# *Introduction*

Emmanuel Levinas died on 25 December, 1995, a curiously strange Christian day which celebrates incarnation and the acknowledgement of the divine in the human, and the human in the divine. A god walks and wanders the way of humanity and occupies the wilderness and strangeness of the human.

A funeral oration was delivered by Jacques Derrida that same day. In that Derrida quotes from Levinas' own writings on 'uprightness' (*droiture*), taking from Levinas' commentary on the Tractate Shabbath Levinas' description of consciousness as

> the urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to self . . . an innocence without naivety, an uprightness which is also absolute self-criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and whose look calls me into question. It is a movement towards the Other that does not come back to its point of origin the way a diversion comes back, incapable as it is of transcendence – a movement beyond anxiety and stronger than death. This uprightness is called *Temimut*, the essence of Jacob.

Derrida continues:

> This same meditation also sets to work . . . all the great themes which the work of Emmanuel Levinas has awakened in us, that of responsibility first of all, but of an 'unlimited' responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom, that of an 'unconditional yes'.[1]

Derrida recalls a conversation on the rue Michel Ange in Paris, where in response to Derrida, Levinas remarks,

> You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.[2]

Derrida rightly points to 'all the great themes' which Levinas' thought has awakened, for philosophy (and theology) is an awakening. This book attempts to outline some of them, particularly as they might relate to theology. Levinas was both a philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, but also a religious thinker in a Jewish tradition. He also mistrusted Christian theology, first, because it compromised the transcendence of the divine, but secondly, and more importantly, because, by taking God as its proper object of study, it avoided the detour of the human. So also, his mistrust of any mysticism which would seek access to God without the encounter with the human. For Levinas, God could only be encountered in terms of the human. Hence his constant saying that 'God arises as the counterpart of the justice rendered to the other person.'

## LEVINAS AND THEOLOGY

Why is Levinas significant for theological reflection? In the *Preface* to the second edition of *Of God who Comes to Mind*, Levinas notes,

> We have been reproached for ignoring theology; and we do not contest the necessity of a recovery, at least, the necessity of choosing an opportunity for a recovery of these themes. We think, however, that theological recuperation comes after the glimpse of holiness, which is primary.[3]

For Levinas, 'ethics is first theology'. Or, put otherwise, theology must first of all be ethics. It is both ethical in intent and ethical in origin. One might say that ethics is 'fundamental theology'. Ethics, as Levinas understands the term, is fundamental to theology and opens on to what is often called 'fundamental' or 'foundational' theology, that is, a theology which takes its point of departure in the one who is able to receive some form of revelation. The question of God cannot be asked without raising the prior question of the one who is able to ask the question of God. Theology begins as theological anthropology, and to reflect on the human person is already to be involved in an ethical enterprise.

But further, in paying attention to the significance of the human, Levinas enables theology to be liberated from a tendency towards the purely theoretical and directs its concerns to practical engagement

in human concerns. Theology, like ethics, involves *praxis*. It is 'the wisdom of love in the service of love'.

There is a further reason why Levinas is significant for theological reflection: significant work is being done in Continental Europe – particularly in France and Belgium – on the theological development of Levinas' phenomenological and ethical reflections. One thinks of figures such as Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Jean-Louis Chrétien in France, and Roger Burggraeve in Belgium, to say nothing of the new generation of theologians and philosophers of religion who advance theology in a phenomenological voice, some of whom figure in this present work.

For these reasons, Levinas is worth careful attention by theologians and aspiring theologians. He offers to theology a new voice, a new grammar of response and responsibility, a new lexicon for articulating the human in its tendency towards the divine which, for Levinas, cannot avoid an ethical commitment to the other person here and now.

## EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Who, then, is Emmanuel Levinas? These are simply the bare bones of biographical detail. Others have written substantial biographical volumes.

Emmanuel Levinas was born on 12 January 1906 (30 December in the Julian Calendar) in Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania, into an orthodox Jewish family. During the First World War, the family emigrated to Karkov in the Ukraine, before returning to Lithuania in 1920.

In 1923, he went to Strasbourg, France, where he began his philosophical studies, and where he met Maurice Blanchot. In 1928–29, he was at Freiburg to follow courses offered by Husserl and Heidegger, and, in 1930, completed his thesis on 'The Theory of Intuition in the Phenomenology of Husserl'. Also in 1930, he became a French citizen.

He was imprisoned during the war in a German prisoner-of-war camp, Stalag 1492.

In 1947, he was named director of L'École Normale Israélite Orientale. In 1961, he became a professor at the University of Poitiers, and in 1967, professor at the University of Paris, Nanterre. In 1973, he was named a professor at the Sorbonne.

What of the influences which formed his own thinking? Levinas notes three main ones: first, his reading of great Russian authors. Thus, one finds frequent references to Dostoievsky's *Brothers Karamazov* and the words of Markel, younger brother of the elder Zossima:

> Darling mother . . . there have to be masters and servants, but let me be the servant of my servants. Let me be the same as they are to me. And let me tell you this, too, Mother: every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all.

Secondly, the Hebrew Bible, especially Talmudic texts and Rabbinical commentary: Levinas' Talmudic writings involve painstaking and detailed reflections on the Talmud, and like its authors, return time and again to these texts which grapple with the human existential. In Levinas, the existential acquires a phenomenological articulation. Levinas' method of constant iteration ('like a wave breaking constantly against a shore', as Derrida would have it) no doubt reflects this Talmudic training.

Thirdly, the historical experience of emigration across Russia, and then to France, the rise of Hitler and National Socialism, and the experience of the Holocaust. The effect of the never-to-be-forgotten antisemitism – the type of 'every hatred of the other person' – cannot, nor should it, be underestimated in Levinas' writings. In the inscription and dedication in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Levinas writes

> To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same antisemitism. (*OB*, vii)

Then, in Hebrew, the more personal dedication which lists Levinas' father, Yekhiel ben Rabbi Avraham Halevi, his mother, Dvora bat Rabbi Moshe Halevi, his brothers, Dov ben Rabbi Yehiel and Aminadav ben Rabbi Yekhiel Halevi, his father-in-law, Shmuel ben Rabbi Guershon Halevi, and his mother-in-law, Malki bat Rabbi Haim, all of whom, with the exception of his father-in-law, were victims of the Holocaust.

Of specifically philosophical influence is the thinking of Husserl, Heidegger, and Bergson.

A considerable volume of secondary literature continues to be produced on aspects of Levinas' thought. This is a small contribution.

## OUTLINE

One cannot begin to consider Levinas as a philosopher without acknowledging the phenomenological context within which his thought unfolds, and also the way in which he pushes beyond Husserl. This going beyond Husserl has provoked sharp criticism; hence the need to consider carefully the critique of Dominique Janicaud, and the 'theological turn in French phenomenology'. Chapter 1 considers the relationship between Levinas, Phenomenology, and Theology. A key point will be that ethics is not only 'first philosophy' but also 'first theology'.

This opens on to the relation between ethics, theology, and the question of God, which is considered in Chapter 2. These first two chapters set the context for any theological furthering or transposition of Levinas' thought.

Levinas is committed to the world. Existence is incarnate, and is lived out as responsibility for the other person. The nature of this incarnate existence is considered, both phenomenologically and theologically, in Chapter 3. Yet, to be is not only to be 'in-the-world'; it is to be in the world in a way which is *otherwise* than being. How this incarnate existence can be articulated ethically is considered in Chapter 4 which addresses the notions of transcendence and the appeal of the infinite, and the beginnings of a theology of grace. The theology of grace is a fundamental Christian doctrine. One could argue it is *the* fundamental and guiding doctrine. The ethical awakening of the subject, and the language and economy of grace is considered in Chapter 5 in terms of desire and phenomenological and theological awakening.

Transcendence, however, is not an escape from the world, nor an evasion of responsibility. 'The true life may be elsewhere' – or otherwise – 'but we are in the world'. Levinas expresses this in terms of the liturgical nature of subjectivity, where liturgy is understood as a work or service undertaken for and on behalf of the other person. This is considered in Chapter 6 on 'the liturgical orientation of the self'. The practical outcome of responsibility is the commitment to

justice and working for an ethical community. The orientation of the self towards the other person – the one and the many – can also be articulated in terms of a eucharistic ethics. This, along with the nature of time and eschatology, is considered in Chapter 7.

Both for phenomenology and theology Levinas presents a challenge, an opportunity, and a language. The Carnegie Trust for Universities in Scotland is thanked for assistance in funding a research trip to Leuven, Belgium.

CHAPTER I

# *Levinas, phenomenology, and theology*

Emmanuel Levinas first became prominent in the French philosophical environment as a translator and commentator of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), and was largely responsible for introducing phenomenology to France.

Following studies in Strasbourg where he obtained his *licence* in 1927, he embarked on doctoral studies on Husserl, and in the academic session of 1928–29 went to Freiburg-im-Breisgau where he attended classes given by Husserl and Heidegger. His doctoral thesis, subsequently published in 1930, took as its theme 'The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology'. Husserl, meanwhile, had delivered a series of lectures in Paris in 1929. These, first published in French in 1931 as *Méditations Cartésiennes* in extended form, were translated and co-edited by Levinas, and became influential in the development of French phenomenological thought. Significantly, it was the translation of the fifth of the *Cartesian Meditations* which fell to Levinas that accounts for Levinas' ongoing interest in pursuing the intersubjective reduction in phenomenology, implicated but not pursued by Husserl.[1]

Simone de Beauvoir, in *La Force de l'âge*, gives a somewhat amusing account of this influence of Levinas on phenomenology in France, when she recounts Sartre's first encounter with phenomenology. Out with Raymond Aron, a student of Husserl, in Paris in 1932, apricot cocktails were ordered. According to de Beauvoir, Aron said to Sartre, 'You see, my little comrade, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail, and that is philosophy.' This seemingly mundane incident, terribly ordinary, gives an indication of the value which Sartre recognised in phenomenology: the seemingly ordinary affairs of human existence have a significance which may be more than, or

other than, ordinary. Levinas indicates something similar when he draws attention to the sincerity which characterises our life in the world. 'Life is a sincerity.' 'We breathe for the sake of breathing, eat and drink for the sake of eating and drinking, we take shelter for the sake of taking shelter, we study to satisfy our curiosity, we take a walk for the walk. All that is not for the sake of living; it is living.'[2] De Beauvoir continues:

> Sartre grew pale with excitement, or nearly so. This was precisely what he had wished for years: to talk of the things as he touched them and that was philosophy. Aron convinced him that this was exactly what fitted his preoccupations: to transcend the opposition of idealism and realism, to affirm at the same time the sovereignty of consciousness and the presence of the world as given to us. He bought at the Boulevard St. Michel the work on Husserl by Levinas, and he was in such a hurry to inform himself that, while walking, he leafed through the book, whose pages he had not even cut.[3]

The book in question was the published version of Levinas' doctoral thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (*TIHP*).

## LEVINAS, HUSSERL, AND PHENOMENOLOGY

In his essay on 'The Phenomenology of Givenness and First Philosophy', Jean-Luc Marion indicates the three key formulas of classical Husserlian phenomenology,[4] which provide a helpful map or platform for considering Levinas and his use of phenomenological method. First, 'as much appearing, as much being'; in other words, objects are known insofar as they appear within consciousness, and according to the manner of their appearing. Secondly, 'Return to the things themselves'; in other words, phenomenology, through a reduction, attempts access to an object divested of ontological assumptions. The object, quite simply, is as it appears, and it is the reality of this object as it appears within consciousness which is to be clarified. Thirdly, 'intuition is a proper source of knowledge'; in other words, intentionality, or the attitude which is taken towards an object – the object as it appears within consciousness – is constitutive of knowledge. Marion will add, as a fourth 'principle', 'givenness' – objects are as they give themselves to us, which can be formulated 'as much reduction, as much givenness'. In other words, phenomenological

method must first recognise the givenness of an object – the object as it first strikes us or imposes itself upon us, and thereafter reduce its appearing as such. Levinas, in his own use of phenomenological method and his defence of interiority on the basis of exteriority, will open the way for such as Marion. What then is the significance of Husserl for Levinas? Writing in *Signature*, Levinas comments,

> Husserl brought a method to philosophy. It consists in respecting the intentions which animate the psyche and the modalities of *appearing* which conform to these intentions, modalities which characterise the diverse beings apprehended by experience. It consists in discovering the unsuspected *horizons* within which the real is apprehended by representative thought but also apprehended by concrete pre-predicative life, beginning with the body (innocently), beginning with culture (perhaps less innocently). (*DF*, 291–2)

Three things of significance are worth noting here, which correspond to the formulas which Marion identifies in Husserl. First, there is the link between appearing and reality: 'as much appearing, as much being'. Secondly, there is the concern with 'concrete life' which is to be subjected to phenomenological scrutiny: 'return to the things themselves'. Co-implicated here are also various horizons and frameworks which need to be reduced. If objects appear in consciousness as meaningful, these particular meanings point to other horizons and structures of meaning. There is also the difficulty of identifying or delimiting an object in the first place. Thirdly, there is the notion of intentionality: objects appear in a particular mode in conformity with a particular intention. In other words, thought is always 'a thought of something', hope is a 'hoping for something', desire is 'a desire for something'. Correspondingly, objects are always appreciated in terms of the particular manner in which a subject relates to them: objects make their appearance under a particular aspect, or they appear *as* thought of, hoped for, or desired. Husserl himself uses the example of the tree in his garden: A tree is never *just a tree*, but a tree apperceived and appreciated in a particular way and from a particular perspective. To say, however, that 'a tree is never *just a tree*' is to bring into play two contesting attitudes: the 'natural' or 'naive' attitude, and the 'phenomenological attitude' which seeks critically to overcome the 'natural attitude'.

### *Contesting the 'natural attitude' (or, naive realism)*

Husserl had recognised that the 'naturalistic theory of being' is pervasive. He had started his philosophical career with studies in the philosophy of arithmetic and logic, but became convinced that although the sciences seemed to display rigour in the pursuit of certainty, they remained in themselves uncritical and unfounded. They claimed to be evidentially based but the evidence which they offered was circumscribed by the confines and presumptions of their own particular discipline. Levinas comments that the sciences such as physics, biology, psychology 'make use of a certain number of fundamental notions' such as memory, perception, space, time etc., yet they do not themselves clarify the meaning of these notions. Yet, these very notions provide the framework within which the sciences operate and 'determine the necessary structure of different domains of being and constitute their essence' (*TIHP*, 3). What Husserl recognised was the need for a fundamental science – a 'first philosophy' – which would provide critical grounding for all other sciences, 'a phenomenological theory of cognition as a fundamental science, that is, a science which systematically explores the ultimate basis of justification not only for objectively oriented logic but for every science pure and simple.'[5] Levinas comments that 'for Husserl, the study of being is not exhausted by the natural sciences and the regional ontologies' (*TIHP*, 4) such as 'the world of mathematics' or 'the world of biology'. These regional ontologies are themselves founded on something more basic, and it is phenomenology's task to investigate and expose the fundamental notions which the various regional ontologies employ. Phenomenology, then, is an 'absolute science' whose task is to 'disclose the "sources" from which the basic concepts and ideal laws of pure logic spring, and back to which they must again be pursued in order to provide them with the "clarity and distinctness" requisite for an epistemological understanding and critique of pure logic.'[6] Such a task means placing in question and contesting the 'natural attitude' which is often evident in the sciences.

Naturalism – as 'a general philosophy, a theory of being' – assumes that reality is always and everywhere the same. The constitution of objects, the relations between them, and the categories of thought are identical. Such a supposition of universality, Husserl recognised,