Before I met Lévinas, I encountered his philosophy. My acquaintance began nearly twenty years ago when I read *Totality and Infinity*. This book was a shock to me, as it was to most of my contemporaries. As a student in philosophy I had been trained in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition which was still prevalent in France in the 1980s. For most of my teachers at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, the con cepts of totality and identity were the core of philosophy. Through his ideas of otherness and infinity, Lévinas opened new horizons to me, new ways of thinking.

In 1984, I visited Lévinas at his home in Paris, rue Michel-Ange. When ever I think of my first meeting with him, the only word I find appropriate to describe my impression is “affability.” Affability in the literal sense means dealing with one with whom one can talk. In other words, it describes someone who has the ability to welcome the other graciously and to listen. Despite the distance between him, the great and famous philosopher, and me, the young and inexperienced student, Lévinas’ affability was devoid of any condescension. In his *Traité des vertus*, the French philosopher and friend of Lévinas, Vladimír Jankelévitch severely criticized condescension which he described as the disposition “to bow down without humiliating oneself, to go down to ground floor to see how it feels there, while the mind stays perched on top of its sublime observation post, with its disdainful outlook.” There was no condescension in Lévinas. On the contrary, he had both highness or, as he says about Blanchot, an “ar isocracy of thought,” and humility. After I got to know Lévinas better I discovered his sense of humility that con trasted so surprisingly with his seriousness, rigor ous, and severe philosophy. Without Lévinas’ living presence, only his books remain. From now on he be longs to the history of philosophy as his *Discours de la méthode,* this his tory is not a mere enumera tion of writings and doc trines. On the con trary, it is a vast forum where individuals meet and converse de spite their differences of time and place. So let us imagine an encounter between Lévinas and Kant, and their en suing dis cuss ion on the relation ship be tween utopia and reality.

In the history of philosophy, Kant and Lévinas are associated with the highest expres sions of ethics; both philosophers center ethics on a con cept of being hu man as a con cern for the other. An actual meeting between the two men is not purely imaginary. It took place in Lévinas’ writings. Though his quotations of Kant are not nume rous, they relate to major issues such as his criticism of ontology and his concept of ethics as first philosophy. In early works, written in the 1950s, Lévinas stressed his proximity to Kant. In “Is Ontology Fundamental?” he paved the way for *Totality and Infinity* by elaborating the key con cepts of “face,” “language,” and “religion.” As the title suggests, this article chal lenged the Heideggerian claim to the primacy of ontology. In contrast to Heidegger and the ontological tradition, Lévinas acknowledged that he felt particularly close to Kant’s practical phi losophy. He also indicated the resonance of “Kantian echoes” in his own conception of the ethical relationship with the other. Twenty years later, Lévinas’ lectures on *God, Death, and Time* further develop his affinity with Kant. In the latter work, there is a chapter entitled, “The Radical Question: Kant against Heidegger.” By opposing Kant to Heidegger, Lévinas pointed to the possibility of overcoming ontology. In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* he celebrated Kantianism in which the meaning of being human is found, with out mea suring it by ontology, by yong the question “What is there here?” Nevertheless, Lévinas also stated that “Kantianism is the basis of philosophy, if philosophy is on ontology.”

**UTOPIA AND REALITY**

**THE CONCEPT OF SAINCTITY IN KANT AND LÉVINAS**

Joëlle Hansel
Moreover, foundational aspects of his ethics are diametrically opposed to those of Kant. By understanding moral obligation as subjection to the other and based on heteronomy, Lévinas breaks with the Kantian principle of autonomy.

Thus, Lévinas' attitude towards Kant is ambivalent. On the one hand, he viewed Kantian philosophy as a way to escape from the domination of Being; yet on the other hand, he depicted his philosophy as the sum of ontological rejection of ontology as the basis for philosopher as ready mentioned. The goal of the present study is to highlight this ambivalence by dealing with an issue that concerns both Lévinas and Kant: the tension between utopia and reality. In their efforts to rouse people from dogmatic slumber, in their endeavor to put an end to egocentrism and inhumanity, Kant and Lévinas were both challenged by the opposition between utopia and reality. In their effort to rouse people from dogmatic slumber, in their endeavor to put an end to egocentrism and inhumanity, Kant and Lévinas were both challenged by the opposition between utopia and reality.

By its very nature, ethics is utopian. Since "what is" is often contrary to "what should be," the search for good implies a criticism of reality. Nevertheless, ethical demands are desirable, not only in the ory: they should also be carried out in practice. There fore, ethics is paradoxical: on the one hand, it is opposed and even contradictory to reality; on the other hand, it must be made true and be concretized. The paradox of ethics, captured in the tension between utopia and reality, is best reflected in the opposition between utopia and reality. In their efforts to rouse people from dogmatic slumber, in their endeavor to put an end to egocentrism and inhumanity, Kant and Lévinas were both challenged by the opposition between utopia and reality.

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Sanctity and Utopia

Lévinas' use of the word sanctity appeared in his philosophical and confessional works that were published in the 1960s. In *Totality and Infinity*, sanctity, i.e., separation, is a quality of the Infinite as well as of the face of the other that opens to the Infinite. Sanctity is contrasted with sacredness and numinosity, two terms that imply participation and fusion.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Lévinas noted that his book "aims to disengage this holiness." Elsewhere where he stated that "ethics" is a Greek word; I think much more, especially now, about sanctity. His preference for sanctity requires further analysis. In Lévinas' view, sanctity is neither a moral quality, nor the supreme degree in the hierarchy of virtues. Rather it is the principle of an ethics whose foundations rest on the priority of the other and on 'my' infinite responsibility for him. Actually Lévinas' idea of sanctity can be summarized in the little phrase he was so fond of: "After you" (*après vous*), which invites the other to pass before me when we both walk through a door. Lévinas' choice of a banal rule of politeness is significant. It indicates that sanctity does not only consist of the roic and extraordinary action; neither is it the privilege of those "happy few" who choose an ascetic and entirely spiritual kind of life. On the contrary, sanctity is involved in the simple acts and gestures of everyday life. By saying "after you" to the other, I acknowledge the fact that the other always comes first. Further more I recognize that I have obligations and duties to wards the other, or in Lévinas' terms, that I am responsible for him.

Kant's ethics is also concerned with obligation to wards the other. In order to achieve humanity, each individual must strive towards personal, moral perfection. Nevertheless that does not mean being indifferent to others. Besides having duties to one self, one must carry out duties related to the happiness of others. According to the categorical imperatives of moral law, one must treat humanity not only in your well-being for their benefit. Moreover I must be ready to sacrifice part of my well-being for their benefit.

In Kant, will is the source of the moral law that prescribes respecting humanity not only in my own person but also in any one else. In his practical philosophy, he describes "good will" as "a jewel that shines by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself." This will always acts out of virtue, that is, duty and respect for moral law. Further more, Kant developed the ideal of a "holy will" which is
“perfectly good” and whose in tension al ways conforms to moral law. Unlike the virtuous will, the holy will acts morally, even with out the expe rience of the pure in ner con strain of duty. It is the lack of any in ter nal or ex ter nal coer cion that dis tin guishes sanc tity from vir tue in Kant. For Kant as well as for Lévinas, sanc tity is a supreme value. Simi larly they both con sider sanctity to be uto pian.

In Kant’s view, sanctity can be pos sessed only by a per fec ting be ing: that is, a di vine be ing whose will will al ways coin cides with moral law. Thus sanc tity, i.e., “complete con for mity with the moral law” is “a per fec tion of which no ra tio nal be ing of the sen si ble world is ca pable at any moment of his exis tence.”8 It is an idea that repre sen ts a per fec tion to which noth ing ad equate can be given in expe ri ence. Strictly speak ing, sanctity is u-topic: it has no place or topos in the world be low. Rather, it be longs in an oth er realm, an af ter life and an in tel li gible world, i.e., in the King dom of God.9 It is there fore in ac cessible to rea son able and fi nite be ings such as we are. We can only hope to ap pro ximate sanctity through an endless prog ress. This does not im ply that sanctity is de prived of any con nection to re al ity. On the con trary, it is re quired as an ar che type, a model and a stan dard of com par i son for moral con duct. Kant makes it clear by stat ing that “ho li ness of mor als is pre scribed to them [to men] as a rule even in this life.” Never the less man is only ca pable of sanc ti fi ca tion, i.e., “firm res o lution and consciousness of steadfastness in moral prog ress.” As a con se quence, though hu man be ings can pur sue sanc tity, they can never be holy.2

As pointed out above, Lévinas con sidered sanctity to be in volved in sim ple and con crete acts of ev ery day life. “After you” im plies con cern about the other’s ma ter ial needs, hunger and na kedness.9 How ever, his ethics made more ex treme de mands. By us ing the word sanctity, Lévinas as signed an ab so lute mean ing to the pri or ity of the other as well as to my respon si bil ity for the other. Respon si bil ity is lo cated in the asym me try that forms the ba sis for in terper sonal rela tionships: to Lévinas, there is no sym me try, no re cip ro city in the re la tion be tween the I and the other. Respon si bil ity is also re flected in the Levin asi an con cept of “sub sti tu tion,” or be ing “respon si ble for the re sponsibility of the other,” “aton ing for the wrong do ing of the other,” and even “dy ing for the other.” In view of such ethical de mands, one could con clude that sanc tity is im pos si ble to achieve. Lévinas him self ad mit ted that aton ing or dy ing for the other is an in sane de mand. More over he stated that sanc tity is an “ideal” that “com mands our be ing in a u-topic way.”5

There fore, Kant and Lévinas agreed on the uto pian na ture of ethics. Like wise they con sid ered sanc tity to be an ideal. This brings us to the core prob lem of the ten sion or con tra dic tion be tween uto pia and re al ity. Kant’s and Lévinas’ eth ics must both cope with the same ques tion: is sanc tity just a re mote ideal which is de sirable in the ory but unrealizable in prac tice? This ques tion arises in view of the du al ity that char act er izes the term uto pia. Al though it in volves mak ing gen erous plans about help ing hu man ity by build ing a per fect state, uto pia has a pe jo ra tive mean ing. It re fers to an ideal that may be fas ci nating in the ory but unrealizable in prac tice. In the lat ter case, uto pia is of ten con sid ered deceit ful and il lu sory. More over, Lévinas’ con nection be tween sanctity and uto pia seemed to be highly prob lem atic given his own crit i cal at titude to wards ut opism.7 He did not view uto pia as the pure ne ga tion of re al ity. Rather, it orig inated in a judg ment which con sisted in “un der es ti mat ing” or, on the con trary “over es ti mat ing” re al ity.8 It is there fore in acces si ble to rea son able and finite be ings such as we are. We can only hope to ap proximate sanctity through an endless prog ress. This does not im ply that sanctity is de prived of any con nection to re al ity. On the con trary, it is re quired as an ar che type, a model and a stan dard of com par ison for moral con duct. Kant makes it clear by stat ing that “ho li ness of mor als is pre scribed to them [to men] as a rule even in this life.” Never the less man is only ca pable of sanc ti fi ca tion, i.e., “firm res o lution and consciousness of steadfastness in moral prog ress.” As a con se quence, though hu man be ings can pur sue sanc tity, they can never be holy.2

Sanctity as a Human Possibility

So far I have stressed some sim ilar ties be tween Kant’s and Lévinas’ idea of sanctity. Nev er the less, their views are not iden ti cal. Des pite some prox imity, Lévinas’ ethical thought is not a sim ple con tina tion of Kantian prac ti -
cal philosophy. As is shown by further examination, major differences separate the two philosophies. Un like Kant, Lévinas does not see sanctity as a modalilty of will. Rather, sanctity is associated with heteronomy, that is, subordination of the “I” to the other. By ac knowledging that the other al ways comes first, the individual does not manifest his freedom of choice. Accordingly to Lévinas, “the other has de manded a re sponse from me be fore I af firm my freedom not to re spond to his demand.” Therefore, re spon sibility; i.e., ob li ga tion to re spond to and for the other, is prior to my own liberty.

Kant and Lévinas both con tended that man can not ex pect to at tain sanctity, but they base this impos si bility on com pletely dif fer ent grounds. Whereas Kant re ferred to the realm of ontology, Lévinas’ view or i nated in his con cep tion of ethics as “prima philosophia.” In Kant’s opin ion, our in ab il ity to ac hieve sanc tity in this life is due to the very con sti tu tion of our na ture, namely to our finitude. Given its em bod i ment, hu man ra tional will is al ways patho logi cally af fected. In or der to ob serve moral law, will must over come such internal ob stacles as im pulses, needs, in cli na tions, and pas sions. It also strug gles con tin u ously against man’s in nat e pro pensity to trans gress or at least, im pu rity, that is, an ad mix ture of many spu ri ous (non moral) mo tives to ob serve the law. “Hu man ir re me di a ble im per fec tion en tails the pos si bil ity of ac tions that con tradict the cate gor i cal im per a tives of the moral law. In con trast to man’s finite con sti tu tion, Kant cel e brated the per fection that char ac ter izes di vine holy will. Such a will is by na ture dis em bod ied. It there fore “en joys com plete in de pend ence from in cli na tions and de sires” and is “in capa ble of any maxim which con flicts with the moral law.”

Though he ad mit ted that one can not nev er fully at tain sanctity, Lévinas did not as cri be such an in ca pacity to the finitude of hu man na ture. Rather he de scribed the in fi nity that char ac ter izes re spon si bil ity for the other. In Lévinas’ view the im pos si bil ity of be ing holy is not ont olo gical, but eth i cal. It de rives from the very fact that re spon si bil ity “in creases the more it is ful filled.” Sanctity can thus be de scribed as the asymptotic as cent of re spon si bil ity to wards in fin ity. The ful fillment of my du ties can not is suf fice the in sat ia ble de sire for good which al ways rises from its ashes. As Lévinas said, “the more I am just, the more I am respon sible.” Al though re spon si bil ity in creases in fi nity, Lévinas did not see sanctity as rad i cally un at tain able here below. Rather, he con sid ered it as a “hu man pos si bil ity.” By con ceiving sanctity as a “hu man pos si bil ity,” he stressed its am bi guity, that is, its po si tion be tween uto pia and re al ity. According to the clas sic def i ni tion, pos si bil ity means indeterm ination and con tin gency. Un like ne ces sity, it is what may be or may not be. By tak ing into ac count the po si ble non-be ing of sanctity, Lévinas ac knowl edged its prox im ity with uto pia. He ad mitted that “the con cer n for the other . . . is al ways ‘out of place’ (u-topos) in this world.”

Nevertheless, being out of place does not sig nify that sanctity has a to tally utopic mean ing or that it has ab so lutely no place on earth. Rather, it is al ways “other than the ways of the world”; it is dif fer ent from hu man ity’s spon ta neous pre oc cu pa tion with per sonal in terests. This re la tes to Lévinas’ crit ic of Spinoza’s conatus essendi, that is, per se ver ance of be ing into be ing. In his view, sanctity runs coun ter to this ego cen tric ef fort and sus pens the na tural right to self-survival by pro claim ing that my con cern for the other is prior to my con cern for my self. The pos si bil ity of be ing man i fests the con nection be tween san ctit y and re al ity. Though I of ten pre fer sleep ing, i.e., be ing in differ ent to my re spon si bil ity for the other, I may also ex perience eth i cal wake ful ness and insomnia. In this re spect, sanctity is pos si ble and may also be com e re al ity. In or der to show that sanctity, this “sur pris ing” and “ex tra va gant” pos si bil ity, is re al izable, Lévinas made the shift from eth ics to pol i tics, from “san ctit y” to “ju stice.”

Sanctity and Justice

Though Lévinas strongly re jected any kind of moralism, he was in ev i ta bly con fronted with the ques tion of prac tice. In view of the ex cessive re quire ments of ethics, one may ask
whether ethics is practicable in individual life or in human society as a whole. In Lévinas’ eyes, this preoccupation with practice was far from being purely utilitarian and pragmatist. On the contrary, it emerged out of the ethicaledmanda. So far, the ethical relationship has been described as a relation between the “I” and the “other,” i.e., between two people. Following Lévinas’ observations, one may ask: what about the “third party,” the third, the fourth, the fifth, who is my neighbor and who other? If I give everything to the “second” other, I may harm the “third” other. The reverse is also true: in attending to a third party, I may harm the first other that I encountered. To Lévinas, in or der to prevent sanctity from being unjust with respect to a third party, a transposition from ethics to politics or from sanctity to justice is needed.

By justice, Lévinas was referring to society and the State with their institutions, tribunals and prisons. Judging consists in comparing, weighing, and measuring in order to equalize terms that could not originally be compared. This principle of equality contrasts with the inequality of the asymmetrical relation with the other whose face is not in front of me but above me. Justice limits sanctity, i.e., the asymptotic ascent towards infinity that characterizes responsibility for the other. Justice corrects the excessive and exorbitant demands of ethics by confronting the individual with this responsibility for all others. Besides preventing sanctity from being unjust, justice and politics allow the human possibility of sanctity to be achieved by taking into account sociopolitical order. By doing so, Lévinas did not compromise with the pressure of reality. He was consistent with his idea of sanctity. As I mentioned above, sanctity means non-indifference towards the other’s hunger or nakedness. In order to feed human kind, one has to care about the political, scientific, and technical structures of organizations.

Unlike other ethical philosophers, Lévinas did not consider justice and politics to be a degradation of sanctity and ethics. Nevertheless, his conception of the relationship between these two realms seems to be problematic. In order to be cared for, the ethical demands of sanctity must be limited by justice as well as adjusted to material conditions. Does that mean that infinity, which makes these demands ethicaledmand and holy, is negated? Is this the price to pay for allowing sanctity to have a chance in this world? In order to solve these issues, I will refer to Lévinas’ conception of judgment. To Lévinas, when delivering a judgment, a judge should not take into account his infinite responsibility for the other. Otherwise, he will not be able to be equitable in passing a fair sentence on the defendant. In line with a biblical verse and its talmudic interpretation, Lévinas stated that one should not look at the defendant’s face while judging. This does not imply that the judge should completely forget the other’s face and his calls for a response. After the verdict, the judge must look at the defendant’s face in order to moderate the severity of the decision. Generally speaking, Lévinas thought that the entire legal system was concerned with humanizing the punishments and reducing the legitimate violence that is inherent in every act of justice. Lévinas’ description of judgment shows that ethics and sanctity have the last word. Though justice may enjoy some autonomy, it is never disconnected from the ethical demands that control it. Ultimately, the idea of sanctity is the norm that must inspire and direct the political or to prevent it from degenerating into tyranny and dictatorship.

In view of contemporaneous tragedies, Lévinas denounced the danger of separating ethics and politics. In his opinion, autonomy of politics inevitably leads to totalitarianism, that is, to a situation in which conatus essendi (i.e., man’s egocentric tendency to increase his power in finitely) is no longer limited by the obligation to wards the other. More over, Lévinas stressed the limitation which inheres in the law. Justice is constantly confronted with the impossibility of subsuming every special case under its general rules. In addition to legis la tion on social welfare, acts of goodness from one person to another. Acts of goodness demonstrate that sanctity remains a human possibility of being human.

Conclusion

I have tried to determine the boundaries around comparing Kant’s and Lévinas’ re spective positions. Despite his assertions on his proximity to Kant, Lévinas’ conception of the
relation between utopia and reality broke with practical philosophy. Though some aspects of his idea of sanctity converge with those of Kant, other aspects escape or flights, from the realm of ontology do not prepare him for return ing to it. As mentioned above, this is particularly true of the Kantian idea of human finitude that contrasts so radically with Lévinas’ conception of the psyche as originally invested by the Infinite, i.e., by unlimited responsibility for the other.

Lévinas’ distance from Kant is extended by an additional difference. Whereas Kant’s ethics led to religion, that is, to the hope of attaining sanctity and the highest good, or be at itude in another world and in an after life, Lévinas’ ethics tried to achieve sanctity here and now, that is, in the realm of politics, science and technology. Though I have not dealt with sanctity in his Jewish or confessional writings, tal-istion for Jewish Studies in Boston in 1995 and 1996.


5. On this issue, see Pe ter Atterton, “The Proximity between Lévinas and Kant: The Macy of Pure Practical Reason” (unpublished paper). This article contains numerous references to the secondary literature concerning both proximity and divergences between the two philosophers.


7. J. Rolland, ed., Dieu, la mort et le temps (Paris: Grasset, 1993). This collection of Lévinas’ lectures at the Sorbonne in 1975–1976 contains two lectures on Kant: “La question radicale: Kant contre Heidegger,” pp. 74–78; and “Kant et l’idéal transcendantal,” pp. 175–178. As Atterton notes in his essay, there is not “in Lévinas’ corpus a rigorous treatment of Kant concerning the idea of eternity to wards infinity, we are never done with the task of realizing sanctity concretely. Moreover, the philosophical reflection on sanctity itself is affected by this utopian bent. In this respect, one can view Lévinas’ whole work as an attempt to go further into an inquiry of an infinite that will never be bounded by the limits of thinking.

ENDNOTES

1. The present essay is based on some of my previous works on Lévinas: an article published as “Après vous: The Concept of Sanctity in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas” in an issue of Daat 40 (winter 1992) devoted entirely to Lévinas; two lectures that were given, respectively, at the 27th and 28th conferences of the Association for Jewish Studies in Boston in 1995 and 1996.


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yet to be published in the original French, the Sorbonne lectures are among the few occurrences of an explicit mention of Lévinas with Kant’s philosophy.

8. Emmanuel Lévinas. *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 166. Page 129 in the English translation made by Alphonso Lingis (*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981]). Though he acknowledges that Kant can capes from the realm of ontology, Lévinas immediately restricts the scope of his parallels with him by stating that, in so doing, he “only retains one trait” of his philosophical system and that he “neglects all the details of its architecture.”

9. *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 226; *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 180. See also *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 225; “criticism is the very foundation of philosophy” understood as “com prehension of being” (*Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 179).


11. *Totalité et infini*, p. 49. “To re late to the ab so lute, as is the as-temple or God, re main sep a rated in the desire; as desire, he in ter prets it eth i cally. Holi ness is nei ther an ni hi lated or other worldly sanc tity nor an ad her ence to an cient laws. It is pre cisely and con cre tely...”

12. *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 76; *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 59.


15. On this point, Bernasconi correctly observes that by emphatically stressing such phrases as “Après-vous, mon seur,” *Bonjour*, or *Shalom*, Lévinas “is not ad vo cating a way of speaking, but finding in every day speech a meaning which the philos o phers did not sus pect when they ig nored or even vil i fied such speech in favor of grander forms.” (“The Eth ics of Sus pi cion,” p. 11).


19. *Kant, Groundwork*, p. 88. In Kant’s view, that makes the dif fer ence be tween holy will which is “ab solutely good” and virtuous will which does not possess this ab solute good ness.


22. Ibid., p. 239.

23. See Richard A. Cohen, *El e va tions: The Height of The Good in Rosenzweig and Lévinas* (Chicago: Univer sity of Chi cago Press, 1994), p. 130: “Lévinas does not deny the holy; he inter prets it eth i cally. Holiness is nei ther an at tenu ated or other worldly sanc tity nor an ad her ence to an cient laws. It is pre cisely and con cre tely...”
24. See *Otherwise than Being*, chapter IV.

25. In the very last pages of *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas ac know ledges that his “the sis,” i.e., his inter pretation of “the subject as a hostage and the sub ject ivity of the subject as a substitution” is “ex posed impruden tly to the reproach of utopian ism.” (*Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 232; *Otherwise Than Be ing Or Beyond Es sence*, p. 184).


27. “The be lief that the things of this world are im por tant has never been de nied by Chris tian ity, but it si mul ta neously over es ti mates and un der es ti mates the weight of re al ity which it wants to im prove” ( *Diffi cult Free dom*, p. 99).

28. Lévinas con tends that by choos ing “eth ic al ac tion,” Ju da ism has com mit ted it self to “re main here be low,” mean ing in the “place” where ful fill ing my re spon si bility for the other is in cum bent on me (ibid., p. 100).


30. Actu ally, Lévinas’ con cep tion of “cre ated ex is tence” is to tal ly op posed to Kant’s. See *Totalité et infini*, p. 78; “What is ex sen tial to cre ated ex is tence is not the lim ited char ac ter of its ex istence, and the con crete struc ture of the crea ture is not de duc ible from this fini tude. What is ex sen tial to cre ated ex is tence is its sep aration with re gard to the In fi nite. This sep a ra tion is not sim ply a neg a tion. Ac com plished as psy chism, it pre ci sely opens up upon the idea of In fin ity” (*Totalité et infini*, p. 105). Fur ther more, Lévinas op poses his own con cep tion of cre ation *ex nihilo* to those of the the o log i cal tra di tion.

31. Lévinas care fully dis tin guishes two sorts of “im pos si bil ity,” namely, “on to log i cal” or “real” and “eth ic al” im pos si bil ity (*Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 213, note 2; *Otherwise Than Be ing Or Beyond Es sence*, p. 199, note 1).


33. Lévinas him self uses the geo met ri cal cal imag e of the as ymp totoe. See, for in stance, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, p. 181; *Otherwise Than Be ing Or Beyond Es sence*, p. 142.

34. See Lévinas’ ac counts of the “meta phys i cal cal de sire” as a “de sire that can not be sat is fied,” a “sub lime hun ger,” a de sire that “the De sired does not ful fill, but deep ens” and that “nour ishes it self, one might say, with its hun ger” (*Totalité et infini*, p. 4; Totality and In fin ity, p. 34).


36. In “Place and Uto pia,” Lévinas al ready ex press es his op po si tion to ego cen tric pre oc cu pa tion for self-survival by rais ing the fol low ing ques tions: “What is an in di vid ual, a sol i tary in di vid ual, if not a tree that grows with out re gard for ev ery thing it sup presses and breaks, grab bing all the nour ish ment, air and sun, a be ing that is fully jus ti fi ed in its na ture and its be ing? What is an in di vid ual, if not a usurper?” ( *Diffi cult Free dom*, p. 100).

37. On these top ics, see “God and phil os op hy,” *Col lected Phi los o phical Papers*, pp. 155–56. See also *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, pp. 195–207; *Other wise Than Be ing Or Beyond Es sence*, pp. 153–62.

38. In the fifth chap ter of *Other wise than Be ing*, Lévinas deals with this shift from eth ics to pol it ics.

39. Lévinas’ pos i tive at ti tude to wards sci ence leads him to con nect it stron gly with eth ics. See for in stance the fol low ing state ment: “Is not the locus of eth ics and ele vation now in the lab or a tory?” “Le mot je, le mot tu, le mot Die u,” *Le Monde* (March 19–20 1978).

40. *Babylonian Talmud*, Tract ate Rosh Ha shana 17a–18b.

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WHAT GOOD IS THE HOLOCAUST?

ON SUFFERING AND EVIL

Richard A. Cohen

The theological explanation for evil, theodicy, is that evil is willed by God, willed by an absolute God, an absolutely benevolent God.1 The logic may be painful, in the sense that it outrages moral reason, but it remains logical for all that. Since God wills all things, God willed the Holocaust. Be cause all things willed by God are good, the Holocaust too was good. Not just that good comes from the Holocaust, but that the Holocaust itself was good, as repentance, sacrifice, purification, sign, redemption, punishment, perhaps all of these, but ultimately good in itself. Not only do such scandalous conclusions necessarily follow from the logic of a philosophical God, from an absolute omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and benevolence, but even more painfully and intimately, they follow from the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from His special covenant with the Jews, and in our day with “Israel, in its Passion under Adolph Hitler.”2 Part of holy history (Heilsgeschichte), the Holocaust above all—where the Jews once again take center stage, not only in the locale of the Middle East, or of Europe, but globally—would have been willed by God, and thus would be good. It would have to be good, or it would be meaningless, and the Jews for saken. As we know, this very line of thought, enunciated in 1961 by a leading German cleric whose moral heroism had earlier been proven by saving Jews during the Nazi period, so shocked Richard Rubinstein that he rejected Richard in all to gether any belief in the special election of Israel. Emmanuel Lévinas too was shocked by this sound but appalling logic. Like Rubinstein, he too rejected theodicy, the vindication of evil in terms of divine justice. But he did not, in contrast, reject God or the idea of Jewish electi on.

How can one affirm God, Is rael’s election, and ethics after the Holocaust? We are driven to ask anew what sense, if any, do religious and morality have if human affairs are divorced from divine justice. Is a God who hides His face, or is eclipsed, any different than no God at all? Are we to be come like those “agnostics” whose mena dious ness Nietzsche decries because “they now worship the question mark itself as God?”4 If the rejection of theodicy leaves those for whom God is still meaningful with a tremendum, is it no more than a clouding of consciousness, an elliptical but false gesture, a brave but empty stubbornness? Lévinas answered in the negative. After the Holocaust, to be sure, he rejected theodicy. But for Lévinas the meaning of the Holocaust is precisely the “end of theodicy.” “The most revolutionary fact of our twentieth century,” Lévinas wrote, “is that of the destruction of all balance between . . . theodicy . . . and the forms which suffering and evil take.” “The Holocaust of the Jewish people,” he continued, is the “paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in all its horror.” “Auschwitz,” he wrote, “is the radical rupture between evil and mercy, between evil and sense.” But the question of evil remains. This most questionable question, older than Job, is in fact newly deepened, newly sharpened, radicalized by the Holocaust. Lévinas did not shrink from asking: What can suffering mean when suffering is rendered so obviously “useless” (in utile), useless to its core? What can suffering mean when it is “for nothing,” when it heralds and leads only to death and is intended only for obliteration? Friedrich Nietzsche was also troubled by “the meaninglessness of suffering.”5 Like Lévinas, but of course de cades be fore the Holocaust, he too rejected as false and self-deceptive all the justifications of suffering as theodicy, for example, punishment for sin, or a nece ssary piece of a hidden but divine whole. But with the same stroke, with
The three articles work as most of Lévinas’ writings work, by progressively building on original phenomenological and ethical insights by means of re view and elaboration, circulating back to retrieve, extrapolate, and amplify ear later thoughts. Each progresses, that is to say, as an ever deepening commentary upon its own insights, like Talmud exegesis, resaying its own said—like musar [ethical self-development] itself, as Rabbi Ira Stone has pointed out. The three articles each develop, in different proportions and depth, three basic components: theybe gin with a phenomenology of evil and suffering, and then, building on these in tuition and in sights, they turn to ethics, negatively to criticize theodicy, as we have already seen, and positively to propose an ethical alternative to theodicy, which we shall shortly see.

In the following I will trace this same route, beginning with suffering and evil, then concluding with Lévinas’ positive religico-ethical alternative to theodicy.

Phenomenology of Suffering and Evil

Phenomenology uncovers two primary and related dimensions of suffering: (1) excess or transcendence, and (2) meaningfulness. Because these two dimensions are fun da ments of suffering, suffering is linked to evil both in oneself and in another.

Suffering appears in and as an “extreme passivity,” a passivity “more passive than receptivity,” “an ordeal more passive than experience.” The passivity of suffering is extreme or excessive because of its quality of “unassumableness,” “non-integratability.” This quality of “excess” or “transcendence,” which makes up its essence, can not be understood quantitatively. Little and great suffering are both suffering. The “too much” of pain is its very essence, “manner,” or “quiddity.”

Suffering, that is to say, is not only a suffering from something, as Husserl’s commitment to existential analysis would suggest, but also at the same time a suffering from suffering itself, a re-thing of suffering, such that all suffering, reg ard less of its quantitatively measurable, and reg ardless of whether it is endured voluntarily or not, is unwanted, in support able, unbearable of itself. Just as a bodily being en joys and en joying, it suffers suffering. The unwanted and at the same time in essence capable character of pained suffering.

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corpo real reflexivity is what distinguishes the phenomenon of suffering: one suffers from suffering itself.

From the inherent excess of suffering comes its second characteristic and its link to evil: meaninglessness. Despite a variety of post facto explanations or finalities—that pain serves as a biological warning, or is the price of spiritual refinement, or of social or political regeneration—the “sense-of-pain... pierces beneath reasonable forms.” Lévinas wrote of suffering: “in its own phenomeneality, in triscally, it is use less, ‘for nothing’.” As such it is a “‘mystery’, ‘non-sense par excellence’,” the “absurd,” “basic senselessness,” it is “dis turbing and for eign of it self.”

“The evil of pain, the harm it self, is the ex plosion and most pro found articulation of ab sur dity.” “The break with the nor mal and the nor mative, with order, with synthesis, with the world, already constitutes its qualitative es sence.”

Unbearable and useless, suffering is evil. Suffering is evil; suffering is evil. Together they constitute an irreducible zero point of signification, an irsignificance “where the dimensions of the physical and moral are not yet separated.” “All evil,” Lévinas wrote, “re fers to suffering.” It is “not,” he con tin ued, “through pas sivity that evil is de scribed, but through evil that suffering is understood” as “sickness, evil in living, ag ing, cor ruptible flesh, per ishing and rot ting.” In the end suf fer ing and evil are names for the mean ing less pain ful ness of pain which is always, reg ardless of quan tiative considera tions, intrinsically excessive, un wanted, not to be ac com mo dated.

From this un wanted bur den comes Lévinas’ first articulation of an ethical issue: “the funda men tal ethi cal prob lem which pain poses for nothing.” “That ethi cal prob lem is not the suf ferer’s, the one subject to the pain of millenial suf fer ing, but that of the wit nesses in re la tion to the suf ferer: “the inev itable and pre em ptory ethi cal prob lem of the medi cation which is my duty” (“Use less Suf fer ing,” 158). In the other’s suf fer ing, then, Lévinas saw an “orig inal call for aid,” an orig inal call “for curative help,” “where the pri mor dial, irreducible, and ethi cal, anthropol ogical cat e gory of the medi cal co mes to im pose it self—across a demand for anal gesia.”

Earlier, in 1961, in Totality and Infinity, Lévinas had already written: “The doc tor is an a pri ori prin ci ple of hu man mortality.” There he con tested one of the cen tral claims of Heidegger’s Being and Time, that dying or being-toward-death (Sein-zum-tode) isolates and individualizes human subjectivity. For Lévinas, in con trast: “A so cial con junc tion is main tai ned in this men ace of death, which ‘ren ders pos si ble an ap peal to the Other, to his friend ship and his medica tion.’” The evil of suf fer ing, then, meaningless for the suf ferer, would at once be an ap peel to the other, a de mand for analgesia. These are Lévinas’ first and funda mental ethi cal elab orations of suf fer ing: suf fer ing as a call to help, as my ob li ga tion to help. But what if the other’s call is silenced?

Ho lo caust: the End of Theodicy

As I have already indi cated, the phe no men al or intrinsic meaninglessness of suffering and evil ren der them re sis tant to all theodicy. The enormity of the Ho lo caust would be the unforgettable and irrefutable historical proof, and hence forth a para digmatic proof, of the es sen tial dis propor tion between suf fer ing and explana tion. But Lévinas went one step fur ther. After Auschwitz theodicy it self be comes immoral. The idea of theodicy may re main a con so la tion or a moral chal lenge for the suf ferer, but from me. Com ing from me, it is my flight, rationalization, im position, as if the other’s suf fer ing, mean ing less to the suf ferer, were mean ing ful to me. “For an ethi cal sen si bility,” Lévinas wrote, “confirming itself, in the hu man ity of our time, against this in hu manity—the justification of the neighbor’s pain is cer tainly the source of all immorality.”

That I can ex plain some one else’s pain, that I can jus tify it, is to pile evil upon evil. But how, we must still ask, is it pos si ble to re main an “ethi cal sensibility,” beyond the non sense of “evil,” after the Ho lo caust? If suf fer ing is intrinsically mean ing less, and the Ho lo caust the un avoid able global proof of this mean ing less, the proof of the inapplicability of any explana tion, then why and how can we still speak of evil and morality at all? This re mains a funda mental question. How do we re main an ethi cal sensibility, or, as Lévinas ex pressed this in the now fa mous opening sentence of Totality and Infinity: “Ev ery one will readily agree that it is of the

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highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.”

Suffering and evil are intrinsically meaning less. The inordinate suffering and evil of the Holocaust may make this evident not only to the whole world, and to all the religions of the world. “The philosophical problem,” Lévinas wrote, “which is posed by the use of pain which appears in its fundamental meaningfulness across the events of the twentieth-century, concerns the meaning that religion and the human morality of goodness can still retain after the end of theodicy.” Precisely this “philosophical problem” agitates the various existences which drive the question of ethics, the problem of evil, and the meaning of religion, in our time. What is Lévinas’ answer?

**Suffering for the Suffering of An Other**

Deepening his earlier formulations regarding the “category of the medi cal” and the “a priori principle” of the doctor by holding fast to the phenomenon of suffering itself, Lévinas’ entire answer regarding the ethical-religious meaning of suffering, can be summed up in a simple but power ful statement: “The only sense that can be made of evil, that is to say, of suffering, is to make one’s own suffering into a suffering for the suffering of others. Or, to put this in one word: the only ethical meaning of suffering, in deed, “the only meaning to which suffering is susceptible” is compassion. The other person suffers; that is evil; there is no moral or religious explanation for it. In deed, such explanations are them selves immoral, irreligious. Suffering, in short, can not be made into an object, can not be externalized, is not indifferent, and any attempt to do so, in what ever exalted name, is self-imposed morality. But I am a being who suffers too. What Lévinas proposed, then, with out any “mythic” implications, is a kind of holy al most sublime contemplation of suffering. He proposed that morality and religion can still make sense, in deed can in fact only make sense after the Holocaust, in “suffering elevated or deepened to a suffering-for-the-suffering-of-another-person.” The fundamental philosophical problem of suffering, then, its evil, its meaninglessness, its malignancy, would then be come the “problem of the relation between the suffering of the self and the suffering which a self can experience over the suffering of the other per son.”

It is this empathy, this compassion, that would be the “new morality of faith to day.” “That in the evil that pursues me the evil suffered by the other man affects me, that it touches me.” To take on, in and as one’s own affliction, the affliction of the other, is not simply a feeling, however, nor is it a mystical or vicarious action at a distance. Rather, it is a being responsible for the other, the self-as-responsibility, the self as “ashes and dust,” as Abrah am said. Morality and human identity, in other words, arise in a painful solidarity. The humanity of the human would arise—it is an elevation, an “election”—across the narrow bridge of compassion, a bridge which despite its narrow ness is linked to all and every thing. “The humanity of man,” Lévinas wrote, “is fraternal solidarity, solidity not only with all humans, but even more, it is ‘fraternal solidarity with creation.’” This is not, then, the human defined by spiritualization or by absorption into nature, whether nature be spirit or mother. Rather it is nature uplifted to creation, where across human responsibility—“responsibility for everything and for all”—no one, not the greatest and not the least, no creature whatsoever, whether animal, vegetable or mineral, is left out. Lévinas called this vast empathy, this vast compassion, this vast responsibility: “theophany” and “revelation.” Be yond theodicy, it is compassion with out concern for reward, remuneration. It is solar love. Putting the other above oneself, converting one’s own suffering into a suffering for the other’s suffering, has “no other remuneration than this very elevation.”

This “new devotion” after the Holocaust, then, would be the “ultimate vocation of our people,” and hence the ultimate vocation of and for humanity: “to give rather than receive, to love and make love, rather than be loved.” Such, again, would be Israel and human identity, and concluding nothing to Caesar, it would be the “u-topian” imperative of the State of Israel and of all the nations of the earth. In demanding that after the Holocaust Jews re main faith ful to the uttermost depths or heights of Judaism, in a unique particularity which al ways refers to the universal with out ever giving up its particularity, Lévinas several times in voked the de mand

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of Emil Fackenheim that now more than ever Jews (and in this sense everyone is a Jew) must deny Hitler a posthumous victory. Jews must remain Jews. After the Holocaust, in other words, human beings must remain human. We must be “serving vants,” Lévinas wrote, citing the Talmudic tractate Pirke Avos, I:3, “who serve without regard to recompense.” And this, he continued—circling back to his article of 1955—this new devotion and ultimate vocation of Israel after the Holocaust is nothing other and no less than “loving Torah more than God.”

**Conclusion: Loving Torah More Than God**

In conclusion, then, let us turn to the vista opened up by Lévinas’ conclusion. In 1955, Lévinas had already written of suffering, God’s absence, and the Holocaust. “What,” he asked then, “can this suffering of the innocent face—that is to say, in a world where good does not triumph—be without making any demands, with out expectation of any rewards, without reservation or reserve, without miracles, can each of us for the moment believe in the hidden face of God?”

The an answer is powerful and magnificent. It is through the Torah, sanctifying God through the world, are not flights from purity and from God but rather the very work God demands of human beings. Morality would be revelation; justice would be redemption. But “Loving Torah more than God” would also have a second sense, unavoidable after the Holocaust. It would mean people must love the work of morality and justice more, apparently, than does God Himself. It would mean that even if God seems to have let humanity down, having hidden His face or having been eclipsed, as our twentieth century seems to teach again and again, that now all the more must we, we humans, love the Torah, that is to say, “do justice and love mercy.” The prophet Isaiah taught the lofty lesson that God Himself was “afflicted by her [Israel’s] afflictions” (Isaiah 63:9). After the Holocaust, Lévinas is urging that we must take this burden upon ourselves, join Yom Kippur to Purim, that regardless of God’s silence or absence, indeed inspired by the response His eyes which de volve upon us through this silence and absence, we must be moved in our affections by the affections of our fellow humans. Perhaps only in this way, finally, without making any demands, with no expectation of any rewards, with no reservation or reserve, with out miracles, can each of us for the
first time as adults “walk humbly with your God.”

ENDNOTES

1. On the significane of the dash in “God,” see my Ele - 
vations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and 
Lévinas (Chicago: Univer sity of Chi cago Press, 1994), 
pp. xiv–xv.

2. “The pas sion of Is rael in the sense in which one speaks 
of the pas sion of Christ—is the mo ment hu man ity be -
gins to bleed from the wounds of Is rael.” From “Em -
manuel Lévinas se souvient . . .” in Les nou veaux 
cahiers: Em man uel Lévinas , No. 82 (Fall, 1985): 35.
Cf., Frank lin H. Littell, The Cru ci fix ion of the Jews:
The Fail ure of Chris tians to Un derstand the Jewish Ex -
p eri ence (Macon, Geo gia: Mer cer Uni ver sity Press, 
1986; orig i nally pub lished by Harper and Row Pub -
lis hers, 1975).

3. Rich ard L. Ruben stein, AfterAuschwitz: Rad i calThe -
to lo gy and Con tem po rary Ju da ism (Indianapoli s: 

4. Fried r ich Nietz -
sche, On the Ge ne al ogy of Mor als , Part III, 
sec tion 25 (Kaufmann trans la tion).

A. Co hen, in The Pro vo ca tion of Lévinas , ed. by R. 
Bern asconi and D. Wood (Lon don: Routledge, 1988), 

6. Ibid., p. 162.


8. Fried r ich Nietz -
sche, On the Ge ne al ogy of Mor als , Part III, 
sec tion 28.

9. Fried r ich Nietz -
sche, Twi light of the Idols , trans. R. J. 
Holl ingdale (Middlesex, Eng land: Peng uin Books, 
1968), p. 112.

10. We know, too, that un able to rise to his own chal lenge, 
Nietz sche’s thought fal ter -
s in a long ing for eter nity
(per haps more pa thetic than parodic) in its own con -
struc tive ef forts to sit u ate suf fer ing within a larger jus -
ti fy ing whole, even if that whole is now not only quite
small, but in dif fer ent and God-forsaken, and even if
that long ing, bravely re fus ing genu ine elev ation, is
reduced to an elit ist and sol i tary will to eter nal re cur -
rence.


12. “Tran scen dence and Evil,” trans. Al phonso Lingis, in
Em manuel Lévinas, Col lect ed Philo so phical Pa pers
175–86.

1978).


15. Em manuel Lévinas, “L’appel d’Auschwitz,” in Les 

16. Emil Fackenheim, God’s Pres ence in His tory (New 
York: New York Uni ver sity Press, 1970); La Présence 
de Dieu dans l’histoire , trans. M. Delmotte and B.
Dupey (Lagr ass: Ver di er, 1980).

17. Em manuel Lévinas, “Loving the To rah More Than 
God,” in Les nou veaux cahiers: Em manuel Lévinas .

Move ment and the Fu ture of Jew ish Eth ics Af ter the Ho lo caust” con fer ence, May 6, 1996; 
Lévinas, Dif fi cult Free dom, trans. Sean Hand (Bal ti -
142–45. This ar ti cle also ap pears in two short vol umes
pert inent to the themes of this es say, the first writ ten by 
an Amer i can Je uit priest and pro fes sor, and the sec ond
ited by an Amer i can Jew ish au thor: Franz Jozef van 
Beeck, S.J., Lov ing the To rah More than God?: To -
wards a Cath olic Ap pre ci a tion of Ju da ism (Chi cago: 
Loyola Uni ver sity Press, 1989); Zvi Kolitz, Yossel
Rakover Speaks to God: Ho lo caust Chal lenges to Re li -
gious Fa ith (Ho boken: KTAV Pub lish ing House, 
1995).


21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., p. 15.


24. Ibid., pp.179-181; Prov ocation, p. 156.

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29. Ibid., p. 160.
30. Ibid., pp. 157–58.
34. *Provocation* p. 158.
38. Ibid., p. 160.
39. Ibid., pp. 157–58.
40. Ibid., p. 159.
41. Ibid., p. 159.
42. *Provocation*, p. 158.
43. Ibid., p. 158.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
52. Ibid., p. 159.
53. Recently, from within an explicitly Christian standpoint, and primarily regarding the suffering of children with terminal illnesses, Stanley Hauerwas, in *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), touchingly recognizes many of the themes we have found in Lévinas: that suffering has “no point” (pp. 78–79), the link between suffering and medicine, the crucial difference between another’s suffering and “my suffering as service” (p. 89), and the wrong committed when forcing the other’s suffering into an explanation, including traditional theodicy.
54. *Shulchan Aruch*, 16.
55. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 184.
59. See the excellent article by Joelle Haléon on “election” in the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas.
60. *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 185.
61. Ibid., p. 184.
62. Here, in the solidarity of suffering, in compassion, lies the path to the ethical call the ory of “animal rights” that certain commentators have found lacking in Lévinas’s thought, and, more broadly, to the whole di men sion of an ethical rather than anaturalisticenvironmentalism.
64. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
70. *Les nouveaux cahiers*, p. 17.
71. Ibid.
74. In the discussion period following the presentation of this paper in Oregon, Professor Sandor Goodhart quite right fully pointed out that the French term *conscience*, here translated “conscience,” can also mean “con-
sciousness,” since for Lévinas consciousness itself, and not only an explicitly moral conscience, is a vigilance awoken by the other.

77. *Ibid*.
79. Isaiah 63:9: “In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them: in His love and in His pity He redeemed them; and He bore them, and carried them all.”
80. Cf. Chapter XII, “The Day of Atonement,” in Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 216–35 (originally published in 1919). Cohen also rejects interpreting another’s suffering (p. 226), “unless the sufferer is considered as suffering for the sake of others” (p. 227), which compassion is a “means” to ward redemption, for “redemption is also liberation from suffering” (p. 230). All this, encapsulated in Cohen’s formula: “Without suffering—noredemption,” invites comparison with Lévinas on suffering and evil. “The days of old.” Of course, long before Isaiah, the Jews already understood God to be “compassionate” (rachoum) and “long-suffering” (erek apayim), see Exodus 34:6–7.
81. In stark contrast to the inaugural story of the Jewish nation leaving Egypt for Israel in Exodus, the story of Esther in Persia, told on Purim, contains no overt miracles or divine intervention. Jewish sages have often noted that in this biblical text, unlike any other, the name of God does not appear. Precisely for this reason, too, it is said (e.g., Midrash to Proverbs ix) that when in the messianic era all the other holies be come outmoded, only Purim—a “minor” holy day to day—will remain. But was there no miracle—precisely the “miracle” of ethical suffering—in the three-day fast of Esther, Mordechai, and the Jews of ancient Shushan?

82. For a comparison of morality without compensation in Lévinas and Spinoza, see my article, “To Love God for Nothing: Lévinas and Spinoza,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20 (Spring, 1998).
83. On the notion of an “economy with out reserve,” see the very suggestive paper of Robert Doran, “Speaking After the Holocaust: Infinity, the Sublime, and Economy in Bataille and Lévinas,” presented at the University of Oregon, May 8, 1996.
84. This essay was first presented as a keynote address, on May 7, 1996, at a conference on “Ethics After the Holocaust,” held at the University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon.
LÉVINAS AND THE HOLOCAUST
THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE VICTIM

Gilbert Larochelle

Fail ure of the dis course on Be ing with out a doubt pres ents the most stim ul at ing chal lenge of con temporary thought. The work of Em manuel Lévinas, de rived from the phe nom en ology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, while it de nies all as pects of ex is - ten ti al ism, con trib utes to the re a li za tion of this task. The original ity of his project runs through a displacement of Be ing as the re fer ence point of con science. On that ba sis, Lévinas dis rupts philo soph i cal re flec tion and tries to give it a vo ca tion that is no lon ger that of re veal ing the world.

The decentering move ment re lies on the pri or ity ceded to the ques tion of the Other over that of Be ing. This dis place ment aims to evade the traps of all on to log i cal re duc tion, and draw attention to the tran scendence to which no thought can ren der jus tice. Lévinas writes, “One must un der stand Be ing though the Other of Be ing.” He adds: “The alterity of the In fi nite is not abol is hed by the thought that thinks it.” His state ment calls for the reinvention of a phi los ophy sus ce pt i ble to re al ize a so ber ing up of knowl edge. For him, hu man be ings do not need to feel re spon si ble for the world, but for the Other. This rea son ing con se crates the end of an thro po mor phism, and the ap peal to a so li - da rity in which each must make him self hos pi t al to the face of his fel low man. Herein are the stakes of meta phys i cs with out on to log y.

The problem examined in my anal y sis of Lévinas’ think ing con cerns the ap par ent ex cess of re spon si bil ity to wards the Other, and the pos si bi li ty of in scribing it in the realm of an ef fective jus tice. If Be ing evades all de ter mi na tion, and the sub ject of its own iden ti ty, how can one be held re spon si ble in the face of an event? Does not the in crim i na tion of some one af ter a mis deed im ply that the fact as such be estab lished be fore hand, and then, as a re sult, that strong iden ti ties be tween the vic tim and the guilty be dis trib uted? In short, the cen tral ques tion for Lévinas is the fol low ing: can meta phys ics be founded without re course to on to log y? Through this ques tion ing, are in ter pre ta tion of ra tio nal ity is played out with the presump tions it gen er ates in the con struc tion of knowl edge. Reason tests its lim its, for Lévinas, when mea sure d by the stan dard of meta phys i cs. In his think ing, West ern phi los o phy is pa gan, be cause it is founded on a prin ci - ple of re flexiv i ty, iden ti ty, and on to log y, ob - struct ing the chal lenge to accept un lim ited re spon si bil ity for the Other. The Ho lo caust, a per fect ex am ple of pa gan ism, shows that the tri umph of on to log y de stroy s all fi nal i ties. It re veals, for Lévinas, the fail ings of hu man jus tice. Yet that event is not cru cial to Jews alone, for it points out the pit falls of all thought folded upon it self, and, as a con se quence, the ne ces sity to re in tro duce the in fi nite into all hu man re flec tion.

While Lévinas only made spor adic re fer ence to the Ho lo caust in his work, his en tire phi los o phy is ad mit tedly im pre gn ated with the les sons it teaches. How ever, my ar gu ment con sists in dem on strat ing that he is not able to re con struct meta phys i cs without on to log y, jus tice without iden ti ty, re spon si bil ity with out sub jectiv i ty. In stead of ac tu ally decentering all points of view, Lévinas seems rather to dis place the fi nal le git i macy of his tory from the per sec u tor to the per se cuted, by giv ing the vic tim the fi nal right to on to log y. Three prop os i tions can serve here to es tab lish the frame work for this re flec tion: a) re flex iv i ty, as a form of iden ti ty, re sur faces in Lévinas through the sta tus of the vic tim in the Ho lo caust; b) his no tion of re spon si bil ity is de fined by the will to adopt the point of view of the vic tim and opens onto, in ac cor dance with Judeo-Chris tian tra di tion, an on to log y of suf fer ing as a way to sal va tion; c) that con cep tion of iden ti ty and re spon si bil ity ends up jus ti fy ing the moral su per i or ity of the Jew, vic tim par ex cel lence, and of his uni -
ver sal model of jus tice. The para dox we wish to ex pose is that the weak ness of the vic tim cu riously be comes the in stru mental of a will of power in which the Jew takes on the form of the “last man” in his tory. To dem on strate these as sen tions, it seems per ti ment to try to un der stand, through a re read ing of ‘Diffi cult Free dom’, Lévinas’ of fen sive against West ern phi los ophy and pa gan ism, then to see how Naz ism be came its worst man i fes ta tion. Final ly, bring ing light onto the vic tim will serve to un veil Lévinas’ ontology and the failure of his decenter ing ef fort.

Re flexiv ity and Iden tity

a) Solipsism and Cir cum spon si bil ity. The dra ma of West ern phi los ophy is its never hav ing been able to con ceive of al terity with out reduc ing it. Re flection it self, in terms of “re turn to the self” means that the jour ney of the sub ject in ex te ri ority can not be made solely through an ex te ri or pa tion of a re treat to wards its start ing point. Such an act sup poses and Lévinas de plores, a loss of mean ing and an ex cess of pre sump tion. It con denses the mis er ies of phi los ophy since its ori gens. On the one hand, its ex er cise infringes upon the de mands of tak ing into con sid eration the ex cep tional di men sion of the Other by de fining the cri te ria of its ap pre hen sion out side of it self. On the other hand, con struc tion of in telligibil ity as sumes that one can self-con sti tute as a stan dard for all things, while dis re gard ing that which is es sen tial in differ ence. Phi los ophy, he writes, “makes it self the door way into the realm of the ab solute.” And call ing on Plotinus as wit ness, Lévinas quotes as proof his own for mula against him: “The soul will not go to wards any other thing, but to wards it self”; “that it will there fore not be in any other thing, but in it self.”

How ever, dam age far pre ces ces the as ser tion of the neo-Pla to nian phi los o pher. It goes back to the im pera tive “know thy self” of So cra tes, that “fundamental pre cept of all West ern phi los o phy.” He in te grates par ex cel lence into so lip sis of the con science where the vic tory of the Same is paid for by the with drawal of all ob stacles.

The ex pe ri ence of re spon si bility would then be lim ited by the re flex iv ity of iden tity, for to think the world is equiva lent to rec on cili ing one self in it. For Lévinas, in the Odys sey, Ully-

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identity, “the Other is looking at me,” to use Lévinas’ own wording. Only the intrusion of alterity allows us to grasp what thinking means. It re verses all ideologies for the benefit of a humanism without subject, an altruism without ego, a personalism with out individ u alism, a phenomenology without the turn back to the re al ity of a pha en omenon essendi.

Numerous consequences emerge from such an up heaval, and re g is ter, from Lévinas’ point of view, the experience of responsibility. As soon as the way phi los o phy looks at the world an swers only to itself through the presumption of in ti macy of the sub ject with Be ing, the pit falls of its pro ject are re vealed on at least three levels. First, reflexive circularity de ter mines a clo sure of thought: he who de liv ers him self to the rationality of its un folding is at once ele vated to judge and jury. But self-referentiality reveals a per for ma tive ap proach: a state ment that finds ac com plish ment in be ing ex pressed and, in this in stance, a foun da tion that pro duces its own metadiscursive norms and leg i t imacy through the very act that es tablishes it. How ever then the di a lec tics of iden tity can no lon ger be de fined in terms of the Pla tonic ideal of a cor re spon dence be tween one self and the world, of a re pre sen ta tion that would be its tri umph. For Lévinas, the Hegelian strategy of gather ing, through the juncture of con tra dic tions, no lon ger calls for bring ing out iden ti ties from the “cir cle of di a lec tics.”

Finally, these prob lems re garding cir cu lar ity and iden tity ex hibit the a porias of to tal ity. Syn the sis pro ceeds from the need to con quer. It is a way of com ing to terms with the pos ses sion of the world. Lévinas ex plains that it rec og nizes itself in its op er a tion of the logos as “sub or di na tion of an ac tion to the knowl edge that one can have of that act.” If phe no menology tried to per fect un der stand ing by go ing be yond the stric tly cog ni tive di men sion, the trap of this pro ce dure re mains the same, thought still gives it self the pos si bil ity of con tain ing the entire univer se. The famous Husserlian pre ce pt that says “all con scious ness is con scious ness of some thing” still re lies on the pos tu late that an “es sen tial ne ces sity at ta ches be ing to its ways of ap pearing to con scious ness,”5. But this dream of co in ci dence and to tal ity is abol ished as Lévinas con solid dates his neg a ti ve an swer to the ques tion “is on to logy fun da men tal?”5 Yet two at ti tudes emerge from it in the face of the world, attitudes that can be differen ti ated for the most part through one’s relationship with the in finite.

b) Paganism and Judaism. The en tire stakes of Lévinas’ thought are to re store the strength of re ve la tion in phi los o phy. To con front the notion of its in ab il ity to tes tify to its own source, to re fle ct its op ac ity to an other vis i bil ity than that which it pro cures, to de monstrate that some thing re sists or even es capes the phe nom en al ity of its use, such are the epistemic bases from which Lévinas’ in tel lec tual re fram ing takes root. The exit from so lip sism de pends on this open ing to the de mand of a voice. If her meneutics sets lim its to the virtu ous ity of cog ni tive ac tion, it is un der the con di tion that it re ce pts the text, and ac cepts the impera tive char ac ter of the spirit be yond the let ter, since “Every word is an up root ing.” There is in that text an “Wholly Other” (Rudolf Otto) that noth ing can im po ver ish. A prin ci ple emerges from the slid ing of the con cept towards the non-thematizable: “The in fi nite is given only to the moral view [regard]: it is not known, but is in soci ety with us.” Deli ver ance from re flexiv ity only be comes possible though religious lis ten ing to the in fi nite, where all the ep isteme ei ther come up against per pet u a tion in pa gan ism or im plodes be fore the “extreme con scious ness” of Ju da ism.

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with himself, this “usurper,” to use Lévinas’ own word ing, basks in the glory of being “at home,” and not being able to see himself elsewhere: “Paganism is the local spirit: nation al-ism in terms of its cruelty and pitiless-ness—that is to say, in its immediate, naïve, and unconscious sense. The tree grows and retains all the earth’s sap. A human ity with roots that possess God in wardly, with the sap rising from the earth, is a foreign or pre-human hum anity. One must not be fooled by the peace of the woods.”

Heidegger is the perfect pagan, he who wanted to re dis cover the world, to live as a poet in the calm of the Black For est by going deep into the roots of being.

On the contrary, to be Jewish is asumes immersion in the infinite, and heteronomy towards im pregnable forces. Nothing falls due to this con di tion that was not first a heritage of foreign origin. The experience of the elsewhere is destiny for the Jew, whose exceptional char ac ter is due to the fact that he must ac complish the im pli ca tions thereof. To live in the diaspora of meaning, never to be at home, to deny even the possibility of seeing oneself as pointed sovereign sub ject, to Lévinas, is an enriching experience for one who lives by these principles. A sensitivity to alterity becomes the virtue of that ex istance on the out side. How ever, the beauty of exile is that it carries with it an aspiration: “The Prom ised Land will never be in the Bible ‘property’ in the Latin sense of the term, and the farmer, at the mo ment of the first born, will think not of his timeless link to the land but of the child of Aram, his ancestor, who was an errant.”

As opposed to the Ulysses model, reflection as a “re turn to the self” can not come first. Difficult Freedom does not show Judaism through the figure of the circle, but through the amassing of traces that escape all at tempts at fixing a center. The Jew thus lives that decentering, be cause he is refused Being. It is therefore incumbent upon him to live the exodus and to fully ex pe ri ence the spirit of universal respon si bility, since he is uprooted from all anchoring in the soil that would limit its ap pli ca tions.

Lévinas’ displacement exceeds geographical dimension. It puzzles epistemology, so dear to Western thought, by sub mitting reason to the predominance of theological know ledge. From the out set, the con tem pla tive at ti tude of Judaism signifies much more than piety spread out over the world. An ex istence lived under the dependence of the indeter mina ble, backed into a voc ation more than designation, into met a phor rather than con cept, in vests the sacred. It must also make room for what Lévinas calls “intellectual excellence,” for “that Judaism is still to be found at the cross-roads of faith and logic.”

From paganism to Judaism, the debate is played out against the rationalist tradition of philosophy and against the artificial division between finite and science, be tween transcendence and imma nence, in short, between Jerusalem and Athens. The invitation to “make Israel” carries with it the dou ble de mand of re demption and justice, revelation and lucidity, exile and commitment. Be yond met a phor, the oxy moron of “red transcendence” is perhaps con veni ent to the dis course of one whose thought will ingly practices ambiguity in writing. It means to care fully build the great syn the sis of mono the ism that analytical reason finally withered. Christianity itself was unable, according to Lévinas, to meet the challenge to civilize Europe while preserving the pre-eminence of the supernatural: Hitlerism and the Shoah bear spec tacular witness to such a failure.

The analyses made to this point allows us, in brief form, to es tab lish Lévinas’ thought in its moment of extraction from the “fatality of irremissible Being” and to circumscribe the topos of an intel ligibility that would no longer be founded on reflexivity as a method. The wager of this project re quires the de liv erance of the in fi nite and cast a shadow on anthropomorphic hu manism. The message: all meaning comes from else where, it is not a pos ses sion of which hu mans can dispose of at whim. The provoca tion: destabilize the institutions, uproot their foundations, and elevate their referents towards the in fi nite.

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dence and constitutes the “epiph any,” to use a word that appeared at the same moment as Totality and Infinity: “through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God.”

Re mark ably unique, Ju da ism emerges thus under the intrinsic modality of an episteme. Supre me pas sivity in front of the Torah “ac cepted and obeyed as pri mary im per ative,” it never the less contributes to aver ting constructivism and its will of power, to ren dering determinism null since the refer ent is not of this world, to castigating psychologism, narcissism, and thera peutic culture. As are sult, pre ty evicts the will to dominate, asceticism replaces any self-redemptive fi nal ity. While the nine teenth cen tury looked to ac complish the notion of liberty through nume rous rev o lu tions, the twen ti eth cen tury has been that of equality, through the prol if er a tion of ide o logies of that in spi ra tion, but it is hence forth more than ever time, ac cord ing to Lévinas, to face the im pli ca tions of responsibility. “Being-with-others” in cludes this ap peal; it sorts out the foun da tions of in ti macy, the shar ing of an ex is tence that re -

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vo cab u lary be fore it con sti tutes a moral prob-
lem. It spec ifies the ineptitude of dis course as a
trans port of ex is tence out of its tau to log i-
cal cir cuit, where Be ing is de fined on the ba sis
of it self, and it dom i nates in an au thor i tian
way by vir tue of its sole ex po sure: it is as it is,
be cause that is the way it is. There is no higher
level to seek in the hope of ren der ing jus tice:
“all is per mit ted.” The ab sen ce of pro hi bi tion
and hit ler ian man i fes ta tions of Nietz sche re-
dern the do mes ti ca tion of hu man na ture in oper-
a tive. For Lévinas, such a syn drome, ex ceed-
ing the sole ide ogy of the Führer ques tions
West ern ci vi li za tion.24

“A ny civ i li za tion that ac cepts the idea of
Being”25 is termed bar bar ian be cause its val ues
go around in cir cles in their ad her ence to ac-
tion. Lévinas wrote: “The ex al ta tion of sac ri-
fic e for the sake of sac ri fice, faith for the sake
of faith, en ergy for the sake of en ergy, fi del ity
for the sake of fi del ity, fer vor for the heat it pro-
cures, the call to a grat ui tious— that is to say,
heroic— act: this is the per man ent origin of
Hit ler ism.”26 De hu man iza tion emerges in
those shapes with out con tent, from those ac-
tions made with out the in tel li gi bil ity of
thought. Michel Abensour re marks that Hit ler-
ism signi fies for Lévinas “entry into servitute.”27
Re call ing the words of one who lived be-
tween the “pre mo ni tion and mem ory of Nazi
horrors,” he ob serves that the ini tial range of
the tri al re lates back to the “re volt of Na ture
against Su per na ture.”28

Among the many signs of rup ture from the
superna tur al di men sion, the body re pre sen ts,
in the cult re serv ed for it in Nazi ide ogy, the
en clo sure of fi nal sig ni fic an ce. While Chris-
tian i ty, Ju da ism, and lib er al ism al ways treated
the body as an el e ment in the ex te rior world to
give the soul the priv i lege of hu man dig nity,
Hit ler ism con si ders it an ob ject that oc cu pieds
in all points with the sub ject. The flesh thus
sticks to the self through cause and effect,
through a feel ing of see ing one self fas tened to
Be ing in a per fect clo sure of goal: phys i o log i-
cal de ter mi na tion of the face leads to im pris on-
ment in an iden ty where bi ology, race, and
eth nic be long ing em body, it is be lieved, the
truth of ex pe ri ence. Lévinas de nounced the fa-
tality of the bi o log i cal fac tor, the “mys ter i ous
voices of the blood, the calls of he red ity and of
the past for which the body serves as an enig-
matic ve hi cle.”29 The en tire stake of the body in
Hit ler ism was to of fer the in stru ment of a re-
flex i ve jus tice and of an im ma nent le git i macy
through the cat e gories of purity, health, and
per for man ce by dis ru pt ing all su pe rior fi nal i-
ties.

Be ing for Be ing, value for value, body for
body, the lex tal ion is of the Old Tes ta ment en-
shrines the parad igm of this self-referen tial,
pagan jus tice. An eye for and eye, a tooth for a
tooth, dam age to the body, com pensa tion by the
body: an ar ith me tic of pain is in sti tuted be-
tween the act suf fered and the ri poste in flicted.
The com plaint of the vic tim sub sides in front
of the es tab lish ment of a math e mat i cally cal-
cu la ble sym me try. Ac cordin g to Lévinas, one
is thus po si tioned pre sum ingly on the side
of the law by as sum ing that all de bates can be
so lved on the ba sis of re cip ro city of ac tion. The
dem and for com pen sa tion in kind shows, for
Lévinas, ad si re to escape all re spon si bility to-
wards oth ers through a recip ro cat ing ven-
geance. To con sider ones elf even with one’s
neigh bor is to pre sum e that an act may at once
in clude the al ter ity and de feat within the
aporias of the afore men tioned tri logy: cir cu-
dence. The Ho lo caust was, for Lévinas, the re-
result of that ex treme differ en ce.

The lex tal ion is over es ti mates the
all-pow er ful na ture of judg ment. The fail ing
of this mer can tile jus tice broad en s as the prac-
tical con se quences of its sys tem of equiv a-
len ce be tween the per pe tra tion of the of fense
and pay ment of the in dem nity are un der stood: “Vi-
olence calls up vi o lence, but we must put a stop
be cause that is the way it is. There is no higher
work load, and in crim i nate with out tran sen-
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oneself as in Plato, and integrate alterity into the experience. Lévinas observed: “The justice which will rule the relations between men amounts to the presence of God among them.” In other words, the just must accept that some things cannot be rendered equal through the simple equivalence between crime and punishment. The asymmetry of the relation must endure, since the unit of measurement and intervention before the misdeed is simply not on the human scale. Ap prehen sion of the Hitlerian syndrome con sti tutes that occurrence where the establishment of all proportion be tween wrong and its sanction proves il lu sory. As a re sul t, Lévinas pro posed to re in vent a jus tice in which the vic tim re mains vic tim and the guilty keeps his cul pa bil ity like an at a vis no his tory can erase. The chal lenge is to come out of the lex tal lionis and demon strate that hu man jus tice is not enough in the face of the Shoah, where noth ing and none other than the vic tim can an swer for his own sta tus.

b) Vict im and Leg it im acy. Judeo Christian ity is a mo ral ity par ex ce llence of the con scious ness as a man. The two co in cide.” 44 The ego struc ture, is con tem po ra ne ous with my jus tice, of the harm caused to the Other, by my writes: “The con scious ness of any natu ral in - ter pretation of it. To this end, Lévinas made sure that his con cep tion of jus tice is un speak able, as much in court room lan guage as in that of tra di tional rab bi ni cal her me neu tics. His dis course con sists in say ing that man is born not evil, but guilty. Be cause of the an teriority of the fault, responsi bil ity com es first, and lib er ty, sec ond. As a re sul t, the as sumption of innocence as a cus tomary sche ma of West ern jus tice must cease to pre vail: evil is as orig i nal as sin is in Chi on tin ity. And yet, if all are guilty from the out set, it is the point of view of the vic tim that be comes the prin ci pal of leg it im acy of jus tice. Lévinas writes: “The con scious ness of any natu ral jus tice, of the harm caused to the Other, by my ego struc ture, is con tem poraneous with my con scious ness as a man. The two coincide.” 46 Con science and cul pa bil ity are equiv alent; cul pa bil ity and hu man ity du pli cate one an other; humanity and violence are in con tradiction. Evil, Auschwitz be ing its ab so lute para digm, would begin with the dis ap pearance of the equa tion, when the fear of fault be comes blur red: “The hand that grasps the weapon must suf fer in the very vio lence of that ges ture. To an aes the tize this pain brings the rev olu tion ary to the fron tiers of fasc ism.” 45 The drama as - so ci ated with the loss of sta tus of the guilty is thus mea sured along side the ba nal ity of the act it leads to. In other words, the Ho lo caust would have been im pos si ble, in sin u ated Lévinas, if a solid sense of guilt had pre vailed.

Such a phi los o phy con ju gates a na tur al ism and an ex trem e con servatism on the level of polit ical leg it im acy. First, hu man sol i dar ity be comes the con se quence of a hos tile na ture that, left to it self, can not rec og nize the face of the Other in the full ness of its mean ing. The shar ing of guilt makes it nec es sary that each take upon him self the guilt of others. Then, in a pre modern spirit, more precisely pre liberal and prede moc ratic, an ap peal to tame hu man ity and gen tle na ture en ter into the world with the harsh words of an ex act ing God.” Here, meta phys ics cu ri ously meet up with onto logy, the op po site point to which Lévinas was lead ing. Lévinas’ pat tern is only held to gether, in fact, by spe cu la tion on the fi nal sense of any Being, despite the criticism he formulated against that type of dis course. His thought, however im preg nated with con cern for the stranger and his vul ner a bility, seems lim ited in its ac com plish ment by three bor rowed ideas: 1) A Hob bes ian ism which depicts an un rea son a ble hu man be ing ab in itio to whom spir i tu al ism ab so lut i sm must serve as pa li ative: Ju da ism is the lan guage of its Levi a than. 2) A Heg el ism that man i fests it self, in Lévinas, by the ex tra di tion of the power of the spirit to wards that of alterity, in which real con science be comes re spon sibility and not iden ti ty; ethics is the in stru ment of its rea son. 3) A

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Freudianism that sup ports at once the con cep tual iza tion of a rupture, of an origin al wound, even a traumatization, and the for mu la tion of a “struc ture of De sire” for the Other: the in fi nite is the uto pia of this at trac tion. The Ho locaus t failed in its at tempt to fuse the ab so lute, ethics, and the in finite. And the suf fer ing it caused bears wit ness to our fail ure in reg u lat ing hu man con duct. It serves to call upon mes sianic jus tice: “the Mes siah will come when the world is wholly guilty.”

Suf fer ing and Sal va tion
Suf fer ing al lows us, ac cord ing Lévinas, to ex pe ri ence the heav i ness of the body, and to live the call for its de liver ance. Ac cord ing to him, its ped a gogy is that which breaks through the opac ity of ex is tence, with draws all sub stance from the sub ject, and shel ters the word of a help ful lan guage. Per secu tion gives rise to the emer gence of an ex cep tional vi sion of the in suf fi ciency of being alone, and man i fests a con tra rio the ba sic pre cept of all mo ral ity, that is to pro hibit kill ing. That is where ac com plished the re deem ing vir tue of suf fer ing, that which gives the op por tu nity to have an “extreme con sci ence” by be long ing to the most un for tu nate peo ple on earth. Ju da ism is the fra gil ity of Be ing; weakness ap pears to be in her ent in the Jew ish con di tion, a pathos which vouches for the sense of pre car i ous ness of the ephem eral. “The ul ti mate es sence of Is rael, de rives from the sense of pre car i ous ness of the ephem eral.”

Par don stip u lates the prin ci ple of virtual re vers ibil ity of the act, the pos si bil ity to have as if it had never hap pened. It con si ders suf fer ing as proof of Be ing; weak ness ap pears to be inherent in the Jew ish con di tion, a pathos which vouches for the sense of pre car i ous ness of the ephem eral. “The ul ti mate es sence of Is rael, de rives from the sense of pre car i ous ness of the ephem eral.”

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Ex pi a tion for oth ers, the ba sis of Chris tian doc trine, frus trates Lévinas for rea sons that en light en and limit his think ing. The fact that Christ came to live among men to atone for the orig i nal sin does not hold to gether in his phi losophy, since the syn thesis of trinity, re cov ered by Hegel, holds out the pros per of an em pi rical to tal ity that in ev i ta bly con tra dicts the prin ci ple of jus tice. From his point of view, only the vic tim has the right to dis pose of the Lévinas and the Ho locaus t
outrage, and vulnerability authorizes a judgment otherwise forbidden to all who did not suffer the affliction in flesh. “The sin committed against man can be pardoned only by the man who has suffered by it.”⁴⁴ Thus, genuine responsibility manifests itself in justice through the will of identification towards the legitimacy of the victim, conferred as an ontological experience, by suffering as a way to salvation.

Reconstruction of a system of meaning around the victim as ex tem speaker, in the case of genocide, takes place on the basis of three main lines of reference that cross Lévinasian thinking and recall the categories of classical philosophy. 1) A privileged subjectivity reappears in the notion of victim; the heteronomy of man and the altruism of his destraitment here cede to the “full autonomy of the hu man who is of fended.”⁴⁵ In Lévinas, the idea of election, of a “chosen people,” corresponds to the special status conferred to the mis for tune of having endured his story as victims. In other words, the subject has no rights, except he who lives in pain. At the very outside, the more one suffers, the more one exists, the more likely one is to become just: “The just man who suffers is worthy not because of his justice, which derives suffering.”⁴⁶ In this way, all responsible justice must be carried by Judaism: “a Jew is accountable and responsible for the whole efficacy of creation.”⁴⁷ There is the “last man” who stands up in front of all humanity and dictates its will to power.

2) An objectivity of reference surfaces out of an ontological language. Being no longer exists, suggests Lévinas, but Judaism could still salvage it in order to re-establish it in Jerusalem, and no longer in Athens. The world has a renewed interest, and it would suffice to abandon oneself to it in a manner far more suave than that which has pre vailed until now: “Judaism has the conscious ness to possess, through its per ma nence, a func tion in the general economy of Being. No one can re place it. Some one has to exist in the world who is as old as the world.”⁴⁸ Circularity and reflexivity complement each other here in con science.

3) A messianic becoming ties the subject to the object; it passes through the historical destiny of the State of Israel, which “achieves the return of the possibility of an abrogation.”⁴⁹ The realm of ends is then in car nated in Jerusalem where a son of the State forms an alliance with the Sacred to re as sure the Prince and God in one and the same operation. “The State of Israel will be religious because of the intelligence of its great books which is not free to for get. It will be religious through the very action that establishes it as a State. It will be religious or it will not be at all.”⁵⁰ The Torah will thus become the code of obedience, and the guar anty of servility of the people. It will give power an authority of divine right, will justify, if need be, suffering as an exceptional experience, and will confer to the law the attributes of mystery by eliminating any criticism against it. At the same time, the definition of a Lévinasian ideal type responsibility, while it reminds us of the limits of reductionism, particularly materialist, does not allow to open up onto a formulation of a deontological frame work for contemporary society. For social secularization and pluralism make, in fact, unthinkable the prescription of duty and rules on the basis of any messianism bound to a particular faith.

In conclusion, his reconstruction of a system of meaning around the theme of responsibility towards the victim leads to the same aporias as those Levinas denounces: subjectivity (reflexive) of the victim laid down as example before universal guilt, objectivity (ontological) of suffering as an experience of the revelation of being, messianism as legitimacy of the State of Israel before God and men. Lévinas’ line of argument ties the possibility of a responsible justice to the Jewish will to power, as if their millenarian weakness should finally open up onto the reign of their pre dominance. And yet, in the same manner as Kipling wrote in the last century, that “civilization is a road,” Lévinas in the verses that just tice is a faith first. And certainly not any faith; his faith, that of triumphant Judaism. The decentering movement, so dear to the French philosopher, reaches its climax with Judeo-centerism and turns against its original ambition. Reflexivity of the victim, the Jew, means to appropriate the virtues of Athens, but to live the experience in Jerusalem. After all, Ulysses was unable to rise to the veritable experience of alterity, and to derive an appropriate pedagogy from it. He
must have been obsessed by an overly proud civilization in which reflectional ways means a re turn to the Self, in which no one knows the limits of a thought shut off from the world, in which all have forgotten that another conception of humanity exists, over there, on the far shore of the Mediterranean. Here is proof: “Perhaps the dog that recognized Ulysses beneath his disguise on his return from the Odyssey was a forebear of our own. But no, no! There, they were in Ithaca and the Father land. Here, we were nowhere. This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives. He was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt. And his friendly growling, his animal faith, was born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile.”

ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., p. 10.


4. Difficult Freedom, pp. 7–8. The author showed himself more acerbic in the following passage: “In this world without speech” in which “we recognize the West. From Socrates to Hegel, it moved towards the ideal of language. . . . At the end point of this itinerary, the speaking man feels part of a dis course that speaks itself. . . . We have a closed language, and a civilization composed of aphasias. . . . If in coherent speech has lost its speech. From this point on, there is no longer any word that has the authority nec es sary to announce to the world the end of its own de cline” (ibid., p. 207).


7. According to the title of an article by Lévinas in Revue de métaphysique et de morale, January 1951. The work was reproduced from the first chapter of Entre nous: Thinking-of-the-Other, pp. 1–11.


9. Ibid., p. 10.

10. Ibid., p. 6.

11. Ibid., p. 100.

12. Ibid., p. 137.

13. “I am thinking,” wrote Lévinas, “of one prescient current in modern thought, which emerged from Germany to flood the pagan recesses of our Western souls. I am thinking of Heidegger and Heideggerians. One would like man to rediscover the world. Men will lose the world. They will know only that chance stands before them, put for ward in some way as an object to their freedom. They will know only objects” (ibid., p. 231).

14. Ibid., p. 17. He adds in significant fashion: “Free dom with regard to the sedimentary forms of existence is, perhaps, the human way to be in this world. For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an im por tant aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges” that matter (ibid., p. 23).

15. Ibid., p. 274.

16. Ibid., p. 16.


24. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1997), pp. 7–8. This article was written in 1934 after the accession to power of Adolf Hitler and was published in 1990 as “Re fl ections on the Phil os o phy of Hit lerism,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Fall 1990). On the occasion of this new publication, Lévinas wrote a short post-scriptum, for the French re-edition, in which he radicalized the relation he had established between Hitlerism and philosophy.


27. On the question of the “presence and the memory of the Nazi horror,” Lévinas made this declaration in an autobiographical text entitled “Signature” at the end of *Difficult Freedom*, p. 291. The premonition had already been explicitly expressed in “Re fl ections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” while the memory transpires throughout the work of the thinker on the secularization of Judaism. Whereas the idea of “the revolt of Nature against Supernature” is, of course, from Lévinas, and quoted by Miguel Abensour in the esey that follows “Re fl ections on the Phil os o phy of Hitlerism” (p. 36f., quoted according to the French original).


29. Ibid., p. 147.

30. Ibid., p. 35.

31. Ibid., p. 16.

32. Ibid., p. 155.


36. Emmanuel Lévinas wrote on this point in *Difficult Freedom*: “The phenomenology of the relation with the Other suggests this structure of Desire analyzed as an idea of the Infinite” (p. 294). There is also in him an association between the sacred and the theme of fear, of worry (see: ibid., p. 101).

37. Ibid., p. 77.

38. Ibid., p. 225.

39. Ibid., p. 159. “God is real and concrete not through incarnation but through Law” (ibid., p. 145). On the theme of incarnation, see Lucien Richard’s article from which come many of our remarks on this point.


41. Ibid., p. 54.

42. Ibid., p. 20.

43. Ibid., p. 141.44. Ibid., p. 51.

45. Ibid., p. 166.

46. Ibid., p. 224.

47. Ibid., p. 219.


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