DISCOVERING LEVINAS

Emmanuel Levinas is well known to students of twentieth-century continental philosophy, especially French philosophy. But he is largely unknown within the circles of Anglo-American philosophy. In *Discovering Levinas*, Michael L. Morgan shows how this thinker faces in novel and provocative ways central philosophical problems of twentieth-century philosophy and religious thought. He tackles this task by placing Levinas in conversation with philosophers such as Donald Davidson, Stanley Cavell, John McDowell, Onora O'Neill, Charles Taylor, and Cora Diamond. He also seeks to understand Levinas within philosophical, religious, and political developments in the history of twentieth-century intellectual culture. Morgan demystifies Levinas by examining in illuminating ways his unfamiliar and surprising vocabulary, interpreting texts with an eye to clarity, and arguing that Levinas can be understood as a philosopher of the everyday. Morgan also shows that Levinas's ethics is not morally and politically irrelevant nor is it excessively narrow and demanding in unacceptable ways. Neither glib dismissal nor fawning acceptance, this book provides a sympathetic reading that can form a foundation for a responsible critique.

Michael L. Morgan has been a professor at Indiana University for 31 years and, in 2004, was named a Chancellor's Professor. He has published articles in a variety of journals, edited several collections, and authored four books, most recently *Interim Judaism* (2001). He is the coeditor of *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish Philosophy*.

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In Memory of
Emil Ludwig Fackenheim
(1916–2003)

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Preface

About six years ago, I began to study Emmanuel Levinas's works seriously. I had tried several times before to read *Totality and Infinity*, unsuccessfully. The work seemed impenetrable, and each time I set out I managed only a few pages before I put the book aside. But in 2000, after Paul Franks and I had finished our translations and editorial work on *Franz Rosenzweig: Philosophical and Theological Writings* and we had agreed to teach a course on Rosenzweig and Levinas, I began to immerse myself in Levinas's works and the secondary literature on him. Paul then left Bloomington to take a position at Notre Dame, and I was scheduled to teach the course on my own. It was quite an experience, an enormous challenge but an exciting one. I found that the students, undergraduates and graduates alike, found something about Levinas gripping, and as I struggled to make sense of him for myself and for them, I also fell under his spell. This book is one outcome of that attempt to explore and decipher Levinas.

I mention these events in part to clarify something about the book. As I have worked on it, I have had several goals in mind, but one persisting reason for writing the book is, in all honesty, to find a way to make clear to myself what Levinas is saying and why it is important. The fact that this book is my extended attempt to say what Levinas means has had a significant effect, I believe, on how it is written. As I study and think about him, my questions about his thinking and his writings continue to increase exponentially, as one might expect, but the ones I have selected to examine and answer here, and how I set out to do so, were very much determined by my own interests, my background as a philosopher, and my personal angle of vision. I have tried to consider many others as the book's audience and to take their needs into consideration, but to a great degree I always remain the book's first reader.

I believe that the great philosophical question of the twentieth century for our culture – perhaps for all cultures – concerns the objectivity of values, in particular moral values. In this respect, the century began in the nineteenth

century, at least by the time of Nietzsche, the rise of neo-Kantianism, and the flourishing of high modernism, and it is still with us. Eric Hobsbawm once called the twentieth century the short century, beginning in 1914 and ending in 1989, with the fall of the Soviet Union. But to me the century is a long one, for its central problem emerged before 1900 with the flourishing of the great urban cities of Europe and the crises this phenomenon brought with it, and, as I have said, the problem has not been solved or resolved. And, as one might expect, in many ways the history of Western philosophy during the past century has been the history of attempts to come to grips with this problem – with the threats of nihilism, relativism, and skepticism and the suspicion that groundlessness was the sin of naturalism and the true legacy of the Enlightenment.[1]

This great question and the crisis that has been associated with it crystallized in the Nazi genocide, the death camps, and the events that encircled them, horrific satellites of a totally dark spectacle: World War I, Stalinism, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Rwanda. It was a century, and it is now a time of cruelty and atrocity beyond our worst nightmares, and there is every reason to see these events as the historical and political expressions of this crisis of objectivity. Facing up to this problem and to these events is a challenge that none of us, philosophers included, can escape. What can be done is a question that has its own abstract and global dimension, but its declension begins with each one of us: What can I do? And for a philosopher, it begins with How do I understand the human condition, and how do I live?[2]

Levinas, once the point and purpose of his thinking began to disclose themselves to me, seemed to speak directly and urgently, dare I say passionately, to these issues. His intellectual world is one that I have some familiarity with, the world of Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Blanchot, Derrida, and Marcel. Others whom he discusses and responds to – Rosenzweig and Buber, for example – I have lived with for years. But, as I came to believe, Levinas's thinking has an importance beyond these confines. He is part of a larger conversation. Reading Levinas, I brought with me the tradition of Anglo-American philosophy, as well as my own understanding of the history of Western philosophy. Thinking about Levinas, I also thought about Wittgenstein and readers of him, especially Stanley Cavell, and other philosophers as well: Hilary Putnam, Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and John McDowell. Most – indeed, virtually all – of the secondary literature on Levinas – and it is vast – focuses on the continental partners

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre tells this story, in his own way, in *After Virtue*. A classic formulation can be found in Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy." (See Chapter 7, footnote 90 in this book.)

[2] Something like these questions, I believe, are the ones Stanley Cavell associates with "moral or Emersonian perfectionism" and his special brand of romanticism.

in his conversation, and I have not completely neglected them. But I found it important and revealing to bring these other partners to the table, so to speak.

This feature of my own reading has had a special impact on the present book. If I have written it to become clear myself about what Levinas wrote and thought, I also have written it to introduce others to the Levinas I have come to understand. And this is a Levinas who talks with Cavell, Putnam, Taylor, and McDowell, as well as Heidegger and Derrida. At one point in time, this goal of placing Levinas on the map of Anglo-American philosophy seemed paramount to me. Now I realize that it was always important but subsidiary. I realize that if I really wanted to carry out such a task, there might be other ways to do it, ones that pay more systematic and detailed attention to the venue of Anglo-American philosophy and to the categories of work in that territory. In part, that is not my style. I could not simply lay out, in survey fashion, various options, say, in meta-ethics – moral realism, moral particularism, noncognitivism, projectivism, and so forth – and then go about asking how well Levinas fits one category or the other. If that seems like an intriguing enterprise, I invite others to carry it out. Personally, I would find it as difficult to do that and perhaps as unprofitable for me as I would to carry out such a regimented set of comparisons for someone like Cavell.

One of the book's aims, then, is to understand Levinas and his writings by reading those writings carefully, and what this means is that the book contains frequent quotations from those writings with interpretations of them in terms that I hope the Anglo-American reader can grasp. Extensive quotation and discussion of Levinas's own words have seemed necessary; only in this way can the reader actually experience how Levinas speaks and writes, his vocabulary and syntax, his style and tonality. At the same time, this exegetical dimension of the book will, I hope, facilitate the reader's ability to go on and read Levinas on his or her own. For Anglo-American readers, his writings will initially appear to be utterly opaque, almost nonsensical. But my hope is that the persistent reader can overcome these obstacles and find, as I have, something valuable on the other side.

At various moments, moreover, I draw others into the conversation about Levinas's works and the themes he addresses – figures like Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, and Emil Fackenheim, on the one hand, and like Stanley Cavell, Donald Davidson, Charles Taylor, John McDowell, Onora O'Neill, and Christine Korsgaard, on the other. Indirectly, in this way I try to place Levinas on several maps at once. One map is that of twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy – in particular, moral theory. Another is a map of twentieth-century Jewish philosophy, and a third is twentieth-century religious thought. I do all of this in the course of addressing various themes that I think are central to understanding Levinas and that, at the same time, should be of interest to

contemporary philosophers and religious thinkers. Hence, the book is not a mechanical comparison of Levinas with twentieth-century Anglo-American philosophy or indeed with any other kind of thinking; it is rather an exploration of various themes in the course of which Levinas is put into conversation with others dealing with similar, albeit not identical, issues.

All of this says something about the structure and style of the book, but it leaves out what is perhaps its central feature. Earlier I said that introducing Levinas to an Anglo-American philosophical audience has become a secondary goal for me. The primary one has been to present a way of reading and understanding Levinas that I find attractive and one that places him in excellent company indeed. There is, I believe, a remarkable affinity between Levinas and various other philosophers, most notably Stanley Cavell, Charles Taylor, and John McDowell. All are, to one degree or another, part of the Hegelian and Heideggerian legacy, a legacy also shared by a host of continental philosophers and religious thinkers. In Cavell's terms, these are philosophers of the ordinary, of the lived world of everyday experience, with all its nuances and subtleties, and yet they focus, too, on the ethical demands that are raised for us as we live in the world with other people. No one, however, addresses the ethical dimension of this lived experience as dramatically and urgently as Levinas. No one locates the original venue of moral normativity, as it were, in the same way and with the same dedication. No one characterizes the substance of that moral demandedness so specifically and relates it so fundamentally to the very fact of human social existence. At least, that is what I try to show. But to do so, I must show how, for Levinas, what he calls the encounter with the face of the other person is not a rare episode. Rather, it occurs as a regular, if occluded and compromised, dimension in all of our social lives. It carries with it the purity of a kind of moral standard, but at the same time it pervades our ordinary daily lives. The responsibility that we have and that we are, in a sense, eludes us and yet claims us. For Levinas, the social, the political, and the ethical occur together. To show this and what it means, as Levinas sees it, are the central tasks of this book.

The title of this book is *Discovering Levinas*. The word "discover" suggests an initial encounter or an introduction, and I do think of the book as a way of introducing Levinas to many who have never read him or who have tried, as I did, and found him wholly mystifying. I do not think that the book makes no claims on its readers, but I *do* think of it as introductory in the sense of an initial encounter. The word "discover" also suggests an act of uncovering or disclosing something that has been hidden and bringing it to view.[3] I believe

[3] This is an act of excavation, as Kevin Houser suggested to me.

that Levinas takes the encounter with the face of the other person, the face-to-face, to be a dimension of all of our social existence that is largely hidden from view and that needs to be uncovered or disclosed. In this sense, discovery is important to Levinas, although it is not a word he himself uses. The book, then, is about furthering Levinas's project by continuing the process of disclosing the dimension of ordinary life on which Levinas focuses, and in so doing it is also about uncovering or disclosing Levinas's thinking, which to a large extent has been hidden for most readers.

Given the analytical scruples of Anglo-American philosophy, it may seem that I do not carry out this project, a kind of translation into other terms, with sufficient detail or nuance. I do not, for example, engage in critical analysis of the analytic philosophers I introduce, and my treatment of Levinas, while it raises a great number of serious problems with his views and his language, is invested in arriving at the most persuasive interpretation of him that I can give. My hope is that the outcome should leave us with a reading of Levinas worth taking seriously and also worth criticizing, but to some it may look highly apologetic. Hence, I agree that others might want to pursue, in much greater detail, many avenues in reading Levinas in a highly analytical spirit. For myself, I will be happy if I have at least whetted their appetites and begun the process, by showing what Levinas is doing and what he means and by making plausible his kinship with various important Anglo-American philosophers and their work.

If there is something concrete and gripping about Levinas's primary insight into the ethical character of human social existence, his writing is highly abstract and arcane. It is filled with neologisms and formulations that have a strange ring in our ears. I feel that one needs to see the concreteness of his thinking, the way that it speaks to our lives. In order to show this and to raise some important questions at the same time, I have chosen to begin the book – as I have begun my courses and my teaching – by introducing Levinas as a reader, specifically as a reader of a fascinating realistic novel about the Battle of Stalingrad. That novel is *Life and Fate*, and in Chapter 1 I discuss the novel and its author, Vasily Grossman, as well as Levinas's infatuation with the book. I then expand the domain of his words by saying something about Levinas's critical comments on the twentieth century as a century of suffering and atrocity. One of the by-products of such a beginning is that we are given a very powerful example of a face-to-face encounter and the response to it, one that we can refer to and consider more carefully later in the book. Another by-product is that Levinas's role as a social and political critic raises early on some important questions about the relationship between ethics or religion, as he calls it, and the domain of moral decision making and political life.

Following the introductory chapter, I try to clarify how one might read Levinas – in particular, the way in which he is and yet is not a phenomenologist. In

the end, I argue that there is in him an important strain of transcendental philosophy. I then turn to the content of Levinas's central claim about the ethical character of social existence. From there, I discuss a variety of central themes: the notions of totality and infinity; the relation between various cultures and the meaning of the ethical; the nature of subjectivity and the self; Levinas's understanding of God; his account of time and history; the kind of ethical understanding Levinas provides when considered alongside certain recent examples of Anglo-American moral philosophy; the role of skepticism for Levinas and the sense in which the encounter with the other person occurs beyond the limits of thought and language; and his understanding of Judaism and its role in his account of Western culture and philosophy. Finally, in an appendix, I place Levinas within recent discussions of objectivity, or agent-neutral reasons, in part to consider, if indirectly, how his understanding of our infinite responsibility might be distinguished from utilitarianism and in part to clarify the status of his thinking as a kind of metaphysical foundation for normative moral theory.

It may be that I raise more questions about Levinas than I answer and furthermore that my reading of him raises more questions still. If so, that is all to the good. If I have succeeded, the reader of this book might look in two directions. In one direction, the book may intrigue the reader to investigate further a rich philosophical legacy that is worth further exploration. In another, if the book is at all right about Levinas, it might lead in another direction: to a recognition about our responsibilities to others, especially to those suffering and in need, and then to acts of benevolence in their behalf.

In conclusion, let me repeat two caveats. The first is that some readers may find me too uncritical of Levinas. The book may appear to defend him too often and too firmly. As a response to such a concern, I would say two things. One is that I do raise questions about Levinas's views and claims throughout the book, many of which are major cruxes in any attempt to understand his views and his work. The book is not simply an uncritical presentation of what Levinas says; in order to become as clear as we can about what Levinas means, I use a strategy of challenging what he means and seeking to clarify his writings to the best of my understanding and ability. But this procedure may lead some to think that I regularly conclude by agreeing with Levinas, and this leads to my second response. At some point, I do let things stand, so to speak – that is, I stop interrogating Levinas and come to places where I think we have understood what he means and what his reasons are for holding the views that he does. In general, I do not then register more compelling reasons to reject his views or find fault with them. In short, more often than not I do not end on a critical note. This strategy, however, is not to say that his views are unassailable or that I fully agree with all of them. It is a strategy to bring us to a point where we have understood him sufficiently and

can then continue the process of philosophical conversation and dialogue with his works and his ideas on a sure footing. To arrive at that point for the reader and for myself is one of the goals of this book.

My second caveat concerns the issue of Levinas's philosophical development. This subject has received extensive treatment by commentators and critics of Levinas.[4] Usually, it is framed as a question about his two major books, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, and whether the latter involves a serious modification or even rejection of views stated in the earlier book. Often, too, the question about Levinas's development from the one book to the other invokes the name of Jacques Derrida and asks whether the latter book is a direct response to Derrida's criticisms of Levinas in his famous review of 1963, "Violence and Metaphysics." Sooner or later, virtually everyone writing about Levinas seems to address this cluster of issues. In this book, however, I do not address them directly. Issues about philosophical change and development in an author's corpus ought to be handled with the greatest care and delicacy. I have always found it unlikely that a philosopher – so many great figures come to mind, from Plato and Aristotle to Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel – who wrote a great deal over a period of several decades would never have modified his or her views, altered terminology, come to new commitments, or arrived at new perspectives. My basic assumption about Levinas is a very conservative one. His thinking in the late 1940s and 1950s crystallized in *Totality and Infinity*. As he continued to think about the issues he had raised and his central concepts and terminology – surely, in part, under the influence of Derrida's review – he rethought, revised, and reoriented his thinking, looking at some issues from new perspectives and seeing some issues for the first time and others in different ways from which he had before. But basically, I see this as philosophical growth and development and not as a fundamental reorientation or rejection of earlier views. Hence, there is no chapter in this book about this issue; when a change occurs that I think is important to note, I try to do so and explain what it means and why it occurred. But such attention is paid as we go along, in the context of dealing with a particular theme or idea, and it does not usually lead to extended discussion.

I have one piece of advice about reading the book. I recommend reading Chapters 1–4 consecutively. They indicate why Levinas is important and

[4] See John Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*; Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds.), *Re-Reading Levinas*; Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. The literature on the early and late Levinas is extensive. The issue is also framed as a question about Levinas's use of the phenomenological method and whether that method, if it is in fact used in any strict sense in the earlier work, is also employed in the later book, *Otherwise Than Being*, and thereafter in Levinas's career.

establish the foundations of his views. Even though the remainder of the book is organized in a way that I think is helpful, readers might pick and choose among the remaining chapters, depending upon their interests. For example, Chapter 9 and the Appendix deal with moral philosophy; Chapters 5 and 10 with language; and Chapters 7, 8, and 11 with God, religion, and Judaism.

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This book owes a great deal to many colleagues and friends. When I decided to invest myself totally in the project of understanding Levinas, I turned to Richard Cohen, who gave me helpful advice. Among other things, it was Richard who recommended that I read Theodore de Boer's excellent essays on Levinas. Bob Gibbs also responded to several queries and offered sage counsel. I then met, first through my reading, then via e-mail, and finally in person, Robert Bernasconi. Robert's generosity has been extraordinary. In response to my requests, he sent copies of essays printed in not easily accessible venues; as a commentator on Levinas, he is without peer. I sometimes think that nothing I could say that is right about Levinas has not already been said and understood by Robert, with great depth and profundity.

Three years ago, Paul Franks, David Finkelstein, and I organized a conference at Indiana University on Levinas and Wittgenstein. The dozen or so participants had an exciting time together. It was an effort to overcome – or better, to ignore – the boundary so often honored between analytic and continental philosophy. My own study of Levinas and reflections about philosophy itself have been enriched by conversations with several who were present – among them Jeff Kosky, Simon Glendenning, David Cerbone, and Gary Gutting – and by reading and discussion with other friends, especially Jim Conant, John McDowell, Chuck Taylor, and Fred Beiser. For several years, Joshua Shaw and I met almost weekly to read Levinas; it is sometimes hard for me to draw the line between my own ideas about issues in Levinas and Joshua's. I also thank Joshua for reading the entire manuscript and making numerous valuable suggestions. On many occasions over the years, my friend Mark Goldman, a physician with a passion for literature and philosophy, has been a great conversation partner on Fackenheim, Rosenzweig, Levinas, and others. He even took on the challenge of reading Cavell, when I touted his importance. For many years, Mira Wasserman and I have met weekly to pore over Levinas's Talmudic

lessons and his Jewish essays; her growing involvement with Levinas and his writings has been a joy to behold, and her understanding of Bible, Talmud, and Talmudic commentaries have made her a wonderful partner in study. I have benefited as well from having taught Levinas several times to undergraduates, graduate students, and nonprofessional audiences. Each time, I was surprised and delighted by the intense engagement of so many of these students, whose expressions of puzzlement forced me again and again to find creative ways to clarify Levinas's thinking and whose probing criticisms challenged me to defend it insofar as that was possible. I especially thank Nick Alford for preparing the index.

Philosophically and personally, during the past decade I owe most to three people. Simon Critchley has been a good friend and a wonderful supporter. His philosophical writing on Levinas, Beckett, romanticism, and so much more exemplifies what is best about the philosophical life. During the past few years, since his move to the New School, we have met often in New York City for conversations that always send me off with new insights and nagging questions. Paul Franks and I have spent countless hours together working on Rosenzweig, talking about German Idealism, Jewish philosophy, Cavell, and much else. No one defies the boundary I spoke of – between so-called analytic and continental philosophy – more effectively than Paul, with a philosophical depth and a humanity that are very special indeed. Philosophically, I owe as much to David Finkelstein as to anyone else. While he was my colleague at Indiana, we met weekly for years, talking about his work and mine, sharing virtually everything that we thought about. Our friendship is one of the special joys of my life.

I have been, for my entire career, a historian of philosophy and a Jewish philosopher. I never tried to keep separate these two aspects of myself. Levinas was not a historian of philosophy but rather a philosopher, and he would not, I think, have thought of himself as a Jewish philosopher – he may not even have thought that there is such a thing. But my teacher and my dearest friend, Emil Fackenheim, who passed away while I was writing this book, did think that there was Jewish philosophy, and in his unique way he invested his life and his soul in forging its character with a seriousness of purpose and depth of humanity that are rare. His works testify to this conviction everywhere and to the commitment to go on with our lives in the shadow of a darkness without equal. I never think about Levinas without also thinking about Emil; indeed, dare I say, I never think about anything without thinking about Emil.

Discovering Levinas has meant for me appreciating more fully not only the burdens we all share but also the gifts we receive. My gifts are Debbie, Adam, Sara, Marc, and, most of all, Aud, who more than anyone has shared with me

the sorrows and joys that have filled these past few years. I think that she is happy that this book is now completed but happier still, as we both are, with all the good things we enjoy with our daughters and their families. Among those good things are Gabrielle and Sasha, who were thoughtful enough to wait to be born until I was able to make the final revisions on this book.