Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's life spans the twentieth century. He was born in 1906 and lived his youth in Kovno in Lithuania; he died in 1995 in Paris. Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and the great tradition of nineteenth-century Russian literature inspired him to philosophy. In France, his study of philosophy, his career as a Jewish educator and intellectual, and his philosophical teaching and writing were all conducted within the traditions of French and German philosophy, especially the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and others such as Jean Wahl. Living in Europe also meant living in the years that led to the Nazi dictatorship and included the horrors of the Nazi atrocities. These events and their aftermath, years of trying to cope with the memories of those horrors, also mark his thinking. His commitment to the French liberal tradition was always powerful, his relationship to Marxism changing and mixed. If Levinas is our teacher, it is because he was a student of, indeed a child of, the twentieth century.

There are four features of Levinas's life and thought that will help us to appreciate his significance: his historical situation, especially the role of the Holocaust in his memory and in his thought; his relationship to Judaism and religious texts, in particular the Bible and the Talmud; his place among those who were critical of Western philosophy and yet found special links to that tradition; and finally, his role in the twentieth-century debates about the place of ethics in our lives and the foundations of ethical value. Let me now say a word about each of these.

The rise of National Socialism and its twelve-year reign had intellectual and personal effects on Levinas. He lost many members of his family in the death camps and the Nazi advance into the east. His own wife and children had to go into hiding in France – his friend Maurice Blanchot arranged for them to be hidden in a monastery – when the Nazis took control and while he was in a prisoner-of-war camp for nearly five years after 1940. And intellectually, it was Martin Heidegger's role as rector of

Freiburg University and his commitment to Nazism that provoked, in 1933, Levinas's lifelong struggle with Heidegger's philosophy and his drive to rethink the character of the human condition and its ethical foundations. Moreover, as the century grew old, in the wake of the Nazi atrocities, Levinas was forever attentive to the evils that we inflict on one another, the threat of nuclear destruction, the continuing genocides – in Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda – and the catastrophes that we wreak of all kinds. To him, the twentieth century, from the First World War through the Rwandan genocide, was a time of human abandonment, injustice of vast scope, inhumanity and suffering. If our thinking often resists acknowledging the horrors of which humankind is capable, our history makes such resistance difficult indeed.

Secondly, Levinas spent much of his life as a Jewish educator and a Jewish intellectual. He published several collections of essays on Jewish subjects and volumes of Talmudic studies, originally presented orally at annual meetings of the organization of French Jewish intellectuals.[1] Moreover, his philosophical writings appropriate biblical and Jewish religious terms and concepts for philosophical purposes. That there is a Jewish side to Levinas's life, intellectual and personal, is well known. However, there are details about his Jewish commitments that are important to keep in mind. His Jewish education as a child and youth in Kovno, while traditional, was nonetheless superseded in his mind by his love for Russian literature and philosophy. Only in the late 1940s, with the encouragement of friends, did he turn to serious Talmudic study under the tutelage of M. Chouchani, the enigmatic Talmudic savant with whom many Jews in Paris studied. That is, he came to serious Talmudic study only from the perspective of his developing philosophical thinking.[2] Furthermore, in the early 1930s, he came to teach in the École Normale Israélite Orientale and eventually to become its director, but this was no doubt because he could not find a university teaching position until completing his second dissertation. This occurred only in 1961, when *Totality and Infinity* was completed and he took a position at the University of Poitiers. In short, his role as a Jewish educator and as Jewish intellectual came to influence his thinking in serious ways only from the late 1940s, as he was developing his own philosophical views and responding against his Heideggerian heritage.

[1] Including *Difficult Freedom*, *In the Time of the Nations*, *Beyond the Verse*, and *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Levinas was a cofounder of the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française* in 1957.

[2] See, on this theme, Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Cornell, 2007).

Third, from literary modernism and the philosophical developments we associate with Heidegger as well as from trends in French philosophy in the interwar period, Levinas inherited a critical stance toward the tradition of Western philosophy. On the one hand, he came to see that tradition as limited; only rarely did figures within it seem able to see beyond its conceptual and linguistic boundaries to features of the human condition that are determinative and yet call for unusual means of access. These features are often referred to with a term like "transcendence," and just as often they are associated with the utterly unique that is of necessity occluded or hidden by systems that always function at the level of generality or universality. On the other hand, Heidegger had sought a more fundamental or primordial investigation into the being of beings in order to place science, philosophy, and more in terms of deeper dimensions of reality. Others challenged philosophical systems – totalizing schemes that sought comprehensiveness and exclusivity – by claiming that they could not, without contradiction, reach out and include the utter particularity of the individual, concrete, living person or the living God. Like such thinkers, Levinas was convinced that all systems reduced genuine multiplicity and diversity to some form of uniformity, to some one source. All totalities reduce the other to the same; they make sameness out of otherness, and since the dominant form of such reductionist accounts, ever since the early seventeenth century, has started with the subjectivity of the self, such totalities have regularly taken the shape of idealisms, reductions of everything to subjective or even mental phenomena. In opposition to all such strategies, Levinas claims that the human condition, intrinsically a social condition where we live together with and in interaction with other persons, has within it something that is irreducibly other. That other, which Plato thought was the Form of the Good, Plotinus the One, and Descartes the infinite and perfect God, Levinas takes to be the utterly particular other person with whom I stand face to face. Levinas's philosophy of the human condition, then, is not just another alternative picture; it is an attempt to replace all accounts of the human condition that fail to appreciate our essential social existence with one that does so and to carry out this task by revolutionizing philosophy, which is the way in which such an account is reflectively identified and disclosed.

Finally, and to my mind most importantly, this project of Levinas's – to revolutionize philosophy and in so doing to disclose the deepest structure of human social existence – yields a remarkable result. That result is the conclusion that, as he often puts it, "ethics is first philosophy." The conclusion – he says something similar when he says that ethics is an

optics – has multiple significance. One thing that it means is that philosophy is indeed systematic, in the sense that what it points toward is a study of what is fundamental, that upon which everything else depends. That is, there is a first philosophy, what, ever since the commentators on Aristotle, has been called in the West "metaphysics." There is a study of the most fundamental realities, those things that ground everything else. It may be that philosophy is not constructive or deductive; there are different kinds of systems. It may be, that is, that philosophy is dialectical or probing or interrogative or even imaginative. The issue is not one of method; rather, it is about the outcome. Philosophy discusses all aspects of the human condition, but in so doing there is a philosophical disclosure of the most fundamental things because human existence does have a kind of foundation. In human existence there is something that comes first, so to speak, and for Levinas that something is ethics. We do not yet, of course, know exactly what Levinas means by the expression "ethics." There is every reason to wonder whether that term for him has connections with our everyday use of the expression. Only later will we be able to say more about this. But for the moment, let us assume that "ethics" has something to do with human character and conduct, that it involves in some way our sense that there are actions that we take to be right and good and others that we take to be bad or wrong or harmful. Some things we do increase pain and suffering; others alleviate them. Some things we do are fine and right, respectful and just; others are not. Levinas's slogan that "ethics is first philosophy" seems to suggest that at the bottom of any account of human existence lie these matters – about right and wrong, good and bad, just and harmful. We are not fundamentally beings that are rational or beings that have certain desires or emotions or that are systems of physical processes or bundles of atoms and subatomic particles. Rather, we are fundamentally ethical beings. That, by itself, is an important and rather surprising thing to say.

But there is more to Levinas's slogan. It says that ethics is first or primary, and part of what this means is that ethics is not grounded in anything that is more primary than it. It is not grounded in something else. This means either that it is not grounded at all or that it is, in a sense, self-grounded. On my reading, Levinas clearly advocates the latter. In a provocative way, we might say that for Levinas human existence is ethical all the way down. By saying this, Levinas is making a claim that is, as I see it, tremendously valuable for twentieth-century philosophy. Let me say something here about why that is so; it is an extremely important context in which to understand Levinas's work and his contribution.

In the nineteenth century a variety of critiques of ethics became influential. One came from Kierkegaard, who subordinated ethics, as well as politics, aesthetics, and much else, to the overarching shape of the divine-human relationship and ultimately to the primacy of God. Another came from the sciences. Darwin, for example, suggested that ethical principles and theories, along with religious belief and practices, like all human institutions, were a product of human evolution and ultimately of the drive toward self-preservation. Later, in the early twentieth century, Freud would characterize ethics as a function of the superego that internalized as psychological constraints based on parental relationships. Even earlier, Marx treated the ethical as an expression of fundamental economic needs. A further critique of ethics we associate with Nietzsche and his genealogical or historical account of ethical systems as expressions of class conflict, political confrontations, and historical factors. And furthermore, there was the suggestion that emerged from the development of the human sciences – historiography especially – that all value systems were relative to history, to cultural differences and such. In short, by the turn of the century, ethics had been subjected to doubts from a host of directions – from philosophical critique, from the sciences, and from history and religion. The outcome for some was skepticism about ethics altogether; for others, ethics, like other systems of values, was taken to be relative to historical periods or to cultural, political, or religious traditions. Its authority and content, that is, was localized and made parochial, subordinated to considerations of power or group interests.

At the same time that ethics was being subjected to this multifaceted assault on the universality and absolute or unconditional character of the ethical, philosophers – as well as poets, political theorists, and theologians – sought to come to the rescue of ethics in a number of ways. One response, to the criticism of the logical positivists, was to interpret moral vocabulary in terms of human responses, in particular attitudes of attraction and endorsement or of repulsion and rejection. This development, made more sophisticated as the twentieth century went on, became one foundation for a kind of ethical naturalism that grounded the authority of ethics in our nature, here our psychological nature, and also derived its content from the same source.[3] Another development, present throughout the century, was an attempt to ground the authority and content of ethics in our nature as rational agents. In this case it was Immanuel Kant who

[3] One could include here R. M. Hare, Simon Blackburn, and Alan Gibbard, along with many others.

was the primary historical predecessor; in the twentieth century the heirs were ethical intuitionists, such as W. D. Ross, and later contractualists and other rationalists, from John Rawls to Alan Gewirth, Onora O'Neill, Thomas Hill, Tim Scanlon, Christine Korsgaard, and others. In short, seeking a source of authority for the normative force or the ought-to-be-doneness of the ethical, once a divine source has been subjected to criticisms – from Kant to our own day – these two options, to turn to human nature or to rationality, seem the most likely and compelling alternatives.

In the late twentieth century, by the late 1970s, these developments were deemed by many to be unsatisfactory. In all areas of human endeavor, the ethical, the cognitive, the aesthetic, the political, and even the scientific, arguments had successfully, it seemed to many, challenged the very notion of some foundation or unconditional ground in virtue of which the edifice of principles and commitments was taken to be justified. Debates about what philosophers called "foundationalism" raged in the seventies and eighties, and many took up the banner of one form of anti-foundationalism or other. Some were persuaded by developments in the history and philosophy of science, associated with the work of Thomas Kuhn; others were convinced by the critique of Richard Rorty, which drew on pragmatism to argue against all kinds of foundationalisms, in epistemology, ethics, politics, and elsewhere, in favor of the pluralism of worldviews and positions, to be evaluated in terms of practical considerations alone. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida – among a host of others – were called to the table as defenders of such pluralism, in part as a response to various forms of colonialism and domination. What began as a defense of minority cultures, of women and gendered concerns, and of the victims of social and political oppression became an attack on all kinds of so-called hegemonic discourses, structures, institutions, and practices. Among the favored objects of such criticism was the philosophy of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on liberal values, freedom, and rationality, and its seeming dismissal or at least denigration of emotion, feeling, the body, and particularity and distinctiveness. It is no wonder that even the notion of a self with a specified complement of essential features came under attack. Some anti-humanists, as they are called, came to their attack on the self or the person from French structuralism; others came to it from Heidegger's later philosophy of Being, and still others from a form of naturalism. But one result of much of this discussion was a conviction that everything is a text or akin to one, the object of interpretation and understanding and hence relative to the individual or community that engages in this process, as a matter of course or self-consciously.

There is one further feature of this cluster of developments that should be underlined. It is not exclusively a conversation and a debate of one strand of Western philosophy in the twentieth century. Whether the authority of the ethical is grounded in some absolute foundation or not, what is the content of the ethical, and whether the ethical is a primary feature of all human existence – these are common questions in all twentieth-century philosophy and in general intellectual discussion as well. It is well known that during the past century, beginning sometime during the early part of the century, various streams of philosophical thinking began to emerge with enough autonomy and enough of a sense of their own exclusivity to look to us now, from our vantage point in the early twenty-first century, to be distinctive ways of engaging in philosophy. It is commonly said that these streams largely converged into two, what we often call analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. Such a distinction is a simplification, to be sure, and it hides many complexities. But one thing can be said. The concerns I have been discussing about ethics, about the ground of ethical value and the content of ethical obligations and ideals, are issues that have been addressed within both of these traditions. That they are has been seen best by those figures, from both traditions, who in the latter part of the century increasingly ignored the boundary and developed for themselves ways of talking about philosophical issues that draw upon figures from both sides of the so-called divide.[4]

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas ought to be understood within this discussion about the foundation and content of the ethical. Levinas can be taken as a foundationalist about the ethical. Responding to Heidegger and the lack of any constraints on what counts as authenticity, and responding too to the horrors of Nazism, Levinas believes that social existence itself incorporates within it, in a primary way, the content and force of the ethical. There is nothing more primary to human existence than the ethical, and the ethical is its own ground, so to speak. On the one hand, of course, as we have seen, Levinas opposes the hegemony of schemes of totalization, comprehensive theories and ways of understanding the world and human experience. In this respect, Levinas seems to begin with a commitment to pluralism, to the openness of languages and conceptual schemes. But, on the other hand, this original commitment to pluralism does not lead Levinas to a form of anti-foundationalism. He knows that even a pluralist can be committed unconditionally to reducing

[4] Here I am thinking of Jurgen Habermas, Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, Raymond Geuss, Stephen Mulhall, and even Richard Rorty.

suffering, to treating others humanely and with concern, and to fighting for justice and equality. Levinas does not know the work of Richard Rorty, but he knows in principle that pragmatic and wholly interpretive commitments can nonetheless harbor absolute ethical commitments. Rorty knows this, and Levinas knows this. But what distinguishes them is that for Levinas a very careful and philosophically precise understanding of what is required by all our social interactions discloses an ethical need and an ethical imperative that binds us all. In this sense, Levinas believes that ethics is something that occurs between every two particular persons in terms of their face-to-face encounter with one another, and at the same time he believes that this fact is universal. It applies to all our relationships.

Levinas's response to the problem of the authority and content of the ethical is unlike any other twentieth-century response. Indeed, it is unlike any other attempt to deal with similar problems.[5] This is not to say that the *content* of ethical value that he advocates is distinctive. In fact, it is often just what one would expect – that we ought to care for others, respond to their needs, work to feed the hungry and reduce suffering. But what is distinctive of Levinas's account is the role it gives to the ethical in our understanding of human existence and also the *way* in which he accounts for the *force* and content of the ethical. If indeed Levinas does provide a superior way of understanding such matters, then that would count in its favor. It would, if other evidence were also forthcoming, contribute to our taking it seriously and even to our being persuaded by it.

It is worth noting, even at this stage, how this sense of the authority of the ethical and its normative force, as I shall call it, are accounted for. By "authority" I mean the status that the ethical seems to have in our lives, whereby it is regularly thought to count as a dominant reason and sometimes a decisive reason for acting. By "normative force" I mean the kind of influence the ethical is thought to have, in virtue of which it counts as such a reason, its "ought-to-be-doneness," as one might call it. We often distinguish among various kinds of force or necessity – causal, conceptual, deductive or inferential or rational, compulsion, and moral force. Here I am focusing on the latter. For the moment, I take it that this kind of moral force cannot be identified with or reduced to a type of causal or motivational force; nor can it be reduced to a conceptual or inferential force, and it is clearly not a type of compulsion. It does justify our doing something,

[5] It is even unlike the accounts of second-person normativity such as those by Stephen Darwall, R. Jay Wallace, and Michael Thompson.

in a sense, but it also is a reason that carries with it a kind of compellingness, although not one that precludes our choice or our responsibility but somehow incorporates it. It is this normative force, as I shall call it, that philosophers have so often investigated and that Levinas too explores, and it is his way of understanding it that is so unique.

As I have suggested, there have been, in a sense, four twentieth-century responses to this problem that have been most persuasive. Let me call the first the pluralist response, according to which there is no single force or source of authority; it is culturally relative or historically relative or perhaps even tied to the content of particular obligations or ideals. A second is the naturalist response, according to which there is a force, but it is tied to our psychology, either to our preferences or desires or to our needs as identified by a scientific inquiry – evolutionary biology, for example. A third grounds this force in some feature of our rational agency – for example, our ability to deliberate about our desires or reasons reflectively or our ability to choose freely what to do – and a fourth takes the force itself to be conventional, whereby a society takes certain rules and ideals to be compelling. The last is a broadly Wittgensteinian response that is often tied to Aristotle as well.[6]

Unlike the last response, which takes ethics to be conventional and social, and the first, which rejects the idea of a global moral force, Levinas ties the ground of ethics to the utter particularity of the other and the self in their engagement with one another. Since Schelling and Kierkegaard at least, one criticism of philosophical systems is that they cannot reach the uniquely particular, concrete, living individual. They function with concepts, categories, principles, and institutions and hence do not have the capacity to touch the individual and acknowledge her priority. In Marx's terms, such systems deal with species-man and not with individual persons. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have used various strategies to deal with such particularity. With Levinas, however, the utter particularity of the other person and that of the self are linked; the self's particularity lies in responsibility, which comes into being with the other's claim upon the self. By itself, the other is not utterly particular; nor is the self. But together both are, precisely because the other calls the self into question, that is, cries out to it in need and commands the self to accept it. In short,

[6] See Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1–19, reprinted in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minnesota, 1981), 26–42; and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1984) (orig. 1981). Even when one argues that modern moral philosophy is itself grounded in the second-person standpoint and its presuppositions, as does Stephen Darwall in *The Second-Person Standpoint*, it can be shown that Levinas's conclusions differ and function at a different level of understanding.

social existence is the ultimate content of the utter particularity of the self and the other.

Much of Western moral philosophy has it that morality requires of us that we detach ourselves from all that makes us the unique individuals that we are. This criticism of utilitarianism and Kantian moral philosophy is famously associated with someone like Bernard Williams, on the one hand, and with those like Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel, on the other. The criticism is that our selfhood or identity is a complex weaving together of talents, heritages, traditions, practices, and associations. What makes us unique is a highly diverse and rich cluster of features and characteristics. Rationalist moral theory calls upon us to set all that is distinctive aside, to take up a special perspective, that of man in general, or the rational agent in general, and to tie the ethical to that perspective. What is surprising about Levinas, however, is that while he clings to the centrality of our utter particularity, he takes it to be tied to ethical obligation that is prior to all of this complexity and even to the moral universality characteristic of Kantian and utilitarian moral theories.

Levinas refers to the ethical foundation as what is expressed in the relation between two particular persons when they face one another. As we shall see, this is a seemingly simple idea that is deceptively complex and elusive. Its character and its status in our lives are very difficult notions to grasp. In part, however, even here we can notice one feature of this relation. As Levinas wants us to understand, the claim that the other person makes upon me when I encounter his face – indeed, what the face reveals to me – arises out of the other person's need – what Levinas calls vulnerability or nudity or weakness and what I call its dependency-upon-me – and out of the other person's dignity or status – what Levinas calls the face's "height" and I call its authority. That is, the face speaks with authority and out of weakness or need; it commands and petitions at once. This may sound perplexing; how can someone who is destitute or weak make demands of me, and how can one who commands me be vulnerable and deprived? But Levinas's point, in a sense, is that this combination, when understood dialectically, is what is needed to make normativity or the ought-to-be-doneness possible. If the other person were only my superior, then her commands would be compulsion; if she were only destitute or weak, then her pleas would carry no more weight than I choose to give them. Why is it that what the other person needs of me is something that both calls out to me, grips me, moves me, and also makes demands of me, requires me? There must be something about the other person's relation to me that primitively and irreducibly incorporates both these dimensions