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Richard A. Cohen
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Introduction: philosophy as ethical exegesis

But it belongs to the very essence of language, which consists in continually undoing its phrase by the foreword or the exegesis, in unsaying the said, in attempting to restate without ceremonies what has already been ill understood in the inevitable ceremonial in which the said delights.

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*¹

Parents, teachers and religious leaders have always taught morality to their charges, to their sons and daughters, to school children, and to ordinary people. Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), the Lithuanian-born French Jewish philosopher, does something different, something perhaps more difficult. He teaches morality to the intellectual elite, to those who all too often, and all too proudly, have become our new “cultured despisers of religion,” thinking themselves too intelligent, too sophisticated, too cultured for the common imperatives and well-known limitations of “ordinary” morality. Whether they dismiss the authority of morality as “self-incurred immaturity,” “bourgeois superstructure,” “grammatical error,” “infantile internalization,” “mass delusion,” “physiological weakness,” or some other derisive reduction, Levinas aims to show them – at the highest levels of intellect and spirit – that morality is a matter for adults, intelligent adults included.

Levinas will show that nothing is more serious than morality. For at stake in morality is our highest individual and collective

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1964), p. 30.

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vocation, the very humanity of the human. His writings are difficult, then, not because morality is difficult. Everyone already knows the moral imperatives and knows that they run counter to our instincts and inclinations. Rather, Levinas's writings are difficult because the readers they seek have become difficult. They have become ensnared in the labyrinth of knowledge, both true and false, advanced and elementary, forgetful, however, of the genuine roots of our common humanity.

Levinas's first two book-length works in philosophy were both published in 1947: *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*. Products of the phenomenological school of Edmund Husserl, they present original and distinctive theses that challenge the then dominant readings of phenomenology articulated by Heidegger in Germany and Jean-Paul Sartre in France. They challenge Husserl's own phenomenology too. Nonetheless, these books are but the first steps, and as such appear – retrospectively – as schematic beginnings, when compared to his later, more mature philosophy. This philosophy appears in Levinas's two great works of ethical metaphysics: *Totality and Infinity*, published in 1961, and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, published in 1974. Each by itself, and both together, represent major contributions to Western philosophy. Chapter 5 of the present volume will present their chief theses and elaborate the relationship holding these two volumes together. Both works present Levinas's nuanced, ethical re-vision of Western philosophy, and more particularly his challenge to the philosophies of Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. Together they form the backbone of Levinas's philosophy, including his so-called “Jewish” writings.

Unlike many thinkers of modernity, Levinas does not separate philosophy from religion or religion from philosophy. Neither does he bind them together, one at the expense of the other. To maintain their integrity Levinas will insist that philosophy rethink its origins. He will insist that in acknowledging the limits of knowledge, which has been philosophy's obsession throughout the modern period, philosophy also recognize something greater than knowledge, a dimension or excellence more compelling than knowing but at the very root of knowing itself. Levinas will point

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knowledge to its own moral responsibilities and obligations. To be sure, this dimension and its demands will strike a militantly epistemological philosophy as unjustified, excessive, indeed, as “religious.”

But Levinas will also insist that religion is alien to mythology and ideology. As a philosopher, he will reject the intrusion of “proof texts” and “religious experience,” no less than any philosopher – in contrast to the sophist – would reject the intrusion of opinion, personal narrative, violence, power. As a philosopher, he will not rely on the prior agreement, the common consent of a particular community of religious faithful. This route, the shared ethos and history of a particular group, perhaps attractive and even necessary for a certain pedagogy, ends by suppressing the universal experience of humanity and the universal knowledge of science, hence it ends by divorcing religion from its proper intellectual heights. Religious thought, and certainly Jewish religious thought, is for Levinas no less universal than philosophy’s epistemological discipline imposes on genuinely scientific thought. Indeed, philosophical thought, as Levinas conceives it, is universal precisely because it is bound to the universality of religious thought. That is to say, both philosophical and religious thought are universal insofar as both are attached to the universality and humanity of morality and justice. Showing how these connections are made, without sacrificing the particularity of religion or the universality of philosophy, is one of the great attractions of Levinas’s work.

All twentieth-century philosophy, aside from positivism, rejects the hegemony of science. This is the very contemporaneity of contemporary thought and the deepest sense of its “postmodernity.” The modern period, inaugurated by Spinoza and ended by Bergson, as I shall argue in chapter 1, was the epoch of science and unqualified faith in science. Because he accepts the authority of science without totalizing that authority, Levinas’s two most important interlocutors and protagonists are Husserl, staunch defender of science, and Heidegger, staunch opponent of science. Levinas will challenge the Heideggerian turn from science and technology to language and “the question of being.” Thus he will also challenge this same turn as found in Heidegger’s most faithful

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and clever disciple in France, Jacques Derrida. Levinas's confrontation with Heidegger – the opposition between ethics and ontology – is the topic of chapter 4.

But Levinas is engaged in deep debate not only with Heidegger, his anti-scientific protagonist, but also with Husserl, his pro-scientific teacher. Husserl, a philosopher's philosopher, not only vigorously defended the ultimacy of science, like the positivists, but he extended its range. He extended its method, naming this enlargement "phenomenology," including phenomena, that is, meanings, within the range of a science that had hitherto limited itself to "objects." So powerful and compelling was this extension of science that phenomenology would become the all-embracing context of all subsequent twentieth-century continental philosophy, and influence all the humanities and social sciences throughout the twentieth century. To see Levinas's intimate appreciation for phenomenology, his appropriation of it, and at the same time his profound and critical deviation from this school of thought, will be the task of both chapters 2 and 3 of the present volume. While Heidegger (and Derrida) breach the confines of phenomenology by way of an aesthetic development of language, Levinas will show that the root of this breach derives from the higher demands of ethics, whose compelling say – its obligations – cannot, without violence and injustice, be suppressed within the play of what is said, however delicate.

The importance of Levinas's philosophy lies, then, in its "argument" about *what is most important*. And in our day, where the sweet songs of sophism are daily heard in the lecture halls, one could even say that the importance of Levinas's philosophy lies in its defense of the very importance – not to mention the existence – of importance. Like Matthew Arnold, Levinas will not argue that "only one thing is needful." His is not, to be sure, a narrow-minded or sectarian thought. But he will argue that the very force of *importance* or *seriousness* derives most fundamentally neither from the search for truth nor from a scintillating play of lights. Nietzsche had already grasped this lesson, but rather than recoil he embraced its nihilist consequences, attacking seriousness as such (which he called "the spirit of gravity," and characterized as a physiological condition – sickness, weakness, bad nutrition). But

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contrary to Nietzsche, philosophy has always favored the intellectual life conceived as a quest for knowledge. Philosophy has always conceived itself as the search for truth, and it has always proposed that no greater quest exists for humankind, individually if not collectively. Furthermore, philosophy has proven itself, made good on its many self-congratulatory paeans.

Philosophy's greatest results have come in what was traditionally called "natural philosophy," what we today simply call "science": mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. The Periodic Table puts to rest the concocted mythologies of alchemy. No one but an intellectual ostrich would dispute the success of philosophy conceived on the model of knowledge. It is a success that validates philosophy's quest for truth, for knowledge in the strong sense, for the universal, for an accurate and coherent account of the real. But already at its very origins, two and one half millennia ago, Socrates – Plato's Socrates – challenged the hegemony of knowledge of the *real*. For Socrates, more important than knowledge of the real would be knowledge of the *good*. The good was not only *more important* than the true, but the true itself would rest on the good. Socrates, however, remained wedded to the hegemony of knowledge, for he wanted above all to *know* the good. Once again, even if the object of his most serious inquiries – justice, love, piety – was different, one would *first* have to *know*.

Levinas, in contrast, challenges the hegemony of knowledge. Knowledge, by itself, as has become nearly transparent today, is incapable of determining worth, value, or purpose. It knows, to be sure, but it cannot rank importance. Its object is "difference" not excellence. No knowledge is more or less urgent than any other. In truth, then, contrary to its own paeans, knowledge cannot defend even its own priority. Instead, as a sort of displacement, a masking of its indifference, it reduces everything else to knowledge, until there is nothing else but itself or ignorance. Knowledge, by itself, thus remains indifferent to the very humanity of the human. This latter, the humanity of the human, Levinas finds not in knowledge, but in ethics. More important than epistemology would be ethics: the demands of morality and justice.

The unique contribution of Levinas, however, is not simply to declare that ethics is more important than knowledge, but to show

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knowledge, in all its nuances, its own shortcomings, and to show those shortcomings in a manner faithful to the very priority of ethics itself. Hume and Kant had both seen the limitations of knowledge but, one in habit and custom and the other in a moral repetition of knowledge, had succumbed to its hegemony nonetheless. In defending ethics *ethically*, insisting on an excellence rather than yet another truth or untruth, Levinas surpasses the entire enterprise of philosophy hitherto conceived. Herein lies his importance, his genuine postmodernity.

Kant, in particular, had shown that knowledge could not stand by itself, that it was incapable of fully knowing its own knowing. In the dialectical “paralogisms” and “antinomies” of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had shown once and for all that knowledge had its limits. He had also understood that two routes lay open beyond knowledge: ethics and aesthetics, the will and the imagination. But when Kant tried, in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, to present an ethics operating otherwise than knowledge, he once again reverted to the very terms and structures he had ostensibly surpassed in his first *Critique*. That is to say, Kant understood ethics in terms of an adherence to universal law, in terms of a respect not for the other person, but rather for the rationality of the other person as a law-abiding agent. Thus Kant saw the Promised Land, but did not enter. Unlike Levinas he did not grasp ethics ethically.

Ethics operates otherwise than epistemology and is not first subject to its restraints. It is not the law in the other person that a moral agent respects, but the very otherness of the other person, the other’s morality, that is, the other’s mortality, the other’s suffering. Otherness is not abstract like moral law but concrete, in the very flesh of the other, the other’s mortality, aging, degradation, suffering. This will be shown in chapter 8: the link between mortality, suffering, and evil. Morality is not based in freedom, as Kant thought, still constrained by the model of freedom of thought, but is based rather in a more profound *obedience*. Levinas, like Emil Fackenheim, challenges the fundamental Kantian dichotomy between “autonomy” and “heteronomy,” a dichotomy so influential for all modern thought. Heteronomy, in contrast to an unhampered and pure freedom of choice, would represent the non-moral *par excellence*: external coercion depriving the agency of

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freedom, hence depriving human actions of their moral quality. Levinas, rooted in the wisdom of an older and profound Jewish tradition – commenting, no doubt, on the “we will do and we will hearken” said by the Jewish people at Mount Sinai – understands that moral choice depends on a more complicated and intimate structure than the Kantian opposition between inner freedom and external coercion. The human is neither wholly free nor wholly determined. Pure freedom and pure necessity are mental constructs, products of intellectual abstraction, alien to the structure of morality. In chapter 6 we will examine the intimate structure of a moral consciousness, the “maternal psyche.”

Morality, for Levinas, is always a “difficult freedom,” at once bound and free. He does not in the least suggest by this phrase that the skies must open for some self-proclaimed “moral” commandments to burst forth to order humans to do what is right. Rather, it is the other person who commands the self. Moral command comes to the self by way of the other person. Before self-consciousness, the other is in the self, gets to the self, and hence the self is maternal – pregnant with the other – before it is egoist. Or, rather, that being-for-the-other is deeper, more truly oneself, than being-for-oneself. But the idea as well as the reality of being-for-oneself is a subtle, seductive temptation, practically and intellectually, in any account of human agency. In chapter 9, we will examine Ricoeur’s attack on Levinas, and his alternative, his defense – in *Oneself as Another* (1990) – of moral agency *qua* self-esteem. We will show, in a close examination of the deepest recesses of moral agency, the *transcendence* rather than the *immanence* of the priority of the other. The other suffers, I must act. The other is mortal, I must help. Yes, in helping the other the self is rising to its proper height, to its responsibility, but it rises to its proper height in response to the other’s plight. “The other’s material needs are my spiritual needs,” Levinas is fond of saying, citing Rabbi Israel Salanter, founder of the Mussar movement in eighteenth-century Eastern Europe. Or, a more frequent citation, from Dostoyevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*: “We are all guilty of all and for all humanity before all, and I more than others.” Moral agency, in a word, while entirely on my shoulders, does not originate in myself. My responsibility emerges as a response to the

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other person, to the other person who in coming first ordains the self as a moral agent.

Moral agency thus arises in a complicated social dialectic comprising two distinct terms and two distinct relations: (1) the obligating other, (2) the responsible self, (3) the priority of the other, and (4) the service of the self. Not one of these is reducible to the other. The self is responsible for the other. The self is and increasingly becomes (or fails to become) its “brother’s keeper.” Such is the moral self. It is neither an ontological nor an aesthetic event but an ethical event. It is to point to this “height,” this “excellence,” this greater “urgency,” the moral priority of the other person and the “better self” that responds to the other, that constitutes the positive *work* of Levinas’s philosophy and the wedge with which he criticizes the hegemony of epistemology or the seduction of aesthetics. Levinas is not arguing in the name of the real or the beautiful (or the “different”), but for what is better than being, or, as in the title of his second *magnum opus*, for what is “otherwise than being or beyond essence.” “To be or not to be,” Levinas asks, “is that the question? Is it the first and final question?” He answers “No,” for the *more urgent* question has to do with one’s “right to be.” This Levinas calls “the question *par excellence* or the question of philosophy. Not ‘Why being rather than nothing?’ but how being justifies itself.”²

The force of Levinas’s thought is thus a moral force, and this precisely is its excellence and its urgency. Pursuing the close analyses of consciousness opened up by the phenomenological method, taking advantage of its careful descriptive method, and no less attentive to the manner in which language contributes to signification, Levinas tracks down the moment of rupture, transcendence, “the trace of the other,” the peculiar inversion and interplay of activity and passivity by which a “better” claims priority over “being” and the prescriptive overloads the nominative. Against Husserl, who makes consciousness the starting point of meaning, and Heidegger, who makes one’s own mortality the launching point of individuation and the opening onto the ultimate “issue of being,” for Levinas it is the *other’s* mortality and the other’s signifying that count first and most. The other – mortal and

² Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” trans. S. Hand and M. Temple, in Séan Hand, ed. *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 86.

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aging – suffers, therefore I am commanded in my singularity. And so commanded, the self is ordered to its singular responsibility for the other all the way, right up to my own possible death for the other. Such, for Levinas, is the nobility, the dignity of the human. That one can be called upon to die for the other would be the ultimate structure of a responsible self. Thus, for Levinas, the self is not first for itself and then for the other, as if morality were some removable gloss or changeable role. Rather, the self first rises to its true humanity, to its irreplaceable singularity, as – to borrow an ancient biblical term – an *election*. One is chosen before one chooses. One is oneself when and insofar as one is for-the-other, for-the-other-before-oneself. The true self is the moral self. It is a heightening, arising in obligations and responsibilities to and for the other person, the one in need of help. Such is the ethical structure of morality.

But what about justice? If I am for-the-other, the other who faces, who needs help, what about the others, the others not present, absent others? A striking feature of Levinas's philosophy is the derivation of justice from morality, and hence the dependency of justice on morality. A moral self, giving everything to the other, would at the same time – in the name of morality – neglect all others. Morality, by itself, would engender injustice. To give all to one is to deprive others. But in this dilemma Levinas sees not the failure of morality, a flaw in its infinite demands, but rather the very link tying justice to morality. Justice, far from being imposed from outside, arbitrarily, by the State, say, or by miraculous Commandments, is required to *rectify* morality. The force of justice is the rectification of morality. If the self is to be good to the other without producing injustice it must also be good to others, hence it must come to treat others equally. Perhaps in a “Garden of Eden” (the Bible's peculiar version of what philosophers would later call “state of nature” myths), where there are only two persons, one could be moral and just at the same time. In society, however, the society in which we live, in our “unredeemed” world, one must be both moral and just, balancing the infinite demands of morality with the equities demanded by justice.

But to have the equality demanded by justice, one must have knowledge. One must have just balances and equitable

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distribution. Indeed, in a society of scarcity one must also maximize resources, increase crops, manufacture goods, and so on. Thus knowledge, instead of making itself ruler, serves justice. In this way, Levinas's ethical philosophy teaches the *significance* of signification, the *rationale* for the rational. It is not merely an account of science and knowledge, but their justification. Knowledge, science, intellect, truth, would all serve justice, a justice that itself serves morality. This also means that the state – where justice is institutionalized, in legislation, in courts, in social programs, with police and army – is itself beholden to justice and hence also to morality. Thus Levinas will oppose Machiavellian politics and the entire twentieth-century experience of statism from Stalin to Nationalist Socialism. The state is neither the creator nor the final arbiter of justice. True enough, the state maintains justice, but it does so for the sake of morality. The aim of statecraft, then, is thus neither sheer survival nor brute aggrandizement, but justice – the maximization of morality. Thus, too, one can and must judge the state – morally. Politics would have an aim, would be free of sophism and nihilism. The ultimate aim of politics, as of ethics, is a society where morality and justice do not contradict one another, where giving all to one deprives no one else. Such would be the good society of plenty, in contrast to the present society of scarcity. In the Western religious tradition this goal is known as the “messianic age” or the “kingdom of God on earth.” This religious language expresses a humility, our ignorance of how exactly to get from where we are, the struggle of good and evil, justice at war with injustice, morality and justice fighting selfishness and cynicism, to where we aim to go, to morality and justice in harmony. Aiming in the direction of the good, through concrete actions that help the other before oneself, and creating the lasting institutions of a just society – these are the heights of human life, the very “humanity of the human,” as Levinas calls it. And these are the tasks of our time, as individuals and as collectivities, linked to long ethico-religious traditions. What are the repercussions for philosophy? In contrast to a philosophy of ethics, what would be an ethical philosophy?

What can philosophy as ethical exegesis mean? Will philosophy have to be good? Why does this question sound so infantile, so