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1 Introduction

One might speculate about the possibility of writing a history of French philosophy in the twentieth century as a philosophical biography of Emmanuel Levinas. He was born in 1906 in Lithuania and died in Paris in 1995. Levinas's life-span therefore traverses and connects many of the intellectual movements of the twentieth century and intersects with some of its major historical events, its moments of light as well as its point of absolute darkness – Levinas said that his life had been dominated by the memory of the Nazi horror (*DF* 291).[1]

The history of French philosophy in the twentieth century can be described as a succession of trends and movements, from the neo-Kantianism that was hegemonic in the early decades of the twentieth century, through to the Bergsonism that was very influential until the 1930s, Kojève's Hegelianism in the 1930s, phenomenology in the 1930s and 1940s, existentialism in the post-war period, structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s, post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s, and the return to ethics and political philosophy in the 1980s. Levinas was present throughout all these developments, and was either influenced by them or influenced their reception in France.

Yet Levinas's presence in many of these movements is rather fleeting, indeed at times shadowy. It is widely agreed that Levinas was largely responsible for the introduction of Husserl and Heidegger in France, philosophers who were absolutely decisive for following generations of philosophers, if only in the opposition they provoked. Levinas even jokingly suggested that his place in philosophical immortality was assured by the fact that his doctoral thesis on Husserl had introduced the young Jean-Paul Sartre to phenomenology.[2] However, for a variety of reasons – a certain reticence, even diffidence, on Levinas's part, his professional position outside the French

university system until 1964, and his captivity in the *Stalag* between 1940 and 1945 – Levinas's work made little impression prior to the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, and not much immediately after it. In the exuberance of the *libération*, and the successive dominance of existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism on the French scene, Levinas's work played in a minor key, where he was known – if at all – as a specialist and scholar of Husserl and Heidegger. As can be seen from his 1963 collection, *Difficult Freedom*, in the 1950s and after Levinas was much more influential in Jewish affairs in France than in philosophy.

Indeed, even after the appearance of *Totality and Infinity*, apart from some rich, if oblique, texts by Levinas's lifelong friend Maurice Blanchot, the first serious and extensive philosophical study of Levinas's work was by a then 34-year-old philosopher, relatively unknown outside scholarly circles, called Jacques Derrida.[3] First published in 1964, nothing remotely comparable to Derrida's brilliant essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', was published on Levinas during the next decade. A measure of the obscurity enjoyed by Levinas's work can be seen from the fact that in Vincent Descombes's otherwise excellent presentation of the history of philosophy in France during the period 1933–77, published in 1979, Levinas is barely even mentioned.[4] How is it, then, that Jean-Luc Marion, Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne (Paris *IV*), was able to write in an obsequy from February 1996, 'If one defines a great philosopher as someone without whom philosophy would not have been what it is, then in France there are two great philosophers of the twentieth century: Bergson and Levinas'?[5]

The situation began to change, and change rapidly, from the early to the mid-1980s. The reasons for this are various. First and foremost, the word 'ethics', which had either been absent from intellectual discussion, or present simply as a term of abuse reserved for the bourgeoisie in the radical anti-humanism of the 1970s, once again became acceptable. The collapse of revolutionary Marxism, from its short-lived structuralist hegemony in Althusser, to the Maoist delusions of the *Tel Quel* group, occasioned the rise of the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, André Glucksmann, Alain Finkielkraut and Bernard Henri-Lévy, who were critical of the enthusiastic political myopia of the 1968 generation. Although the debt that philosophical posterity

will have to the latter thinkers is rather uncertain, by the early 1980s questions of ethics, politics, law and democracy were back on the philosophical and cultural agenda and the scene was set for a reappraisal of Levinas's work. A convenient landmark is provided by the radio interviews with Philippe Nemo that were broadcast on France Culture and published in 1982 as *Ethics and Infinity*. Another crucial event in the reception of Levinas was the Heidegger affair of the winter of 1986–7, which was occasioned by the publication of Victor Farias's *Heidegger and Nazism* and new revelations about the extent of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism. This affair is significant because much of the criticism of Heidegger was also, indirectly, a criticism of the alleged moral and political impoverishment of the thinking he inspired, in particular that of Derrida. The alleged ethical turn of Derrida's thinking might be viewed simply as a return to Levinas, one of the major influences on the development of his thinking, as is amply evidenced by the 1964 essay.

The renewed interest in Levinas can also be linked to two other factors on the French scene: a return to phenomenology that begins in the 1980s and which gains pace in the 1990s, and a renewal of interest in religious themes. These two factors might be said to come together in what Dominique Janicaud has diagnosed as a theological turn in French phenomenology, evidenced in different ways in the work of Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien.[6] By the mid to late 1980s, Levinas's major philosophical works, which hitherto had only been available in the handsome, yet expensive, volumes published by Martinus Nijhoff in Holland and Fata Morgana in Montpellier, were beginning to be reissued in cheap *livre de poche* editions. *En bref*, Levinas begins to be widely read in France for the first time.

Another highly significant factor in the contemporary fascination for Levinas's work is its reception outside France. A glance at Roger Burggraeve's helpful bibliography of Levinas confirms the fact that the first serious reception of Levinas's work in academic circles took place in Belgium and Holland, with the work of philosophers like Alphonse de Waelhens, H. J. Adriaanse, Theodore de Boer, Adriaan Peperzak, Stephen Strasser, Jan De Greef, Sam IJselling and Jacques Taminiaux.[7] It is perhaps ironic that Levinas is first taken up by Christian philosophers, whether Protestants like De Boer, or Catholics like Peperzak.[8] The first honorary doctorates presented to

Levinas were from the Jesuit faculty of Loyola University Chicago in 1970, the Protestant theologians of the university of Leiden in 1975 and the Catholic University of Leuven in 1976. In Italy, from 1969 onwards, Levinas was a regular participant in meetings in Rome organized by Enrico Castelli, which often dealt with religious themes. Also, in 1983 and 1985, after meeting with the Pope briefly on the occasion of his visit to Paris in May 1980, Levinas, along with other philosophers, attended the conferences held at the Castel Gandolfo at which the Pope presided. The positive German reception of Levinas, with the notable exception of phenomenologists like Bernhard Waldenfels and critical theorists like Axel Honneth, was largely thanks to Freiburg Catholic theologians such as Ludwig Wenzler and Bernhard Caspar, and has obviously been dominated by the question of German guilt for the *Shoah*.

The vicissitudes of the Anglo-American reception of Levinas might also be mentioned in this connection. The reception begins in the Catholic universities in the USA, many of which enjoyed strong connections with the Dutch and Belgium Catholic academic milieux such as Duquesne University and Loyola University Chicago. But Levinas was also being read from the early 1970s onwards in Continental philosophy circles in non-Catholic universities such as Northwestern, Pennsylvania State and the State University of New York (Stonybrook), which produced Levinas scholars such as Richard A. Cohen. The first book-length study of Levinas in English was by Edith Wyschogrod from 1974, although it was published by Nijhoff in Holland.[9] As an undergraduate at the University of Essex in the 1980s, I was introduced to Levinas's work by my present co-editor, as were many others, such as Tina Chanter. At that time, one had the impression that an interest in Levinas was a passion shared by a handful of initiates and rare senior figures such as John Llewelyn, Alan Montefiore or David Wood. It is fair to say that in the English-speaking world many people came to Levinas through the astonishing popularity of the work of Derrida. The turn to Levinas was motivated by the question of whether deconstruction, in its Derridian or De Manian versions, had any ethical status, which in its turn was linked to a widespread renewal of interest in the place of ethics in literary studies.[10]

Although Levinas could hardly be so described, another influential strand of the Anglo-American reception of his work has

been feminist, in the work of scholars such as Noreen O'Connor, Tina Chanter, Jill Robbins and younger philosophers such as Stella Sandford.[11] They were in turn inspired by the early work of Catherine Chalier on figures of femininity in Levinas and Judaism, and also by Luce Irigaray's commentaries on Levinas in the context of discussions of the ethics of sexual difference.[12] Levinas was introduced to sociology through the pathbreaking work of Zygmunt Bauman and his influence is felt in the work of Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy.[13] For good or ill, Levinas has become an obligatory reference point in theoretical discussions across a whole range of disciplines: philosophy, theology, Jewish studies, aesthetics and art theory, social and political theory, international relations theory, pedagogy, psychotherapy and counselling, and nursing and medical practice.

As the theme of ethics has occupied an increasingly central place in the humanities and the social sciences, so Levinas's work has assumed an imposing profile. For example, Gary Gutting's excellent new history of French philosophy in the twentieth century, which supplants Descombes's on the Cambridge University Press list, concludes with a discussion of Levinas.[14] There is now a veritable flood of work on Levinas in a huge range of languages, and his work has been well translated into English. The more recent translations of Levinas build on the work of Alphonso Lingis, Levinas's first and best-known English translator. Indeed, in many ways it now looks as if Levinas were the hidden king of twentieth-century French philosophy. Such are the pleasing ironies of history.

It is a reflection of Levinas's growing importance that philosophers with a background in analytic philosophy and American pragmatism such as Hilary W. Putnam, Richard J. Bernstein or Stanley Cavell, should be taking up Levinas.[15] Even someone like Richard Rorty, although deeply hostile to the rigours of infinite responsibility, which he calls a 'nuisance', now feels obliged to refute him.[16] It is our hope that this Cambridge Companion will consolidate, deepen and accelerate the reception of Levinas in the English-speaking world and along its edges. In the selection of essays, we have sought a balance between the more usual phenomenological or Continental approaches to Levinas's work and more analytic approaches, the ambition being to shun that particular professional division of labour. Attention has also been paid to the significant consequences of Levinas's work for aesthetics, art and literature, and to representing

the specifically Judaic character of Levinas's work, both his concern for religious issues and his practice of Talmudic commentary.

LEVINAS'S BIG IDEA

Levinas's work, like that of any original thinker, is possessed of a great richness. It was influenced by many sources – non-philosophical and philosophical, as much by Levinas's Talmudic master Monsieur Chouchani as by Heidegger – and it deals with a wide and complex range of matters. Levinas's work provides powerful descriptions of a whole range of phenomena, both everyday banalities and those that one could describe with Bataille as 'limit-experiences': insomnia, fatigue, effort, sensuous enjoyment, erotic life, birth and the relation to death. Such phenomena are described with particularly memorable power by Levinas in the work published after the war: *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*.

However, despite its richness, once more like that of any great thinker, Levinas's work is dominated by one thought, and it seeks to think one thing under an often bewildering variety of aspects. Derrida, in an image that Richard Bernstein takes up later in this book, compares the movement of Levinas's thinking to that of a wave on a beach, always the same wave returning and repeating its movement with deeper insistence. Hilary Putnam, picking up on a more prosaic image from Isaiah Berlin, *via* Archilochus, compares Levinas to a hedgehog, who knows 'one big thing', rather than a fox, who knows 'many small things'. Levinas's one big thing is expressed in his thesis that ethics is first philosophy, where ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person. My task in this introduction is to explain Levinas's big idea. Let me begin, however, with a remark on philosophical method.

In a discussion from 1975, Levinas said, 'I neither believe that there is transparency possible in method, nor that philosophy is possible as transparency' (*GCM* 143). Now, while the opacity of Levinas's prose troubles many of his readers, it cannot be said that his work is without method. Levinas always described himself as a phenomenologist and as being faithful to the spirit of Husserl (*OB* 183). What Levinas means by phenomenology is the Husserlian method of intentional analysis. Although there are various formulations of the meaning of

the latter in Levinas's work, the best definition remains that given in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*. He writes,

> Intentional analysis is the search for the concrete. Notions held under the direct analysis of the thought that defines them are nevertheless, unbeknown to this naïve thought, revealed to be implanted in horizons unsuspected by this thought; these horizons endow them with meaning – such is the essential teaching of Husserl. [*TI* 28]

Thus, intentional analysis begins from the unreflective naïvety of what Husserl calls the natural attitude. Through the operation of the phenomenological reduction, it seeks to describe the deep structures of intentional life, structures which give meaning to that life, but which are forgotten in that naïvety. This is what phenomenology calls the concrete: not the empirical givens of sense data, but the *a priori* structures that give meaning to those seeming givens. As Levinas puts it, 'What counts is the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives' (*TI* 28). This is what Levinas meant when he used to say, as he apparently often did at the beginning of his lecture courses at the Sorbonne in the 1970s, that philosophy, 'c'est la science des naïvetés' ('it's the science of naïveties'). Philosophy is the work of reflection that is brought to bear on unreflective, everyday life. This is why Levinas insists that phenomenology constitutes a deduction, from the naïve to the scientific, from the empirical to the *a priori* and so forth. A phenomenologist seeks to pick out and analyse the common, shared features that underlie our everyday experience, to make explicit what is implicit in our ordinary social know-how. On this model, in my view, the philosopher, unlike the natural scientist, does not claim to be providing us with new knowledge or fresh discoveries, but rather with what Wittgenstein calls *reminders* of what we already know but continually pass over in our day-to-day life. Philosophy reminds us of what is passed over in the naïvety of what passes for common sense.

Mention of the spirit of Husserlian phenomenology is important since, from the time of his 1930 doctoral thesis onwards, Levinas could hardly be described as faithful to the letter of Husserl's texts. He variously criticized his former teacher for theoreticism, intellectualism and overlooking the existential density and historical embeddedness of lived experience. Levinas's critically appropriative relation to Husserl is discussed at length below by Rudolf Bernet, with

special reference to time-consciousness. If the fundamental axiom of phenomenology is the intentionality thesis, namely that all thought is fundamentally characterized by being directed towards its various matters, then Levinas's big idea about the ethical relation to the other person is not phenomenological, because the other is not given as a matter for thought or reflection. As Levinas makes clear in an essay from 1965, the other is not a phenomenon but an enigma, something ultimately refractory to intentionality and opaque to the understanding.[17] Therefore, Levinas maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian phenomenology.

LEAVING THE CLIMATE OF HEIDEGGER'S THINKING

Levinas is usually associated with one thesis, namely the idea that *ethics is first philosophy*. But what exactly does he mean by that? The central task of Levinas's work, in his words, is the attempt to describe a relation with the other person that cannot be reduced to comprehension. He finds this in what he famously calls the 'face-to-face' relation. But let me try and unpack these slightly mysterious claims by considering his somewhat oedipal conflict with Heidegger, which is discussed by a number of contributors below, such as Gerald Bruns.

As is well known, Heidegger became politically committed to National Socialism, accepting the position of Rector of Freiburg University in the fateful year 1933. If one is to begin to grasp how traumatic Heidegger's commitment to National Socialism was to the young Levinas and how determinative it was for his future work, then one has to understand the extent to which Levinas was philosophically convinced by Heidegger. Between 1930 and 1932 Levinas planned to write a book on Heidegger, a project he abandoned in disbelief at Heidegger's actions in 1933. A fragment of the book was published in 1932 as 'Martin Heidegger and Ontology'.[18] By 1934, at the request of the recently founded French left Catholic journal *Esprit*, Levinas had written a memorable meditation on the philosophy of what the editor, Emmanuel Mounier, called 'Hitlerism'.[19] So if Levinas's life was dominated by the memory of the Nazi horror, then his philosophical life was animated by the question of how a philosopher as undeniably brilliant as Heidegger could have become a Nazi, for however short a time.

The philosophical kernel of Levinas's critique of Heidegger is most clearly stated in the important 1951 paper, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'[20] Levinas here engages in a critical questioning of Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology, that is, his attempt to raise anew the question of the meaning of Being through an analysis of that being for whom Being is an issue: *Dasein* or the human being. In Heidegger's early work, ontology – which is what Aristotle called the science of Being as such or metaphysics – is fundamental, and *Dasein* is the fundament or condition of possibility for any ontology. What Heidegger seeks to do in *Being and Time*, once again in the spirit rather than the letter of Husserlian intentional analysis, is to identify the basic or *a priori* structures of *Dasein*. These structures are what Heidegger calls 'existentials', such as understanding, state-of-mind, discourse and falling. For Levinas, the basic advance and advantage of Heideggerian ontology over Husserlian phenomenology is that it begins from an analysis of the factual situation of the human being in everyday life, what Heidegger after Wilhelm Dilthey calls 'facticity'. The understanding or comprehension of Being (*Seinsverständnis*), which must be presupposed in order for Heidegger's investigation into the meaning of Being to be intelligible, does not presuppose a merely intellectual attitude, but rather the rich variety of intentional life – emotional and practical as well as theoretical – through which we relate to things, persons and the world.

There is here a fundamental agreement of Levinas with Heidegger which can already be found in his critique of Husserl in the conclusion to his 1930 doctoral thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* and which is presupposed in all of Levinas's subsequent work. The essential contribution of Heideggerian ontology is its critique of intellectualism. Ontology is not, as it was for Aristotle, a contemplative theoretical endeavour, but is, according to Heidegger, grounded in a fundamental ontology of the existential engagement of human beings in the world, which forms the anthropological preparation for the question of Being. Levinas writes with reference to the phenomenological reduction, 'This is an act in which we consider life in all its concreteness but no longer live it' (*TIHP* 155). Levinas's version of phenomenology seeks to consider life as it is lived. The overall orientation of Levinas's early work might be summarized in another sentence from the opening pages of the

same book, 'Knowledge of Heidegger's starting point may allow us to understand better Husserl's end point' (*TIHP* xxxiv).

However, as some of the writings prior to the 1951 essay make clear (for example, the introduction to the 1947 book *Existence and Existents*), although Levinas's work is to a large extent inspired by Heidegger and by the conviction that we cannot put aside *Being and Time* for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian, it is also governed by what Levinas calls, 'the profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy' (*EE* 19). In a letter appended to the 1962 paper, 'Transcendence and Height', with an oblique but characteristic reference to Heidegger's political myopia, Levinas writes,

> The poetry of the peaceful path that runs through fields does not reflect the splendour of Being beyond beings. The splendour brings with it more sombre and pitiless images. The declaration of the end of metaphysics is premature. The end is not at all certain. Besides, metaphysics – the relation with the being (*étant*) which is accomplished as ethics – precedes the understanding of Being and survives ontology. [*BPW* 31]

Levinas claims that *Dasein*'s understanding of Being presupposes an ethical relation with the other human being, that being to whom I speak and to whom I am obliged before being comprehended. Fundamental ontology is fundamentally ethical. It is this ethical relation that Levinas, principally in *Totality and Infinity*, describes as metaphysical and which survives any declaration of the end of metaphysics.

Levinas's Heidegger is essentially the author of *Being and Time*, 'Heidegger's first and principal work', a work which, for Levinas, is the peer of the greatest books in the history of philosophy, regardless of Heidegger's politics (*CP* 52). Although Levinas clearly knew Heidegger's later work, much more than he liked to admit, he expresses little sympathy for it. In the important 1957 essay, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', the critique of Heidegger becomes yet more direct and polemical: 'In Heidegger, atheism is a paganism, the pre-Socratic texts are anti-Scriptures. Heidegger shows in what intoxication the lucid sobriety of philosophers is steeped' (*CP* 53).

'Is Ontology Fundamental?' demonstrates for the first time in Levinas's work the *ethical* significance of his critique of Heidegger. It is in this paper that the word 'ethics' first enters Levinas's philosophical