as deep and radical but not incompatible with our ordinary lives – in particular, our moral, political, and religious lives.

When *Discovering Levinas* was about to be published in paperback, the editors at Cambridge suggested that I abridge and revise that book with an eye to introducing Levinas to readers and students who wanted a clear and helpful initial guide to understanding his thinking. The present book is the outcome of that effort. Each of its eight chapters is grounded in that earlier work, but in every case I have made significant modifications in order to streamline the interpretation, to eliminate much of the use of analytic philosophy that would have required special background, and to focus on central texts and themes. Whereas the earlier book was distinctive in the use to which it put analytic philosophy, in this introduction my focus is on presenting Levinas's texts and ideas in as clear a fashion as I can. The result, I hope, is a shorter, more focused book that will be useful for those coming to Levinas for the first time, for readers who are seeking a guide to how to understand his thought and how to read his writings.

Some philosophical writing is distinguished by its argumentation, and there surely are arguments in Levinas's essays and books. But more often,

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Preface

even where there is no evident argument, as one might find in a typical analytic article or paper, there is certainly a very explicit theme and order to Levinas's presentations. Since I have not, however, attempted to provide overall readings of Levinas's works – certainly not of his most important books, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* – I have not always paid explicit attention to that order or organization. Even in the case of his essays, I have not sought to offer complete readings. Most often, I have focused on concepts and themes, and hence this introduction regularly turns selectively to texts and the careful reading of passages in order to clarify what Levinas is doing and why. In reading him, such careful and attentive reading is mandatory. For the reader first coming to his work, Levinas's style, his terminology, even his sentence structure will seem opaque and utterly impenetrable. He relishes the construction of seemingly paradoxical or at least surprising sentences and descriptions, and he enjoys hyperbole and exaggeration. All of this requires sensitivity and care, if one is going to avoid finding obvious faults with what he is saying. In order to appreciate what he is saying and its significance, there is no substitute for careful translation into an idiom that the reader can understand and then attention to the nuances and caution that such translation always calls for. I have tried to offer a guide to understanding Levinas that is also a guide to how to read him, and hence there is a good deal of quotation and use of phrases and expressions from him, together with paraphrases and interpretations of what I take him to mean.

In the course of working on this book I have taught students at a number of institutions whose eagerness has been a delight to behold and whose questions about Levinas and about my reading of him have been a valuable resource for me. I want to thank students at Indiana University, Yale University, and Northwestern University for all they have taught me. During a semester at Yale, Rabbi Jim Ponet and I spent hours talking about Levinas, and he offered to organize several late-afternoon conversations with students at the Slifka Center, which were as helpful to me as they were enjoyable. I also thank audiences at Yale, the New School, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Toronto, where I received very valuable comments on talks about Levinas and my reading of him. I especially want to thank Jay Bernstein for an extremely valuable discussion after I presented my paper at the New School. I would also like to thank Nick Alford for preparing the index.

As always, I could not have finished this book without the love and support of my wife, Audrey. Levinas is about teaching us to acknowledge what we owe to others, to be kind, caring, and generous. Aud has always

Cambridge University Press

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Michael L. Morgan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface*

ix

known these lessons – and never needed to study him to learn them, as everyone who knows her well appreciates. Intellectual work has its special joys. However, watching our grandchildren – Gabby, Sasha, Tyler, and now Halle – grow and flourish has brought to both of us delights beyond compare. As I work in my study, they are always in my mind, as are our daughters and sons-in-law – Debbie and Adam, Sara and Marc – who work hard, so that what remains for Aud and myself is to enjoy the rewards of being grandparents.