

**GOD, RELIGION, ATHEISM AND IDOLATRY · INTERPRETING SOME  
RELIGIOUS THEMES IN LEVINAS'S ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY**

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**A Dissertation**

**Presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of San Carlos  
Cebu City, Philippines**

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**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN PHILOSOPHY**

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**by**

**RYAN C URBANO**

**May 2010**

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**The researcher is a recipient of the Dissertation Grant  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Writing a dissertation is a difficult and tedious task. Sometimes one gets the impression that finishing the task seems impossible. Were it not for the constant prodding and encouragement of some significant people, this dissertation would have seen the light of day. For this I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my adviser Bro. Romualdo Abulad, SVD, for his patience and guidance. He not only read all the drafts but he had also corrected and improved the writing of my dissertation as well as clarified certain issues in my work which to his mind needed elucidation.

I would like to thank all my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy, University of San Carlos for their unwavering support so that I will finally be able to complete this dissertation.

My heartfelt thanks also go to the members of the panel: Fr. Ramon Echica, STD, Dr. Rosario M. Espina; Fr. Heinz Kuluke, SVD, PhD; and Dr. Amosa Velez. Their valuable comments and suggestions have greatly improved and enhanced the quality of my dissertation.

I have greatly benefited from the wisdom of the following scholars who generously gave me a copy of their work on Levinas and phenomenology: Jeffrey Bloechl, Jeffrey L. Kosky, James Richard Mensch, Michael Purcell, Jeffrey Robbins, Michael B. Smith, Steven G. Smith, and Andrius Valevicius. Had it not been for their respective works, I would not have been able to understand the difficult philosophy of Levinas. Their generosity is not only matched by their scholarship but it also exemplifies Levinas's notion of infinite responsibility for the destitute Other.

For financial support, I would like to acknowledge the Commission on Higher Education for granting me a dissertation grant and the University of San Carlos for relieving me of some of my teaching responsibilities through deloading.

Finally, my work was accomplished through the inspiration and love showed to me by my family. I am deeply indebted to my wife Raray and my three children: Francis, Karl, and Ryan Emmanuel, for putting up with me and for the unfailing support and understanding while I was writing my dissertation.

## ABSTRACT

The study explores the depth and the richness of the ethical and religious philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. It particularly examines his thoughts on God, religion, atheism, and idolatry in order to highlight his significance in an age known as postmodern, generally characterized as secular and even godless. This study has also ventured to explicate how Levinas's thoughts on religion can help address contemporary issues on religious pluralism, fundamentalism and dialogue.

The dissertation has three important parts. The first part begins with Levinas's phenomenological background and proceeds to elaborate Levinas's notion of the self as fundamentally enjoyment, self-enclosed and hence, egoistic. The self in this initial state is atheistic. This is a natural and innocent atheism wherein the self is oblivious to the presence of the Other. But once this egoism is exposed to the presence of the Other, the self is awakened to his responsibility which is to serve and care for the Other. The Other pierces through the self's sensibility which makes this contact primordial ethical. This ethical encounter provokes responsibility in the self and the self is called to respond to the Other even before it can reject this obligation. For Levinas, the true life is not self-responsibility but in the self's assumption of his ethical obligation to and for the Other.

The second part discusses Levinas's claim that God is glimpsed in the ethical experience. Ethics provides an opening and a clearing where the trace of God can be discerned. For Levinas, God is revealed as a trace through the face of the Other to whom the self is called to serve and love. But this openness to the revelation of God is preconditioned by the self's initial atheism. The self is first atheistic before God can be glimpsed in the face of the Other. Levinas names the self's ethical relationship with the Other as religion. According to Levinas, there is no direct relationship with God because God can only be approached through the responsibility with the Other. He is critical of the notion of religion as the 'sacred' because believers are cast in a situation where they are under the spell of some irresistible and magical power. This notion of religion diverts the adherent's attention away from his responsibility for the Other and undermines God's holiness and transcendence. Moreover, Levinas considers religion that promotes the sacred a form of idolatry because God is replaced with a sacred object.

Levinas rejects rational theology because it thematizes God and reduces Him to a mere concept. Rational theology for Levinas is a manifestation of the philosophy of the Same which, he claims, dissolves transcendence into immanence. In this type of theology, God becomes a mere idea and this leads to a kind of conceptual idolatry. Levinas also rejects mystical theology because this will lead to a union between God and man which obscures their independence. Both rational and mystical theology weakens, if not destroys, God's transcendence and these two approaches presuppose that God can be accessed other than one's ethical responsibility for the Other.

Finally, the third part of the study applies Levinas's ethics of responsibility to interreligious dialogue. For Levinas, the ethical encounter is a peaceful meeting which conditions dialogue. Dialogue occurs when one is open to and receptive of the Other.

When this openness and receptivity is appropriated into interfaith dialogue, this means that the aim of the dialogue is not to convince, convert or even impose on the Other what one believes. Rather, the aim is to respect the Other's difference and unique faith experience. Only then can there be mutual understanding, mutual enrichment of each other's faith, and mutual collaboration for noble causes such as the promotion of world peace and justice, poverty eradication, environmental sustainability and protection, human rights advocacy and women empowerment. In interfaith dialogue, the proximity of the participants must not be reduced into a kind of universalism that eliminates the particular and unique identity of the participants. Otherwise fundamentalism and violence sets in. Fundamentalism then can be viewed as a reaction to an oppressive condition caused by universalism and totalizing systems of thought. It precludes dialogue because openness to the Other is no longer possible. As a result, understanding the Other will not be realized.

Levinas cautions that although dialogue thwarts violence, dialogue should not be pursued unilaterally and vigorously because this could lead to the same violence. The abolition of violence, which is the very aim at which the dialogue is pursued, could turn and also become violent if persuasive discourse is not held in check. It is for this reason that vigilance and caution must be borne in mind so that dialogue may not lapse into hostility and aggression. Thus, it is important to respect differences and acknowledge insoluble problems so that dialogue may not erupt into violence. Without this respect and recognition, dialogue becomes adversarial and antagonistic thereby giving way to animosity, antagonism, enmity and hatred.

For Levinas, interfaith dialogue may fail if it is merely construed as a cognitive encounter where one makes only an effort to know and understand the other's religion. Knowledge tends to assimilate and dominate the Other. Though this is inevitable, its influence on one's thinking and adverse impact on the Other can be minimized if at the sensitive level of encounter, one takes up the responsibility that the Other has placed on one's shoulder. Prior to one's cognitive encounter with the Other, one is already burdened by the responsibility to respect and uphold the Other's welfare. Responsibility for the Other precedes understanding the Other. The ethical encounter comes first before knowledge of the Other. The more primordial encounter occurs at the level of sensibility. Understanding others who have a different religion comes later. It is in the primordial encounter that genuine dialogue can occur and proceed.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

		PAGE
	APPROVAL SHEET	ii
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
	ABSTRACT	iv
	CHAPTER	
ONE	<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	
	Rationale of the Study	1
	Theoretical Background	9
	The Problem	19
	Statement of the Problem	19
	Significance of the Study	20
	Scope and Limitation	22
	Methodology	24
	Definition of Terms	25
	Organization of the Study	28
TWO	<b>ETHICS AS OPTICS OF THE DIVINE</b>	30
	Levinas's Phenomenological Background	33
	Levinas's Interpretation of Husserlian Phenomenology	35
	Levinas's Interpretation of Heideggerian Phenomenology	44
	Beyond Mainstream Phenomenology	50
	Western Philosophy's Hegemonic Stature	53
	Being without beings The "There is"	62

	From Anonymous Being to being: The Separated Ego or Self	67
	Subjectivity and the Face of the Other: Responsibility to-and-for-the-Other	80
	Ethics as Critique of the Freedom and Hegemony of the Self	81
	Exposure	84
	The Face of the Other	86
	Election and Passivity	91
	Subjectivity and Substitution	95
	Skepticism	109
	The Third Party	111
	Conclusion Ethics as Beyond Nature or Ontology and Towards God	113
<b>THREE</b>	<b>ADIEU: APPROACHING THE DIVINE</b>	119
	Ontotheology and The Death of God	122
	On Idolatry and Religion	136
	Atheism	143
	On God and Transcendence	148
	Conclusion	152
<b>FOUR</b>	<b>LEVINAS AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE</b>	155
	Interfaith Dialogue as Moral Imperative	155
	Meaning and Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue	159
	Three Main Approaches to the Diversity of Religions	161
	Conditions for the Possibility of Interfaith Dialogue	165
	Conclusion	181
<b>FIVE</b>	<b>SUMMARY</b>	183
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	200



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Rationale of the Study

Man, in the deepest recesses of his soul, desires God<sup>1</sup> He is *homo religiosus* This claim is in part buttressed by the fact that behind every human civilization there lies a religion The great philosopher-theologian of the medieval period, St Augustine of Hippo (354-430), put it nicely when, with regard to man's deepest longing for the Infinite, he said that man's heart cannot be at rest until it finds repose and solace in God<sup>2</sup> Max Scheler (1874-1928), a prominent German philosopher, contends that man cannot escape from the "essential endowment" of his nature to yearn for a transcendent Being That is why he argues that the problem of religion is not whether God exists or not but whether the object of man's desire is truly God or merely an idol Hence,

the correct way of dispelling 'unbelief' is not that of guiding man to the idea and reality of God by arguments external to his personal condition (whether by 'proofs' or by persuasion) but that of showing him invincibly that he has installed a finite good in place of God, *ie* that within the objective sphere of the absolute, which he 'has' at all events as a sphere, he has, in our sense, 'deified' a particular good— or 'become enamoured' of it, as the ancient mystics would have said<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Levinas, this *desire* for God is provoked, enkindled and deepened by the face of the human Other This desire, however, cannot be understood as *need* that can be fulfilled for it seeks the infinite and the absolute The desire aroused by the Other translates into a task, an obligation that the self must bear upon himself in order to promote the welfare of the Other This desire is *religious* How this desire is awakened by the Other will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters

<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St Augustine*, trans John K. Ryan (New York: Image, 1960), Bk 1, Chap 1, 43

<sup>3</sup> Max Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans Bernard Noble (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 267

Paul Tillich (1886-1965), also a brilliant German thinker-theologian, considers religion as the *ultimate concern* which pervades all aspects of man's life. Every human enterprise or passion, as manifested in the search for truth, beauty, and goodness, expresses this ultimate concern. Religion is presupposed in all human undertakings. It is "the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit,"<sup>4</sup> the integrating center of man's personal life that gives direction and unity to all other concerns. Hence, for Tillich, there is no man without an ultimate concern.

The whole history of Western philosophy has always dealt with the problem of God. The existence (or non-existence), nature and attributes of God have always been the subject of an intense and passionate discussion of many philosophers since the dawn of philosophy. It even came to a point that the search for wisdom, truth, ultimate reality, essence, substance and Being became equated with the search for God. Ancient Greek philosophy, for instance, viewed God as perfect and thus represented the summit in the hierarchy of beings. Medieval philosophy, employing philosophical categories borrowed from the Greeks, advanced the idea that God is not only the most perfect and the highest kind of Being, but He is also the Uncaused Cause or Creator of all things. Even in Modern philosophy, God plays a major role in the understanding of reality albeit with frequent attacks from atheists, skeptics and agnostics. What is known as Metaphysics or Ontology, which is the highest in the ladder of disciplines, is at the back of every thinker's mind every time he attempts to explain reality or Being. Almost always God is

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 7

identified as Being and serves as the ultimate ground of all things<sup>5</sup> This means that everything can be explained and understood in relation to God The God of classical theism, according to Tillich, has become a being among and beside other beings, which, though the most important part, is now subsumed under a metaphysical totality.<sup>6</sup> This is what the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) calls onto-theo-logical thinking<sup>7</sup>

Philosophical thinking, according to Heidegger, has so far been characterized as ontotheological This thinking has been largely responsible for the ills and problems of contemporary man Man has so immersed himself in this manner of thinking that he forgets about Being Instead of giving attention to the thinking of Being, man has been lost in the thinking of beings He has drowned himself in the sea of particular things oblivious to the call of Being The death of God, which finds its greatest resonance in the philosophy of Nietzsche, is the consequence of this forgetfulness of Being Scores of philosophers who have heard of Nietzsche, generally called postmodern, endeavor to save mankind from the shock and nihilism that this proclamation engenders The subject of God and religion is not spared from this challenge

How is God now to be understood in the wake of ontotheological thinking? In the event of the end of metaphysics, how must a man grapple with the reality of the meaninglessness of a religion he once embraced? Is it enough to talk about God in a

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<sup>5</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Illinois Northwestern University Press, 1997), 10

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, Connecticut Yale University Press, 1952), 184

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans Joan Stambaugh (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42-74

language that is “otherwise than Being?” There are myriad ways of understanding God in the postmodern era. But it seems that all this “God-talk” ends up with the same claims, which these theologies reject. The attempt to correlate faith and reason ultimately fails for the latter always gets the better of the former. In the end, theology is subject to the limitation of philosophy. Philosophical language reduces faith to its own standards, to the categories and structures of reason. As a consequence, faith is no longer lived but is undermined and atrophied by a kind of speculative discourse lost in abstraction.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), a very important philosopher of this age, offers a conception of God, which evades the trappings of metaphysical language. He proposes a notion of God not grounded in ontology but one which has its basis in an ethics of the face-to-face, an ethics beyond the framework of a totalizing Western philosophy. His monumental work in this regard will certainly change the direction of religion.<sup>8</sup> In fact, there are already published works by established philosophers and theologians applying the insights of Levinas in this area.<sup>9</sup> It is needless to enumerate them here but one can

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<sup>8</sup> At this early point of this study, it must already be noted that the idea of religion for Levinas is inseparable from ethics. God, for him, is an invisible image who can only be approached through an asymmetrical relationship of the self to the Other. Religion, as he defines it, is “the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 40.

<sup>9</sup> In spite of his Jewish background, Levinas has attracted many Christian thinkers from Holland, Belgium, France, the United States, Italy, and South America. See Adriaan Peperzak, “The Significance of Levinas’s Work for Christian Thought,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 184. Morrison, in his doctoral dissertation, enumerates some of the authors engaged in applying Levinas’s thought to religion and theology. They are Michael Purcell, Adriaan Peperzak, Graham Ward, David Ford, Michael Barnes, Paul Ricoeur, Marie Baird, Terry Veiting, Stephen Curkpatrick, Roger Burggraeve, Stephen Webb, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion, Robyn Horner, Richard Kearney, and Michele Saracino. See Glenn Morrison, “Levinas, Von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis,” Ph.D. dissertation (Australian Catholic University, August 2004), 13-14. The researcher would like to add the following names of authors who are inspired by and also engaged, to a certain extent, in developing, commenting and criticizing Levinas’s thought on and in relation to religion and theology (either in Christianity or Judaism): Jeffrey Bloechl, Jeffrey Kosky, Steven G. Smith, Richard Cohen, John Caputo, Jacques Derrida, Andreas Valevicius, Edith Wyschogrod, Hent de Vries, Jeffrey Robbins, Robert Gibbs, Enrique Dussel, James Mensch, James Faulconer, Bettina Bergo, Michael B. Smith, Hilary Putnam, Catherine Chaliel, Paul

see the influence that Levinas has on their thinking. Interestingly, the late Pope John Paul II alluded a few times in his *Crossing The Threshold of Hope* to Levinas's insights. In this work, John Paul II calls Levinas, together with Paul Ricoeur (1931-2003) as one of the thinkers in contemporary hermeneutics who "presents the truth about man and the world from new angles."<sup>10</sup> He also names him as one "who represents a particular school of contemporary *personalism* and of the *philosophy of dialogue*" in the likes of Martin Buber (1878-1965) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929)<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to talk about religion nowadays without seriously studying Levinas. To pass over his conception of religion would be to miss a philosopher who has contributed a lot in changing the philosophical landscape in general and the texture of ethical and religious studies in particular.<sup>12</sup> If one reads the recent literature in philosophy Levinas can hardly be left unnoticed. This only goes to show that his philosophy cannot be dismissed and overlooked.<sup>13</sup> His reputation as an original thinker is already assured in the history of philosophy, just like Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

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Davies, Richard J. Bernstein, Jill Robbins, Frans Josef Van Beeck, G. Rose, Robert Bernasconi, Maurice Friedman, Jacob Meskin, Gary Mole, Merold Westphal, Rudi Visker and Theo de Boer. This list is not complete and there are still others whom the researcher may not have encountered in his readings.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, translated from the Italian by Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (London: Jonathan Cape, Random House, 1994), 35.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida writes, "Emmanuel Levinas slowly displaced, slowly bent according to an inflexible and simple exigency, the axis, the trajectory, and even the order of phenomenology or ontology that he had introduced into France beginning in 1930. Once again, he completely changed the landscape without landscape of thought, he did so in a dignified way, without polemic, at once from within, faithfully, and from very far away, from the attestation of a completely other place." Elsewhere he also says, "His thought remains an inspiration or a horizon." Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 11-12 and 16.

<sup>13</sup> Critchley writes "For good or ill, Levinas has become an obligatory reference point in theoretical discussions across a whole range of disciplines: philosophy, theology, Jewish studies, aesthetics and art theory, social and political theory, international relations theory, pedagogy, psychotherapy and counseling, and nursing and medical practice." Simon Critchley, "Introduction," *The Cambridge*

The religious themes in the ethical philosophy of Levinas are the expository subject of this study. It will explore Levinas's novel insights on God, religion, atheism and idolatry, and endeavor to show how these views can help contemporary man renew his interest in or even embrace religion with fervor and commitment. This study also endeavors to explicate how Levinas's thoughts on religion can help address the problem of religious pluralism and dialogue in the postmodern age. Such tasks seem daunting especially after so much discussion on the death of God, not to mention the surging discomfort and uneasiness brought about by religious fundamentalism. Can religion still be a source of meaning and direction when reason itself fails to provide an adequate explanation about a faith that has now gone stale? How can religion relate with an-*other* religion? These are the challenges posed to any thinker who wishes to propound a religious philosophy. And Levinas, this researcher believes, is one of the pioneers who try to respond to these challenges.

All of Levinas's thoughts are geared towards an exposition of the meaning of religion after the "holocaust." The history of man, including his thoughts, is fraught with violence and wars. "The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy. Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves."<sup>14</sup> Now Levinas wants to end this folly by offering a philosophy that gives priority to ethics over ontology, responsibility over freedom, and love over wisdom. The radicality of his philosophy

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*Companion to Levinas*, edited by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5. A similar remark is also made by Colin Davis in a book published earlier. See Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21. See also his *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 56.

seeks to traumatize the reader, jolt him from his slumber and prompt him to leave the comfort of his home and reach out to his neighbor and to any stranger with infinite love and responsibility. In this way the evil consequences of a philosophy that assimilates the Other (another person) to the Same (the ego) is avoided or at least minimized.

But all these verbalizations of an ethical thought are nothing but an expression of a religious philosophy that Levinas proposes. Derrida said that Levinas, in one of his intimate conversations with him, told him that everything of his (Levinas's) thoughts are really about religion of which ethics is the locus and concrete manifestation.<sup>15</sup> The patient reader of his writings is slowly and gradually led to a path that commences with an unwavering responsibility to a neighbor and culminates in an idea of a Wholly Other.<sup>16</sup> Levinas writes "the idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me— or my relation to God— comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other man, in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbor."<sup>17</sup> This will explain in a way why Levinas is not ashamed to talk about God when churches, as Nietzsche would say, have become "the tombs and sepulchers of God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Levinas says to Derrida, "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy." In Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Kosky contends that Levinas does not only offer an ethical philosophy in a philosophical climate known as postmodernism perceived to be indifferent to morality and religion but his claim that "ethics is first philosophy" is "the point of entry for illuminating the relation between the ethical and religious in Levinas's thought." "My thesis," Kosky writes, "is thus *the analysis of responsibility opens onto a philosophical articulation of religious notions and thus makes possible something like a philosophy of religion*." Jeffrey Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), xviii-xix.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), xiv.

<sup>18</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), sec. 125, 181-182.

One wonders whether it is possible to speak legitimately of God without striking a blow against the absoluteness [*absolute*] that this word seems to signify. What is to have become conscious of God? Is it to have included him in a knowledge [*savoir*] which assimilates him, in an experience that remains—whatever its modalities—a learning and a grasping? And is not the infinity or total alterity or novelty of the absolute thus given back to immanence, back to the totality which the “I think” of “transcendental apperception” embraces, back to the system to which knowledge leads or tends across history? Is not the meaning of this extraordinary name of God in our vocabularies contradicted by this inevitable restitution to immanence—to the point of belying the coherence of this sovereign signifying [*signifier*] and reducing its name to a pure *flatus vocis*?<sup>19</sup>

Though the name God offends many hearers, Levinas maintains that it is still possible to talk about God not within the set-up of ontological ratiocination but in a thought that acknowledges that which exceeds or surpasses it, a thought which does not contain or reduce the Infinite to the economy of a monadic ego. The God that can be encompassed by thought is no longer the real God which man’s heart firmly believes in. For Levinas, the best possible way of talking about God nowadays, especially in this age of suffering and escalating violence, is to engage in an ethical relationship with the neighbor, with the stranger, and with the suffering Other. And the reason why this researcher pursues a study of Levinas’s religious philosophy is because of its aptness and relevance to respond and remedy today’s problems and vicissitudes. What is strikingly interesting in his thought, especially his religious philosophy, is that he offers a religion of peace, tolerance, brotherhood and service to fellowmen.<sup>20</sup> Levinas’s religious insights, in other words, are neither different from nor indifferent to ethics and politics.

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, xii

<sup>20</sup> Burggraeve, a student and close friend of Levinas, said, “The whole of Levinas’ thinking can be interpreted as an immense effort to bring to light the roots of violence and racism, and as an attempt to overcome this in principle by *thinking otherwise*.” Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, trans Jeffrey Bloechl (Milwaukee Marquette University Press, 2002), 28. Levinas even wrote that his life is dominated by “the memory of the



### Theoretical Background

The researcher must confess that in his study of Levinas's ethical philosophy, he is mapping a terrain which has already been traversed by other scholars who have been intrigued, inspired, awakened, enlightened and challenged by this French Jewish philosopher. Quite a number of studies, either in books, journals, theses and dissertations, have already been devoted to the study of Levinas's philosophy of religion. Still, however numerous have been the Levinasian studies of religion, this researcher embarks on a similar study for personal and philosophical reasons. On the personal level, this researcher has always been interested in and fascinated by the study of God and religion. Through his study, he is able to understand better other people's worldviews, characters, attitudes, values and goals, which constitute their culture as a whole. Undertaking this study is thus also a part of this researcher's spiritual odyssey.

On the philosophical level, no serious thinker of the postmodern age can ignore Levinas's philosophy.<sup>21</sup> As already stated, Levinas's philosophy has changed the landscape of Western thought without its being grounded in a fixed philosophical base. He transgresses the ontic (being) and ontological (Being) difference which has been marked by violence and has obscured the primacy of ethical relation. What Levinas offers is a type of thinking that de-centers the hegemonic subject and acknowledges the radical

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Nazi horror" Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 291. If such a memory greatly affected Levinas's life, then one would not be surprised why his philosophy is an attempt to eliminate violence in Western thought.

<sup>21</sup> Atterton avows that Levinas is a "key thinker in postmodernism" because he is "someone who provides an intellectual foundation for the postmodern theory, as well as providing it with an ethics that so many of its detractors have falsely accused of lacking." He says that Jacques Derrida and Jean-Francois Lyotard, two prominent proponents of postmodernism, "have found in Levinas's ethics important resources for their own respective critiques of Western reason." Peter Atterton, "Emmanuel Levinas" in *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, edited by Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoh (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 231.

otherness of the other person. He is so daring that he leaves the traditional intellectual climate in favor of a philosophy that challenges the dominance of Being or the Same without any trace of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. His boldness is what makes him so indispensable in contemporary philosophy especially in ethics and philosophy of religion. "Anyone concerned with the 'loss of meaning' in a secular age, or the encroachments of nihilism, or the threat of totalitarianism, will hear the resonant power of Levinas's effort to re-enchant love and desire, sociability and justice, piety and philosophy."<sup>22</sup> His penetrating insights are commands that bear witness to the dignity of the Other and the love and glory of God.

This study is quite different from the other studies on Levinas's philosophy of religion in that it gives special emphasis on the problem of atheism, idolatry and the possibility of man becoming god if he fails to unchain himself from the shackles of ontological thinking. It will also try to show how Levinas's notion of religion and God can help ease the problem of violence and address such issues as religious fundamentalism and pluralism.

Books, theses, dissertations and articles about Levinas's philosophy in relation to religion, politics, ethics, spirituality and theology are found in the bibliography of this study. However, only those studies which are important and relevant to this research and accessible to the researcher will be reviewed here.

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin C. Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2004), 7

Valevicius' *From the Other to the Totally Other The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*<sup>23</sup>, Kosky's *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*<sup>24</sup>, Bloechl's *Liturgy of the Neighbor Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility*<sup>25</sup> and Purcell's *Levinas and Theology*<sup>26</sup> are constant companions and references of this study aside from the main works of Levinas. Valevicius' book on Levinas is one of the pioneering works on the philosopher's religious philosophy. Valevicius argues that Levinas brings back "the question of God into philosophical debate, but without talking very much about God." He further claims that God pervades every page of Levinas's works without making it a "specific theme." Man's desire for God, he adds, is not oriented towards God Himself; rather, it is directed towards the other person. In his book, Kosky contends that Levinas's ethical metaphysics (ethics as first philosophy) helps in dispelling the negative perception that those postmodern thinkers are indifferent to ethical and religious concerns. The main thesis of Kosky's study is that Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility can be a basis for a philosophy of religion which is not founded on the dogmatic authority of faith or historical tradition. Bloechl argues in his written *opus* that one's ethical relation with another human being is also a relation with the Absolute. For Bloechl, Levinas's writings continuously develop and center round a

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<sup>23</sup> Andrius Valevicius, *From the Other to the Totally Other The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988)

<sup>24</sup> See footnote 16

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2000). The same author has assembled and edited a collection of writings on Levinas by esteemed scholars. See footnote 9.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006)

“single, strategic problem” and not round a fixed idea or perspective “of situating the finite in relation to the absolute” Purcell makes a gallant claim that for Levinas, ethics is not only first philosophy but it is also first theology. He argues that Levinas’s ethical philosophy furnishes theology a basis that begins from a reflection on ethical human affairs. If theology is to talk meaningfully about God, then it must take “its point of departure in the one who is able to receive some form of revelation” from God. Purcell adds that Levinas’s philosophy frees theology from dealing with “purely theoretical” matters and gives it the practical engagement that addresses human problems.

*God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* written by Schrag is another important reference of this study.<sup>27</sup> Schrag draws from the philosophies of Paul Tillich, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in his attempt to think and rethink God after Nietzsche’s proclamation of his “death” and Heidegger’s “end of metaphysics.” Starting from his elucidation of the traditional theistic conception of God in terms of Being, Schrag proceeds to show how this traditional conception inevitably leads to atheism. He then offers an alternative understanding of God as otherwise than Being by moving from ontology to ethics and from “ethics towards a grammar of the gift beyond the economy of exchange and return.”

Peperzak explicates various aspects of Levinas’s thoughts in his superbly incisive books *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Levinas*<sup>28</sup> and *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*.<sup>29</sup> In the former, the author makes a substantial

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<sup>27</sup> Calvin Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Towards a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Adnaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> See footnote 5.

exposition of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* as well as the key themes in *Otherwise Than Being*. The latter has two chapters explicating Levinas's notion of God as Transcendence who cannot be reached by phenomenology. Although man desires and is drawn by the ultimate, God cannot be the means and summit of man's self-realization. This desire for God is insatiable and yet it intensifies this desire, prompting man to go out of his enclosure and orienting him towards the Other.

Davis's work *Levinas: An Introduction*<sup>30</sup> and Hutchen's engaging piece *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*<sup>31</sup> are also consulted. Chapter four of Davis's prefatorial yet magnificent work explores religious themes in Levinas's philosophical texts, discusses his conception of Judaism, and explains how Levinas's understanding of Judaism, ethics, language and philosophy are intertwined in his interest in the Talmud. Hutchen's very fine but critical piece carries a chapter entitled 'God and Atheism.' In that chapter, he reads Levinas as one who views atheism as permeating human existence. Atheism, according to him, preconditions the human approach to the Divine.

The book of Jeffrey Robbins entitled *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* interestingly takes up the problem of philosophy and theology as conjoined in ontotheology.<sup>32</sup> God-talk is a theme common to both philosophy and theology. But this God-talk becomes unavoidably problematic for both. On the one hand, from the point of view of philosophy, thought must be freed from the dogma of faith if it is to think freely and arrive at the truth. However this attempt ends up with

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<sup>30</sup> See footnote 13

<sup>31</sup> See footnote 22

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003)

identifying truth with the concept of God, which is the very thing to be avoided. In this case, philosophy becomes theology. On the other hand, theology seeks to explain the meaning of God and revelation in order to make faith secure. But in doing so God is reduced into something finite, a being among other beings, thus, theology is transformed into ontology. For Robbins, the ontotheological problem, encountered in both philosophy and theology, is not something to be overcome because to do so would not resolve the issue but would only fall into the same trap one has sought to overcome. What he proposes, employing Levinas's strategy, is to think otherwise than overcoming. Ontotheology must be understood as a condition of thought and being where both theology and philosophy could redirect their focus to a critical, creative and responsible engagement with the world, which is their most urgent task.

There are books which compare Levinas's philosophical thought to other prominent thinkers. For example, his thought has been compared with the philosophies of Theodor W. Adorno, Jacques Lacan and Franz Rosenzweig. De Vries' book entitled *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*<sup>33</sup> explores the affinities of both Adorno's and Levinas's critical appraisal of traditional metaphysical and theological concepts. In this work, Vries also attempts to cross the divide that separates faith and reason, a perennial issue that has engaged many philosophers and theologians, by proposing a minimal theology that oscillates between the insights of Adorno and Levinas and does not lapse into dogmatism and egoism on the one hand and nihilism and objectivism on the other hand. Fryer devotes a portion of his book *The*

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<sup>33</sup> Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005)

*Intervention of the Other Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*<sup>34</sup> to a detailed analysis of Levinas's important essay, "God and Philosophy" This is likewise another substantial addition to this research. Meanwhile, Cohen undertakes an incisive examination of Rosenzweig's and Levinas's innovative thoughts on the priority of the human other over other things including the self in his book *Elevations The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*<sup>35</sup> Chapter eight of this book "G-d in Levinas: the Justification of Justice and Philosophy," is another relevant reference of this study Cohen also wrote a long but enlightening essay, "Political Monotheism' Levinas on Politics, Ethics and Religion," where he explicates Levinas's notion of a just politics which is guided by morality and is serving it by being grounded in religious transcendence<sup>36</sup> Levinas's political philosophy is a type of justice utopianism where the use of coercive force is justified not by the preservation of power but by ethico-religious ends Politics based on mundane aims is doomed to fail and this leads to totalitarianism Nor can it be based on an absolutizing religion devoid of an ethics of infinite responsibility, for this will result in theocracy, a kind of religious fundamentalism which is not different from totalitarianism.

In her article, "From Knowledge to Ethics Possibility of Talking About God in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," Adorable Castillo remarks that traditional philosophical

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<sup>34</sup> David Ross Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan* (New York Other Press, 2004)

<sup>35</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago The University of Chicago Press, 1994)

<sup>36</sup> Richard A. Cohen, "Political Monotheism' Levinas on Politics, Ethics and Religion," in *Essays in Celebration of the Founding of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations*, ed Cheung, Chan -Fai, Ivan Chvatik, Ion Copearu, Lester Embree, Julia Inbarne, & Hans Rainer Sepp, web-published at [www.o-p-o.net](http://www.o-p-o.net), 2003

discourse ultimately fails to tackle the issue of Transcendence or the absolute alterity of God<sup>37</sup> This failure however is not tragic, according to her, for it signifies the triumph and the accentuation of ethics as a way of approaching God Thinking about God is only meaningful within the boundary of ethics

Edith Wyschogrod in her article, "God and 'Being's Move' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," asks how, if He resists representation, God can be a theme for a philosophical and theological language<sup>38</sup> Even the turn towards the thinking of Being is still within the purview of ontology. Being shows itself in experience and is still thematized and reduced into representation by the thought that thinks it Levinas, according to Wyschogrod, offers a language in which God is thought outside of "Being's move" This language is ethical and prescriptive rather than discursive Such language calls out the self from its natural existence as enjoyment to an endless responsibility for the Other

The search for ultimate meaning, according to George Kovacs in his article "The Question of Ultimate Meaning in Emmanuel Levinas," leads to and culminates in the notion of God<sup>39</sup> This is his reading of Levinas's ethical philosophy. He argues further that Levinas's philosophy diverges from the dominant contemporary thought characterized by metaphysical and epistemological uncertainty brought about by the eclipse of God because Levinas proffers a thought that recognizes the value and meaning of interhuman relations wherein the self is obligated to an-other self without fulfillment

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<sup>37</sup> Adorable Castillo, CICM "From Knowledge to Ethics Possibility of Talking About God in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *St Louis University Research Journal* 32 (December 2001) 1-21

<sup>38</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, "God and 'Being's Move' in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," *The Journal of Religion* 62 (April 1982) 145-155

<sup>39</sup> George Kovacs, "The Question of Ultimate Meaning in Emmanuel Levinas," *Ultimate Reading and Meaning* 14 (1991). 99-108



The other self manifests a transcendence which cannot be contained in thought, and this reveals God whose infinitude constitutes ultimate meaning

According to Michael Smith, in his paper entitled "Levinas Concept of Religion and its Relation to Judaism," Levinas understands religion as an interhuman relation unencompassed by totality<sup>40</sup> Religion is not a relation of immanence but of transcendence It is an ethical activity where the self moves to the Other to respond to the latter's destitution and vulnerability Though the self and the Other are similar, they are also different That is why their relation does not constitute a whole that assimilates the Other into itself. Levinas rejects the notion of religion where the Divine dwells in a place or object, for this notion of religion tends to undermine the interhuman relation He describes this type of religion as the sacred which is a primitive form of religion Smith looks at Levinas's philosophy and Judaism as mutually validating and enriching each other Levinas's Judaism, which stresses the intellectualist approach to the Talmud, informs, sustains and nourishes his philosophical works His philosophy gives expression to what he thinks Judaism ought to be.

Levinas's view of the sacred as that which subverts the face-to-face relation serving as the venue where the Divine leaves its trace is challenged by Sikka in her article "Questioning the Sacred Heidegger and Levinas on the Locus of Divinity"<sup>41</sup> Sikka argues, with the aid of Heidegger's conception of Being, that Levinas's opposition to the sacred implies a subtle violence which contradicts his claim to unlimited deference to the

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<sup>40</sup> Michael Smith, "Levinas's Concept of Religion and its Relation to Judaism," available from <http://ghansel.free.fr/smithjeru.html>, 8 September 2004

<sup>41</sup> Sonia Sikka, "Questioning the Sacred Heidegger and Levinas on the Locus of Divinity," *Modern Theology* 14 (July 1998) 299-323

Other In other words, according to Sikka, Levinas cannot limit the locus of the Holy or of the Divine to the interhuman relation. The Divine can also be found in nature so that the experience of beauty and the caring for nature are tantamount to the caring for man To assume infinite responsibility towards the Other means not only to promote the other's spiritual being but also to provide for his physical needs

For his part, Stephen Webb, in his article "The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas," says that Levinas's pre-theoretical ethics which is expressed in hyperbolic language can be used to shed light on some issues confronting the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity<sup>42</sup> For instance, Judaism's legalism, which is disturbing for Christianity because it sets aside morality, can be viewed as a way of correcting an ethical theory founded on self-fulfillment and autonomy. An ethics grounded on the freedom and reason of the subject tends to abandon or forget the responsibility for the Other This seems to be the kind of morality deeply entrenched in the Greek philosophy Christianity embraces But obeying God's call as embodied in the commandments (the Law or Torah) gives more priority to responsibility than to reason and freedom The Law has already elected or chosen man to be responsible for the other person (to the point of being held hostage by that person) before he can even theorize about ethics

In "Revisioning Christian Theology in Light of Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics of Responsibility," Marie Baird argues that Christian systematic theology must be revised by anchoring it on ethical responsibility rather than on the ontotheological foundations

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<sup>42</sup> Stephen Webb, "The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess A Christian Theological Response to Levinas," *Modern Theology* 15 (January 1999) 1-16

which render the individual prone to its totalizing tendency.<sup>43</sup> In this case, ethics precedes the attempt to systematically conceptualize Christianity.

The studies reviewed above in no way exhaust the literature on Levinas's philosophy as applied to religion and theology. The readers are thereby given only an overture to and impression of the importance of Levinas to contemporary studies on religion and theology.

## THE PROBLEM

### Statement of the Problem

This dissertation will delve into Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy, exploring his notion of God, religion, atheism and idolatry. It will also aim to apply Levinas's ethical and religious insights to a contemporary issue known as interfaith dialogue. Specifically, it will seek to answer the following questions:

- 1 What is the ethical philosophy of Levinas?
- 2 How are the notions of God, religion, atheism and idolatry to be understood within the context of Levinas's ethical philosophy?
- 3 What is the significance of Levinas's ethical philosophy to interfaith dialogue in the postmodern age?

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<sup>43</sup> Marie Baird, "Revisioning Christian Theology in Light of Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics of Responsibility," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 36 (Summer/Fall 1999) 340-351.

### Significance of the Study

Postmodern philosophy is always associated with the “death of God” and the “death of man”<sup>44</sup> With such a view, postmodernism is perceived by some if not by many to be a philosophy not congenial to ethics and religion But today, this seems to be no longer the case Gianni Vattimo, a contemporary Italian philosopher whose thoughts are profoundly informed by the philosophies of Nietzsche and Heidegger, claims that postmodernism facilitates the dissolution not only of the enlightenment belief in progress achievable by modern reason but also of theories purported to delete religion from modern life, namely, positivist scientism, and Hegelian and Marxist Historicism<sup>45</sup> He further maintains that this postmodern disenchantment with modernity’s abrasive critical stance against religion makes possible the return of religion nowadays<sup>46</sup> But this

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<sup>44</sup> Many postmodern scholars attribute the expression “death of man” to the French philosopher Michel Foucault See his book *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Random, 1970) The expression “death of man” is closely associated with similar expressions like the “death of the author,” the “deconstruction of the subject,” the “displacement of the ego,” and the “dissolution of self-identity” For an excellent discussion on how the human subject can now be understood while avoiding the dangers of modern philosophy and the complete dissolution of the self within the grammar of postmodernity, see Calvin Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997) Though Levinas criticizes enlightenment humanism which accentuates man’s autonomy to shape his own destiny with the powers of his reason, he does not subscribe to the postmodern notion of the “death of man” He still defends subjectivity and maintains a humanism wherein the self gives up his freedom for the sake of responsibility for the other See *Totality and Infinity*, 26, Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Richard A. Cohen (New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 27 For an elaboration and a recovery of the real meaning of humanism from Levinas’s perspective, see his *Humanism of the Other*, translated by Nidra Poller and introduction by Richard A. Cohen (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003)

<sup>45</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, translated by Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1999), 28 For his position within the current debates on the features of modernity and postmodernity, see his *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, translated with an Introduction by Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 1988)

<sup>46</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 28 For some recent literature on the renewed interest in religion in the postmodern time, see Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, editors, *Religion* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: 1998), Niels Gronkjaer, editor, *The Return of God: Theological Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy* (Denmark: Odense University Press, 1998), Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)

renewed and recent interest in morality and religion initially thought to be incompatible with the postmodern view has been largely influenced by the philosophy of Levinas who boldly claims that "ethics is first philosophy"<sup>47</sup> It is Levinas who plays a major role in dispelling this inaccurate and sweeping criticism of postmodernism and shows that it does have a place for morality and religion in its philosophical claims and assertions As William Desmond nicely puts it. "Levinas has always exhibited a spiritual seriousness that is ill repaid by the postmodern frivolity to which deconstruction is frequently prone"<sup>48</sup>

A study of Levinas will help to spur discussion on how to talk about ethics and religion in a secular and postmodern world The language and categories of traditional philosophy suffer shipwreck within the horizon of today's philosophy which is marked by intense criticism of and "incredulity toward metanarratives"<sup>49</sup> How is religion to be conceived in the face of this challenge? This is where a study of Levinas's view on religion will be useful because Levinas, while remaining steadfast in his philosophical convictions, seems nevertheless unaffected by this anxiety or euphoria over the "death of God "

This study will not presume to replace the many excellent researches conducted on Levinas's thought, particularly his philosophy of religion. What the researcher is doing cannot substitute for these scholarly and well-argued studies, more so for the works

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<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, trans Sean Hand (Oxford Blackwell, 1989), 75-87

<sup>48</sup> William Desmond, "Philosophies of Religion Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas," in *Continental Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, edited by Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 1994), 132

<sup>49</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition A Report on Knowledge*, trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1984), xxiv

of the philosopher himself. It is the researcher's hope, however, that anyone who reads this study will be inspired to study Levinas himself.

If there is any modest contribution this study will make on Levinasian scholarship, perhaps it will be the way this researcher organizes, interprets and amplifies Levinas's philosophy. As Pascal said, "Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects."<sup>50</sup> This researcher will make an effort to rearrange Levinas's words in order to explore other possible meanings of his thought and rearrange these meanings as well in order to have different effects on whoever may chance upon this study.

#### Scope and Limitation

Anyone who has to savor Levinas's philosophy needs ample time for reading and understanding his writings. The task of interpreting Levinas is strenuously difficult since his writing style is unsystematic, suggestive and repetitive, rather than expository and rigorously logical. His philosophy is elusive to thought. According to Davis,

For Levinas's readers it is treacherously difficult either to stand inside his writing and to claim with any confidence to have heard its genuine message, or to stand outside it and to examine it according to criteria which are not dictated by the texts themselves. The Levinas effect colours acts of both appropriation and criticism, in the first case Levinas appears to be more or less what we want him to be, and in the second he falls short of what we expect him only because he fails to match his own principles. Either way, Levinas is protean in the variety of forms he can adopt and in the difficulty confronting anyone who wishes to pin him down. His text may be regarded as ambiguous space in which readers encounter the Other and define themselves, or as frustratingly elusive, refusing to elaborate a clear set of ideas in

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<sup>50</sup> Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensees*, introduced by T S Eliot (New York: E P Dutton & Co, Inc., 1958), Fragment 23, 7

sober philosophical prose. And ultimately the Levinas effect mirrors the frailty and strength of the Other: the text is always available for appropriation by its reader, just as, in Levinas's account of the history of philosophy, the Other is ultimately restored to the Same; but the residual sense that, despite such appropriation, the Other or the text has not yet been fully grasped, ensures the survival of alterity and its continuing resistance to the authority of the Same.<sup>51</sup>

It would be splendid if one had an opportunity to converse with the philosopher himself, or at least with his esteemed students. A living conversation with the philosopher or even his disciples will certainly help dispel doubts and confusions in the interpretation of his works. This is always the dream of any budding scholar. Unfortunately, this researcher does not have that precious opportunity. He has access only to some of the philosopher's works and some commentaries. This is one of the limitations of his study. Another limitation would be the researcher's situation who has just begun to study Levinas and whose background in the phenomenological tradition is not well-entrenched.<sup>52</sup> But his desire, interest, hard work, patience, discipline and perseverance will make up for this lack. He intends to pursue further studies on the same philosopher even after he has defended his dissertation.

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<sup>51</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 140-141. For a thorough discussion of how Levinas is understood by his readers, see Chapter 5 (Levinas and his Readers) of this same book, 120-141. The opinion expressed here by Davis is somehow shared by Roland Paul Blum, "Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," 44 (December 1983), 146; Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond The Phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas*, xi; and Burggraefe, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 38-39. After enumerating the possible ways in which the reader may encounter difficulties in understanding Levinas in his excellent and critical study of the French thinker, Hutchens remarks that the "difficulties that the reader might encounter in ploughing intransigently through a book by Levinas are not the result of his or her own lack of sophistication, but rather in some sense an excess of sophistication on the part of the author." Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> This is the same experience Levinas encountered when he first read Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. He said "I entered into that reading, at first very difficult, with much diligence but also with much perseverance, and without guide. It was little by little that the essential truth of Husserl, which I still believe today, emerged into my mind, even if, in following his method, I do not at all obey his school's precepts." Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 29-30.

As already stated, this study will be confined to some religious themes in Levinas's ethical philosophy. It will also seek to address such issues as violence, religious fundamentalism and pluralism within the context of Levinas's philosophy. However, it will not provide a comprehensive and thorough analysis of such issues nor provide programmatic steps for their resolution. It will only provide the initial spark for the further study of these concerns in the light of Levinas's philosophy. If there is any contribution that this study hopes to bring to Levinasian study, it would be this initial step toward the application of Levinas's ethical philosophy to contemporary issues.

In trying to answer the problem of this study, the researcher will concentrate on three of Levinas's important works, namely: *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being* and *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. The philosopher's other works will also be consulted from time to time to support the essential ideas contained in the three works mentioned above.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In pursuit of the aim of this study, the researcher employs the method of textual and interpretive analysis. He will endeavor to analyze and interpret the key concepts in Levinas's philosophy and show their significance for some postmodern issues. While the method employed in this study is textual and interpretive analysis, the researcher takes cognizance of the phenomenological method which is the framework of Levinas's philosophy. To borrow his jargon, this study will *unsay* what is so far *said* about religion in order to keep its *saying* open and possible. Any attempt to understand religion and confine it to the level of the *said* would be inadequate and will invite vehement



opposition from those who view it differently. Thus it is imperative that one is vigilant in order not to fall prey to philosophical and religious dogmatism.

While this study is primarily an interpretive analysis of Levinas's ethical and religious philosophy, the ideas of other important thinkers are also brought into play in order to situate Levinas's thinking in the current debates on postmodern ethics and religion. These thinkers will serve as interlocutors as the exposition unfolds.

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

*Atheism*, as a philosophical view, is traditionally understood as the denial of God's existence. Levinas however gives it a different signification. For him, atheism means man's fundamental condition as enjoyment and being at home in the world. He also says that since Western philosophy has always been the philosophy of the Self-same, a philosophy that only highlights immanence, then it is atheistic for its failure to recognize real transcendence. He likewise claims that atheism makes possible the revelation of God.

*God is A-Dieu*. This term implies the negation of the God of philosophy which makes Him a correlate of objective thought. God, for Levinas, cannot be thought but he can only be approached through the Other.

*Idolatry* connotes a type of thinking that reduces God to Being. What Heidegger calls *onto-theo-logy* is a kind of conceptual idolatry.

*Metanarratives* are grandiose metaphysical claims purporting to have grasped and explained the true nature of reality. Postmodern thinkers however refuse to accept as final

these metaphysical claims for the simple reason that there is no one-to-one correspondence between language and reality

*Onto-theo-logy* is a term coined by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger to refer to the entire history of Western philosophy, which identifies or equates the notion of Being with God. In other words, ontology or metaphysics is nothing but a masked theology. Heidegger undermines this approach to reality or Being because it rests on the assumption that man can entirely know, through language alone, the whole of Being.

*Ontology* or *Metaphysics* is considered by classical Western philosophy as its highest discipline, or the first philosophy, because it deals with the study of reality or Being in its ultimate cause or explanation. Reality, viewed in this light, is the First Cause, Pure Act or Essence, Necessary Being, Ultimate Substance, or God. This is the kind of metaphysics which Heidegger and the postmoderns refer to as ontotheology and metanarrative, respectively.

*Other* is Levinas's term for the other self which is infinite and irreducible to the totalizing knowledge or gaze of the Same or ego.

*Phenomenology* is the method and philosophy developed by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl as his response to the crisis of European sciences (and philosophy). These sciences have undermined the freedom and dignity of a human being. Phenomenology offers a new and a more humane approach to the study of reality which links consciousness to its object, thereby avoiding the difficulties suffered by philosophers who give primacy to either the knowing subject or the object known. For Husserl, these two poles of knowledge are inseparable.

*Postmodernism* is a philosophical movement which distinguishes itself from modern philosophy. While the latter privileges the subject who represents reality in its consciousness, the former decenters the subject to avoid a philosophy that tends towards dogmatism, totalitarianism, solipsism and universalism. Postmodern philosophers are wary and critical of metaphysical claims which they consider as metanarratives. Within postmodernism are various sub-philosophies such as deconstruction, poststructuralism, postfoundational phenomenology, critical theory, and hermeneutics.

*Religion*, according to Levinas, is essentially man's ethical relation with his fellow man. It is less a religion of rituals than one which promotes charity, peace and justice.

*Same* is Levinas's term for the self or ego whose tendency is to assimilate, absorb, represent, or reduce the Other to itself. *Totality* and *Being* are terms Levinas associates with it, while *Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* are terms which he equates with the irreducible Other. For Levinas, the entire history of Western philosophy has so far been the philosophy of the Same. Now he offers a philosophy of the Other that makes ethics, not ontology, as first philosophy.

*Saying* refers to Levinas's notion of an ethical language uncontaminated by ontology. It is the self's ethical proximity to the Other untranslatable in propositional language. Before the self utters a word to the Other, he is already asymmetrically related and exposed to him, subjected to his presence that commands responsibility and respect. This is in contrast to the *Said*, the language of ontology, which betrays the proximity of the self to Other because it fixes *saying* to the level of concepts and categories. Although the *said* is inevitable, Levinas argues that it should always be deconstructed and referred

back to the *saying* in order not to vitiate and obscure the ethical proximity of the self to the Other. Doing so will preserve the transcendence of the Other, irreducible to and beyond the horizon of an authoritative ego or Being.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

As already enunciated, this study is an analysis and exposition of the religious themes in Levinas's philosophy. Once this purpose is established, the study will then proceed to show the relevance of Levinas's thought to interfaith dialogue and to shed light on issues such as violence, religious fundamentalism and pluralism by employing Levinasian insights, categories, and concepts. However, readers must be forewarned. This attempt makes no pretense to provide concrete solutions to the problems it discusses. What this researcher will undertake is simply to explain these issues with the help and direction that Levinas's philosophy can offer.

Chapter 1 gives the reason for conducting this research as well as its significance to philosophy in general and to Levinasian scholarship in particular. The objectives of the study are also articulated in this chapter to inform the readers of its direction and possible outcome. Likewise the scope of the study and its methodology are discussed so as to show the horizon from which it proceeds. Finally, some relevant and related studies on Levinas's philosophy are mentioned in order to avoid duplication or unnecessary repetition.

Chapter 2 will analyze and expound key concepts in Levinas's philosophy. Levinas's phenomenology and his notion of man as ethical responsibility toward the Other will be discussed. Chapter 3 proceeds to explain how his philosophy sheds light on

his understanding of God, religion, atheism and idolatry. This chapter will not only expose the meaning of such themes in the thought of Levinas but will also explore their implications to current discussions and debates on philosophical theology. Chapter 4 seeks to apply Levinasian categories to interfaith dialogue and to address contemporary issues on violence, religious fundamentalism and pluralism. Somehow it is the contention of this researcher that these issues are interconnected and they are an offshoot of Levinas's description of Western philosophy as the philosophy of the Same. If these issues are to be deeply understood, one has to think of them otherwise than Being.

The final chapter will summarize the study based on the questions it seeks to answer.

## Chapter 2

### ETHICS AS OPTICS OF THE DIVINE<sup>1</sup>

Levinas's philosophy is dominated by and preoccupied with a single vision. This vision is the self's inescapable responsibility for the Other. The Other is Levinas's term for the human other.<sup>2</sup> In many of his writings, he calls the Other as the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the neighbor, terms which Levinas lifted from the Bible to stress the urgency of the self's ethical obligation towards another human being, and to acknowledge the non-Greek (Hebraic religion) sources of his philosophical enterprise. In some instances, the Other is also described as absolute alterity, infinite, transcendent, invisible, and enigma.

The Other consumed Levinas's life just as Heidegger was captivated and enthralled by the thought of Being. Levinas says, "There is something more important than my life. And that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. Man is an unreasonable being."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, man's ineluctable obligation to his fellow man precedes deliberation and so "unreasonable." Before one can ignore or accept the responsibility, the Other has already made an ethical appeal and has pierced one's sensibility.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this chapter is a phrase borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas. See his *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 159. There is a similar expression in his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 78. Levinas says "Ethics is the spiritual optics."

<sup>2</sup> With Levinas's approval, Lingis translates the French word *autrui* as the "personal Other, the you" while *autre* as simply "other." See footnote of page 24 in *Totality and Infinity*.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," translated by A. Benjamin and T. Wright in R. Bernasconi and D. Woods, editors, *The Provocation of Levinas* (London: Routledge, 1988 [1976]), 172. Quoted in Peter Atterton, "Emmanuel Levinas," in *Postmodernism: The Key Figures*, edited by Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 235.

For Levinas, ethics and not ontology is *prima philosophia*. He subordinates ontology to ethics because the former effects a relation that reduces the Other to the comprehension of the thinking ego, stripping the Other of its singularity or distinctly human qualities.

Levinas maintains that genuine religion rests on and cannot be conceived apart from the self's responsibility for the Other. He is very emphatic on this claim and asserts "There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator."<sup>4</sup>

Ethics for Levinas is inseparable from religion so that unless the latter works within the matrix of ethical relationships, it fails to be authentic. A religion grounded solely in abstruse dogmas and excessive rituals have no meaning whatsoever in Levinas's perception because this disregards the justice due to the Other. Without ethics, religion becomes an empty discourse and a meaningless ritual.

This chapter begins with a study of Levinas's phenomenological background and his critical stance toward Western philosophical tradition. Levinas's phenomenological background provides a glimpse of how he criticizes Western philosophy as well as how he develops his ethical metaphysics.

After retracing Levinas's phenomenological beginnings, an exposition of his philosophy of ethical responsibility will be made. The exposition will rely mainly on *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, two works Levinasian scholars unanimously consider as his masterpieces. Adriaan Peperzak and Richard Cohen hold the

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78-79

opinion that the former work stresses the transcendence of the other (ethical alterity) while the latter makes the responsible subject (ethical subjectivity) its central topic.<sup>5</sup> Both Levinasian scholars agree however that though the two works differ in emphasis, they still deal with the same concern and that is the ethical relation of the Same to the Other. This distinction made by Peperzak and Cohen only reveals Levinas's novel project of giving priority to the ethical philosophy of the Other without abandoning the notion of the subject to the imminent threats of nihilism.

Levinas's defense of subjectivity runs contrary to Structuralism and Post-structuralism, according to which, the subject is constituted and is eventually dissolved by such external forces as language, myths and ideologies.<sup>6</sup> Levinas, in his "Preface" to *Totality and Infinity*, says that his book is a "defense of subjectivity" "founded in the idea of infinity."<sup>7</sup> He refuses to accept the postmodern notion of the "death of the subject" because this averts one's ethical obligation to the Other.<sup>8</sup> He likewise disapproves of the notion of a modern autonomous subject because it bypasses alterity and obscures radical difference. As will be shown later in this chapter, the subject for Levinas is one whose

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<sup>5</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 212 & 217; Richard A. Cohen, "Foreword" to Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), xii. See also Cohen's "Introduction" to Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 2. See also Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in Richard A. Cohen, editor, *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 127.



passivity and receptivity is such that it is constituted by its infinite responsibility to the Other. The subject is literally and figuratively *subjected* to the Other.

The discussion of the main concepts and themes in the above-mentioned works will be followed by an account of the connection between Levinas's ethics and religion, explaining the reason why for Levinas "ethics is an optics of the Divine." According to Levinas, "The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence, irreducible to essential immanence, go together"<sup>9</sup> This link between ethics and religion will be made in the last section of this chapter.

The presentation of this chapter will follow the development and shape of Levinas's thought. According to Roger Burggraeve

Levinas himself has described the evolution of his thinking thereafter in terms of the following three discoveries. (1) *being without beings* (what he calls the 'il y a' ['there is']); (2) the movement from *anonymous being* to the *being* [or entity], and the *separated ego* in particular, and finally (3) the way leading from the separated being to the *face of the other*, with its ethical implications of *responsibility-to-and-for-the-other* as well as the metaphysical implication of *desire for the wholly other*, or the Infinite, the context in which a 'being-toward-God' uncontaminated by being can acquire its true meaning.<sup>10</sup>

### Levinas's Phenomenological Background

In the years 1928-29, Levinas went to Freiburg and closely studied the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. His studies led to the following publications: a dissertation on Husserl entitled *The Theory of Intuition in*

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<sup>9</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 17

<sup>10</sup> Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace and Human Rights*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 36

*Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930)<sup>11</sup>, which he submitted to the University of Strasbourg, *Martin Heidegger and Ontology* (1932), originally intended as part of a book on Heidegger, and a number of important articles on Husserl and Heidegger since then. Also in 1931, Levinas in collaboration with a fellow Strasbourg student Gabrielle Pfeiffer published a French translation of Husserl's lectures on phenomenology given at the Sorbonne known as *Cartesian Meditations*. These accomplishments bear witness to Levinas's deep familiarity with phenomenology and so his efforts to move beyond phenomenology and to propose an ethical philosophy of radical alterity are more than justified.<sup>12</sup> He is not merely a commentator of phenomenology but a thinker whose erudition, originality, depth, and sharpness of thought deserves serious and careful consideration.

Levinas claims in many of his writings that the most influential thinkers in his philosophy are Husserl and Heidegger. His indebtedness to both great thinkers is discernible in all of his philosophical works. Their phenomenological methods are deeply ingrained in his mind. He says "Indeed, from the point of view of philosophical method and discipline, I remain even today a phenomenologist."<sup>13</sup> According to Simon Critchley, Levinas "maintains a methodological but not a substantive commitment to Husserlian

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<sup>11</sup> This work, Moran says, helped in introducing phenomenology to France particularly on such thinkers as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, de Beauvoir and Levy-Bruhl. Dermot Moran, *Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2005), 245-246.

<sup>12</sup> This part of the chapter will not pit Levinas against Husserl and Heidegger. It will just discuss how Levinas reads and interprets Husserl and Heidegger and how he criticizes and departs from them. In discussing this part, the author relies on Davis's excellent and lucid treatment of Levinas's relation to Heidegger and Husserl in Chapter 1 (entitled Phenomenology) of his book *Levinas: An Introduction*. See pages 7-33.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" in Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 14. See also Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28 and *Otherwise than Being*, 183.

phenomenology”<sup>14</sup> John Drabinski stretches further Critchley’s opinion and accentuates Husserl’s influence on Levinas by claiming that Levinas’s language is more Husserlian than Heideggerian, although for Peperzak, Levinas’s “philosophical approach and style” is more akin to Heidegger than to Husserl<sup>15</sup> Whichever is the case, it cannot be denied that Levinas’s philosophical itinerary is constantly guided by both phenomenologists. He reworks both thinkers’ methods to fashion his own distinct philosophy.

*Levinas’s Interpretation of Husserlian Phenomenology* The proverbial phrase “back to the things themselves” is the slogan of Husserlian phenomenology. This is Husserl’s way of going back to man’s *lived* experience so as to describe phenomena in their own light, freed from the arbitrariness of presuppositions. The *lived* experience is the self’s very first encounter with things before they are objectified in terms of conceptual judgments. Husserl’s chief aim in phenomenology is to furnish philosophy a firm foundation at par with the mathematical sciences. This he tries to accomplish by returning to the source and origin of philosophical questioning so as to see the world anew<sup>16</sup> By venturing into man’s lived experience, Husserl hopes to overcome what science normally overlooks, i.e., “the role of perceiving consciousness in the constitution or formation of the perceived world.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Simon Critchley, “Introduction” to Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8

<sup>15</sup> John E. Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), 9; Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 12

<sup>16</sup> Richard Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy, Phenomenology, Critical Theory, Structuralism*, second edition (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press), 14

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 10

Husserl questions the assumption of scientific realism, which he calls 'natural attitude,' because it assumes the existence of a world out there independent of consciousness. In this scientific standpoint, the world is viewed as an entity which encompasses all things including man. This world is understood in terms of concepts formed out of the data supplied by the senses.<sup>18</sup> But according to Husserl, this way of perceiving the world misses and takes for granted the original pre-theoretical experience of man. He is convinced that the evidence of the senses cannot be taken as the sole basis of knowledge. Rene Descartes has already forewarned the possibility of deception caused by the senses that inevitably leads to skepticism.<sup>19</sup> What Husserl proposes in order to avoid this skepticism, which David Hume so masterfully exposed to the point of destroying knowledge, is his fundamental notion of the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness, according to Husserl, is inseparable from its intended object. All mental acts (*noesis*) presuppose and point to their objects (*noema*).<sup>20</sup> In the words of a prominent Husserlian scholar, "Consciousness is constantly stretching out or reaching beyond itself towards something else."<sup>21</sup>

Phenomenology initially works by applying *epoche* or the transcendental-phenomenological reduction to the scientific standpoint. This method suspends and brackets the belief in the existence of things, including consciousness, in the natural

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, translated by W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 91-92.

<sup>19</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, translated with an introduction by F. E. Sutchiff (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1968), 96.

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 33.

<sup>21</sup> Dermot Moran, *Husserl: Founder of Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 5.

world which, as already noted, is obtained from experience or through the sciences that organize the world into a system of facts<sup>22</sup> What this suspension reveals is the reality of consciousness itself, known as the transcendental ego, and the object (phenomenon) which appears to, intended and constituted by, this same ego. The ego is transcendental because it is not a part of the bracketed world. It is through the ego that the world comes to be known<sup>23</sup>

For Husserl, the ego is the residue of the phenomenological reduction. He considers this ego absolute because it is responsible for constituting the meaning of the world through its intentional acts. But in constituting the meaning of the world, the ego also constitutes itself, thereby making its own life more self-conscious. In other words, its meaning-giving act is self-reflexive. It is through its own intentional relation with the world that it attains self-consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The ego is therefore responsible for its own self-enrichment by means of its own meaning-giving activities. Hence, it can be inferred that for Husserl, the ego or consciousness is primary, sovereign and absolute, responsible only for itself. All others are derived from it—a point, which he shares with Descartes although the latter's rationalism and dualism caused him some serious philosophical troubles<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, 99

<sup>23</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, 99

<sup>24</sup> Levinas says, "Intentionality is what makes up the subjectivity of the subjects." Intentionality is not a property of consciousness but the very life of consciousness itself. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, second edition, trans. Andre Orianne (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 41

<sup>25</sup> Levinas gives a brief discussion of the difference between the Cartesian and Husserlian notions of cogito in *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 31-32

Husserl's method is a milestone in philosophy because it avoids the blunders of modern thinking, which either gives emphasis on the subject as expressed in idealist and rationalist philosophies or the object as expressed in realist and empiricist philosophies. Husserl rejects idealism because it elevates the subject to the status of a "solitary consciousness cut off from the world"<sup>26</sup> He likewise undermines realism because it subordinates and reduces consciousness to objects in the external world. As Levinas, writing on Husserl, says, "If to be is to be in nature, then consciousness, through which nature is known, must also be part of nature inasmuch as it claims to exist"<sup>27</sup> To Husserl's mind then, both opposing views in modern thinking ignore the basic structure of the intentionality of consciousness. It is Husserl's contention that there can be no subject without an object and no object without a subject. Husserl calls this subject-object affinity as the noema-noesis correlation.

For Levinas, Husserl's innovative thinking is important because it fastens philosophy to concrete existence<sup>28</sup> As Dermot Moran says, "Levinas credits Husserl with reawakening philosophy to the possibility of being able to describe concrete, lived human life, without reducing it to a series of inner psychic experiences (as with the Cartesian way of viewing consciousness)"<sup>29</sup>

The notion of intentionality, according to Levinas, makes possible the contact of consciousness with an object or phenomenon, the essence or meaning of which is intuited

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<sup>26</sup> Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, 16

<sup>27</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 13

<sup>28</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 28. See also *Ethics and Infinity*, 28

<sup>29</sup> Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 328

by and disclosed to the conscious subject in manifold ways<sup>30</sup> Consciousness is not self-enclosed but is open to what lies outside it Levinas felicitates Husserl for discovering the way to the heart of reality thereby overcoming naturalism Naturalism or scientific epistemology presupposes that there is an external world independent of consciousness and that beneath this world there lies a determinate essence, the discovery of which leads to truth. It also reduces all beings including consciousness to the level of matter<sup>31</sup> But Husserl, Colin Davis alleges, opposes this theory of knowledge because things are merely regarded as surfaces or phenomena which are deceptive and conceal the truth<sup>32</sup> For him, phenomena do not hide the essence of things but make possible their presentation to consciousness. Hence, phenomenology disregards the notion that at the bottom of things there is a single unchanging essence to which the mind must conform Things present themselves to the mind in their multiplicity. Their meaning is conferred on them by acts of consciousness Thus, the task of phenomenology is not to examine cognitive contents but to describe the intentions that give life to thought

Levinas, seeing through the lenses of Heidegger, thinks that Husserl's phenomenology is not only epistemological but also ontological.<sup>33</sup> Husserl's phenomenology is ontological in that it wants to provide a secure and self-evident foundation for the sciences. This foundation is found in the transcendental ego after the phenomenological reduction. The realm of the transcendental ego is different from the

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<sup>30</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 43

<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 12

<sup>32</sup> Davis, *Levinas An Introduction*, 11-12

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 124 This Heideggerian reading of Husserl's phenomenology as ontology is acknowledged by Levinas See Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, ix

bracketed world. This realm is unique because it now becomes the “field of a new science—the science of Phenomenology.”<sup>34</sup> It thus functions as the wellspring of meaning in its *givenness* to consciousness.

The paragraph below is a précis of Levinas’s understanding of Husserl’s phenomenology.

The most fundamental contribution of Husserl’s phenomenology is its methodical disclosure of how meaning comes to be, how it emerges in our consciousness of the world, or more precisely, in our becoming conscious of our intentional rapport (*visee*) with the world. The phenomenological method enables us to discover meaning within our lived experience; it reveals consciousness to be an intentionality always in *contact* with objects outside of itself, other than itself. Human experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure *cogito*, it is always intending or tending towards something in the world that preoccupies it. The phenomenological method permits consciousness to understand its own preoccupations, to reflect upon itself and thus discover all the hidden or neglected horizons of its intentionality. In other words, by returning to the implicit horizon of consciousness, phenomenology enables us to explicate or unfold the full intentional meaning of an object, which would otherwise be presented as an abstract and isolated entity cut off from its intentional horizons. Phenomenology thus teaches us that consciousness is at once tied to the object of its experience and yet free to detach itself from this object in order to return upon itself, focusing on those *visees* of intentionality in which the object emerges as *meaningful*, as part of our lived experience. One might say that phenomenology is a way of becoming aware of where we are in the world, a *sich besinnen* that consists of a recovery of the origin of meaning in our life world, or *Lebenswelt*.<sup>35</sup>

Though Levinas admires Husserl, he nevertheless finds Husserl’s phenomenology inadequate because it still maintains a kind of intellectualism or theoreticism reminiscent of idealism. It is a fact that Husserl does not only limit his understanding of intentionality to the structure of consciousness. Intentionality also applies to non-theoretical acts like

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<sup>34</sup> Husserl, *Ideas*, 102

<sup>35</sup> Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 14-



valuing, willing, feeling, desiring, etc.<sup>36</sup> These acts also have their own respective object-correlates. But Levinas claims that these non-theoretical acts are still modeled after representational intentionality, thereby not sparing them from the kind of intellectualism that Levinas disapproves of<sup>37</sup>

Levinas does not think that Husserl was really successful in his desired project of going "back to the things themselves." He says that "in a sense the object of representation is interior to thought despite its independence it falls under the power of thought"<sup>38</sup> In phenomenology, there is supposed to be a coincidence between consciousness and the world, and yet the world is confronted "as already constituted by and within consciousness."<sup>39</sup> "The encounter promised by intentionality may be precisely what the theory of intentionality precludes. consciousness can never meet anything truly alien to itself because the external world is a product of its own activity."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, "what is not discovered as an object intended by consciousness has no being, is less than nothing. Consciousness, then, is equal to thinking or to assuming everything that appears

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<sup>36</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 132. In an earlier part of the same work, Levinas remarks "Concrete life, the source of existence in the world, is not pure theory, although for Husserl the latter has a special status. It is a life of action and feeling, will and aesthetic judgment, interest and indifference, etc. It follows that the world which is correlative to this life is a sensed or wanted world, a world of action, beauty, ugliness, and meanness, as well as an object of theoretical contemplation. Will, desire, etc., are intentions which, along with representations, constitute the existence of the world. They are not elements of consciousness void of all relation to objects. Because of this, the existence of the world has a rich structure which differs in each domain." Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 45.

<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 123.

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 19.

since everything that befalls it is according to it”<sup>41</sup> And as such, consciousness remains reflexive and it stands outside of historical time as a consequence of phenomenological reduction Husserlian phenomenology leaves out the “historical embeddedness of lived experience”<sup>42</sup> Hence, a philosophy of this type “seems as independent of the historical situation of man as any theory that tries to consider everything *sub species aeternitatis*”<sup>43</sup>

Another aspect of Husserl’s thought that Levinas criticizes is the notion of intersubjectivity For Levinas, Husserl was unsuccessful in trying to overcome solipsism despite attempts to address the issue in *Cartesian Meditations*<sup>44</sup> The ego still remains isolated and monadic The notion of the existence of other egos arrived at through a second phenomenological reduction, where the ego discovers that it has a body similar to others, fails to account for the independence and separation of these other egos They are analogically known as those which resemble the ego because they behave the way the ego behaves<sup>45</sup> Husserl calls this *appresentation* or *analogical apperception* But the other person that appears as a noematic object in the field of the ego’s noetic intention betrays and fails to duplicate the original Even if Husserl introduced the notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*), this technique in the end still fails The Other is not truly the real Other but an alter ego<sup>46</sup> The *ego* of the *alter ego* is still given priority and the *alter* is

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<sup>41</sup> Jeffrey Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 83

<sup>42</sup> Critchley, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 7

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 155

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Time and the Other” in *The Levinas Reader*, trans. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 43

<sup>45</sup> Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 108

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other” in *The Levinas Reader*, 43

subsumed by it, i.e., by the monadic ego. It is still the ego's prior knowledge which forms the basis of the intersubjective relation, including "the values the alter ego takes on and those attributed to it."<sup>47</sup> Simply put, the meeting between the ego and the Other in phenomenology is cognitive rather than ethical. Hence, the notion of sensibility and proximity, that form of passivity and affectivity in the ego that is pierced through by the Other and which conditions their ethical encounter, remains largely unnoticed by Husserlian phenomenology.

Levinas, according to Davis, "elegantly sidesteps" the epistemological problem of the existence of other selves posed by philosophers like Hume and Husserl. The problem is misguided because it presupposes two things. First, it imagines that the "self pre-exists the encounter with others" and second, it subordinates ethics to epistemology. For Levinas, the self's very subjectivity is founded by its exposure and responsibility to the Other. Second, the problem of other selves undermines the priority of ethical relation.<sup>48</sup> It looks at the difference between the self and the Other as an epistemological gap that must be bridged or overcome. For Levinas, this difference must be respected rather than overcome because it is the site where ethics can thrive and develop.<sup>49</sup>

As will be shown later in this chapter, Levinas's account of alterity does not close the epistemological gap or difference between the ego and the Other. Rather, he is more concerned with "establishing and preserving this radical separation and difference."<sup>50</sup> For

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<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 101.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 78.

<sup>49</sup> David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 153.

<sup>50</sup> Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 153.

him, this distance that divides the ego and the Other cannot be traversed cognitively. It is indeed an irreducible and non-synthesizable distance but one which must be maintained nonetheless in order to preserve and promote the ethical relation.

*Levinas's Interpretation of Heideggerian Phenomenology.* Levinas finds Heidegger's phenomenology important because it corrects Husserl's *absolutization* of consciousness. It is Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world that allows Levinas to see and locate consciousness as steeped in time and history.<sup>51</sup> This is a feat which, according to Levinas, Husserl failed to accomplish. Husserl's intellectualism is tempered by Heidegger's phenomenology which immerses consciousness in the world, in experience, facticity and desire.<sup>52</sup> This would in a way represent "a rupture with the theoretical structure of Western thought."<sup>53</sup> "To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved."<sup>54</sup> Man's enrootedness or embeddedness in the world shapes the way he thinks. Reason no longer stands above the world and sees it from outside. Reason and the world belong together so that they mutually shape and expand each other's horizons. This view of reason is in sharp contrast to the modern philosophy initiated and fathered by Descartes. Reason, for many modern philosophers, must be objective and free from the influence of the world. Knowledge derived from a thinking contaminated by the senses is biased and therefore,

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<sup>51</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 79-81 passim.

<sup>52</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?" in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?", 4.

to borrow from Plato, is not true knowledge (*episteme*) but a mere opinion (*doxa*). The self in modern philosophy is generally understood as a disembodied subject and it is reduced to a pure observer, a mere spectator, who looks at the world from a distance just like the deist God.

Heidegger develops a phenomenology that renews the ancient problem of Being which traditional philosophy has blurred with beings.<sup>55</sup> This time Heidegger's Being is no longer an abstraction but one which is conceived in time and history. Time, Heidegger says, is "the horizon for all understanding of Being and for any way of interpreting it."<sup>56</sup> Being cannot be understood beyond spatio-temporal conditions because it reveals itself in things or phenomena. Phenomenon is the locus through which Being manifests itself. In this sense, unlike in Husserl in which it is understood as absolute, sovereign and outside of history, consciousness becomes *Da-sein* to whom its own being is an issue.<sup>57</sup> Consciousness is not independent of the world but is being-in-the-world and whose being-there becomes the pre-theoretical condition in the reception of Being's unconcealment. The *Da* of *Da-sein* is now "the very foundation and condition of its truth."<sup>58</sup> Here, ontology and phenomenology are not incompatible projects since the phenomenon is the site where Being manifests its truth.

Though Levinas finds Heidegger as a philosopher who gives primacy to thought steeped in experience, he nevertheless criticizes Heidegger for espousing an ontology that

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<sup>55</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 21

<sup>56</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 39

<sup>57</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32

<sup>58</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 16

subjects the self, including the Other, to the impersonal power of Being.<sup>59</sup> "Being, which is without the density of existents, is the light by which existents become intelligible."<sup>60</sup> It also makes possible the opening of a space (clearing) within which a phenomenon is perceivable. From this, it follows that truth "regarding the existent presupposes the prior openness of Being."<sup>61</sup> Even Heidegger's notion of *Seinlassen* ("to let be") situates the subject to a position wherein all phenomena converge and unify towards it. The ego in this case becomes the center of all meaning and intelligibility since "Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time); Being is already an appeal to subjectivity."<sup>62</sup> Being then becomes the main determinant of truth and the self is made to receive and submit to it.<sup>63</sup> Levinas writes, "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relation with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny."<sup>64</sup>

For Levinas, the ontic-ontological difference between beings (particularly the human *Dasein*) and Being is not the primary relationship. There is a more primordial relationship which overcomes the dangers of ontology. And this, for Levinas, is the

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<sup>59</sup> It must be noted that if it is Heidegger's insights which permitted Levinas to move beyond Husserl's theoreticism, it is Franz Rosenzweig's notion of ethics and justice in the *Star of Redemption* which induced Levinas to leave the orbit of Heidegger's ontological phenomenology. See Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 236-237. For Levinas's acknowledgment of Rosenzweig's influence on his philosophical project, see *Totality and Infinity*, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

<sup>61</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

<sup>62</sup> Peperzak, *To The Other*, 139.

<sup>63</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46-47.

ethical. What is more important and must take precedence is the face to face relationship between the self and the Other. Levinas's study of phenomenology has already indicated the impossibility of the Other's being absorbed by thought although the method has revealed that thought and its intentions are inseparable. The Other, however, eludes and resists conceptualization for it poses a challenge to the self's totalizing tendency. Its presence is the very reason why it refuses *re-presentation*.

For Levinas, there is a "profound need to get out of being"<sup>65</sup> in order to recognize and acknowledge that which consciousness cannot re-present in thought. And here Levinas is referring to the Other--the otherwise than Being. The Other is the infinite which cannot be contained by thought and yet it is given in one's consciousness. This reveals the given-ness of the Other to one's mind and yet one is aware that it resists one's thinking. From here it is clear that the Other goes beyond phenomenology because it breaks the unity of Husserlian noema-noesis correlation. Even in Heidegger's notion of intersubjectivity where Dasein is viewed as a Being-with (*Mitsein*) Others,<sup>66</sup> the Other still plays a secondary role to Being. The ego's primary relationship is to Being and there seems to be no real encounter with the Other. Though Dasein exists in the world, the world has meaning only insofar as it is predetermined by Dasein's understanding. The world is what it is because it is given sense by Dasein and it facilitates the realization of Dasein's ownmost possibilities. Now this works only for things encountered by Dasein but becomes problematic when Dasein faces a human Other. The human Other cannot be encountered the way things are encountered by Dasein. The Other cannot be used as tools

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<sup>65</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo, introduced and annotated by Jacques Rolland (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>66</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 149-162.

to realize the self-project of Dasein<sup>67</sup> Hence, there is what Michael Purcell calls an ethical deficit in Heidegger's fundamental ontology.<sup>68</sup> "Other humans are mentioned only as companions within anonymous communities, not as disturbing forces" that displace the ego from its monadic and hegemonic existence<sup>69</sup> Heidegger's concept of mine-ness (*Jemeinigkeit*), his notion of authentic existence in the face of death, precludes the coming of the Other from the outside to challenge the sovereignty of Dasein's self-possession and comprehension of the world This concept is understood as Dasein's primordial concern with its own sense of self although for Levinas, this sense of self or mine-ness is derived not from the ego's autonomous effort *to be* but from its ethical responsibility for the Other<sup>70</sup> In other words, whereas for Heidegger, one becomes a self through self-interested (or egoistic) tendencies, for Levinas, one becomes a self through a selfless assumption of responsibility for the Other Hence, as in Husserl, Heidegger's notion of alterity or the Other is still absorbed into the Same

It is in Levinas's analysis of death that the solitude of the ego breaks. In Heidegger, death is solely the unique experience of the ego and no one can take the place of his dying<sup>71</sup> Death is an essential part of Dasein's relationship with Being as the sum of his possible experiences and as a mode of Dasein's mine-ness Dasein's relation to mortality is ontological Death prompts Da-sein towards self-responsibility. Levinas,

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<sup>67</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 78-79

<sup>68</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 78-79

<sup>69</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 17

<sup>70</sup> Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 153

<sup>71</sup> See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 293-311



however, views death differently. Death for him is an indication that there is something utterly unknowable and this in a way breaks the subject's sovereignty and virility.<sup>72</sup> Death is not merely "phenomenal" where the Other in his external appearance is immobilized.<sup>73</sup> It also points to the unknown (though not a purely negative unknown), the infinite or beyond being. In death, something disrupts the subject's self mastery and intentionality and it establishes the possibility of an encounter between the self and that which is refractory to thought—the Other. As Cohen eloquently notes in contrasting Levinas' and Heidegger's views on death. "It is not mastery of death that Levinas emphasizes but its mystery, the exteriority of the death which always comes to take me, against my will, too soon."<sup>74</sup> Cohen continues: "Death escapes the subject not because the subject flees into superficial everyday existence, into the avoidance of self which is the everyday world of Heideggerian inauthenticity, but because the futurity of death, its unforeseeability, its ungraspability, overwhelms the subject's powers."<sup>75</sup>

Death is an emotional or affective disquietude without an intention or theme. It agitates and shows the proximity or nearness of the neighbor and the obligation of the survivor to the Other.<sup>76</sup> Here, Levinas likens death to the Other. Both are unthinkable. Just like death, the Other is unpredictable and comes as a surprise to the ego. In *Entre Nous*, Levinas goes as far as to characterize the face of the Other as an expression of his

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<sup>72</sup> Levinas, "Time and the Other" in *The Levinas Reader*, 41

<sup>73</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 16

<sup>74</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 142

<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *Elevations*, 142

<sup>76</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 16-17

mortality which summons the self to responsibility, "as if, through its indifference, the *I* became the accomplice to, and had to answer for, this death of the other and not let him die alone"<sup>77</sup> The death of the Other is the self's responsibility This is so because, as will be shown later, the Other plays a decisive role in shaping the identity of the self Levinas relocates death from the Heideggerian notion of death as mine-ness (death as the possibility of impossibility) to his notion of it as the impossibility of possibility of serving the Other

According to Levinas, Heidegger's notion of anxiety over death or nothingness shows the priority of theory over this anxiety Such anxiety is ontological for Heidegger still asks its meaning in the context of Dasein's relation to Being Though for Heidegger anxiety has no object or theme or intention for it is a mood in the face of nothingness, Levinas's reading of Heidegger looks at it as anxiety over Being via nothingness<sup>78</sup> "Nothingness is still dialectically connected with being, of which it is a defective mode"<sup>79</sup>

*Beyond Mainstream Phenomenology* In the end, Levinas does not completely subscribe to both Husserl's and Heidegger's phenomenologies because he thinks that the transcendental ego of the former and the thinking of Being of the latter do not do justice to the radical alterity of the human Other It seems that their notions of alterity are still deduced from and symptomatic of the supremacy of the Cartesian self or the absoluteness

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<sup>77</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans Michael B Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York Columbia University Press, 1998), 186 See also Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 26

<sup>78</sup> Levinas, *God Death and Time*, 18-19

<sup>79</sup> Michael B Smith, *Toward the Outside Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas* (Pittsburgh Duquesne University Press, 2005), 187

of the Hegelian *Geist*. Both phenomenologies still retain notions of something primary and ultimate which are paradigms of an ontological inquiry. These are ways of thinking that emphasize the interior life of the ego manifested in integration, synthesis, mastery and freedom.<sup>80</sup> The face of the Other cannot be encompassed by a totalizing gaze of the Same nor reduced to a concept or neutral term like Being. For this reason, Levinas takes leave of phenomenology by developing his own non-ontological and non-phenomenological thinking of the Other. He calls his thought meontology (from the Greek *me-on* which means non-being) "which affirms a meaning beyond being."<sup>81</sup> He makes use of Descartes' idea of the Infinite as too much for the ego to contain in the *Third Meditation*<sup>82</sup> in order to point out that phenomenology fails to fully take account of the human Other because it cannot be an object or noema of consciousness.<sup>83</sup> He writes "The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it. It designates the contact with the intangible, a contact that does not compromise the integrity of what is touched."<sup>84</sup> The infinite as the human Other breaks the noesis-noema structure of consciousness for it refuses to be regarded as an instance or moment of the ego's all-

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<sup>80</sup> Levinas writes "In Husserl non-doxic intentionalities harbor an archetypical *doxa*, Heidegger's being-in-the-world is a comprehension technological activity itself is openness, discovery of Being, even if the mode of a forgetting of Being. The ontic, which at least involves an opacity, everywhere yields before the ontological, before a covered-over luminosity to be disengaged. The *existentiell* reveals its meaning in the existential, which is an articulation of ontology. An entity counts only on the basis of knowing, of appearing, of phenomenology." Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 80

<sup>81</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 25

<sup>82</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutchiff (London: Penguin, 1968), 130-131

<sup>83</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 26-27

<sup>84</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50

embracing gaze. It is not a phenomenon that can be constituted by objectifying consciousness. It is rather an enigma which is instilled into consciousness.<sup>85</sup> It “overflows that thought that thinks it” and its “*infinite* is produced precisely by this overflowing.”<sup>86</sup> Though the idea of the infinite is uncontainable, it is nonetheless present a priori in the ego’s consciousness. “Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself” but it is “produced as revelation”, given as an idea already present in the ego’s consciousness. The self could not produce and contain the infinite by virtue of its identity as finite.<sup>87</sup> “The infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire—not a desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies.”<sup>88</sup> The presence of the infinite in thought is a desire of an “unequaled” and “unassumable” passivity—a passivity beyond all passivity.<sup>89</sup> Desire as passivity is not a receptivity. “Receptivity is a collecting that takes in a welcome, an assuming that takes place under the force of the blow received.”<sup>90</sup> Desire is more of a “passivity of a trauma through which the idea of a God” comes to mind.<sup>91</sup> Infinity “is not purely and simply lost as a result of its manifestation, it ‘absolves’ itself from the relation in which it presents

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<sup>85</sup> See Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 65-77. See also Peperzak, *To The Other*, 21.

<sup>86</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 25.

<sup>87</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 26-27.

<sup>88</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

<sup>89</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 136; Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>90</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 137; Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 64.

<sup>91</sup> Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 137; Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 64.

itself”<sup>92</sup> This idea of the Other as infinite plays a significant role in Levinas’s notion of ethical relationship. The Other as exceeding thought signifies that it is irreducible and separate from the ego. The *a priori* presence of the infinite in the ego’s consciousness in spite of the fact that it overflows consciousness indicates that the Other’s demand for responsibility is a constant and persistent appeal addressed to the ego. It also implies that the ego is not pure interiority or completely enclosed within its own world but is also open to transcendence or the infinite.

Levinas’s patient study and critical engagement with phenomenology develops into a critical reading of the history of Western philosophy which he characterizes as an egology.

#### Western Philosophy’s Hegemonic Stature

Levinas’s philosophy of the responsible subject can best be understood against the background of the salient features of Western philosophy.<sup>93</sup> Levinas, while acknowledging the contributions of past philosophers to the formation of his thought, is critical of the negative tendencies of Western philosophy in so far as it engenders violence to the other person. As Levinas sees it, Western philosophy absorbs or assimilates the Other and privileges the ego *cogito* or the thinking self. This ego, to which everything is appropriated and must return, is what Levinas calls the Same. Levinas

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<sup>92</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50

<sup>93</sup> Knowledge of Levinas’s philosophical formation as a student in France is necessary in order for the reader to be sympathetic to his critical appraisal of Western philosophy. Peperzak notes that philosophy in French universities emphasized the study of what they considered great thinkers, namely, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Comte, etc. Medieval and Christian philosophy, basically after Plotinus and before Descartes and Pascal, was unnoticed. Bergson, Nietzsche and Marx at this time were not yet as influential as they were years later. See Peperzak, *To The Other*, 9-10 and *Beyond*, 8.

borrowed these two terms the Same and the Other from Plato's dialogue *Sophist*. These two terms are the two categories of Being in Plato's philosophy.

For Levinas, the Same basically possesses a nature that encompasses what is other than itself. This way of assimilating things is to be understood as the ego's mode of self-existence through enjoyment and material nourishment. This is also the reason why Levinas describes Western philosophy as narcissistic because it gives primacy to and enshrines the Same. The Other, in Plato's thought, is not genuinely other. It is other in a relative sense. For example, a book is not the same as a pencil, so it is other than a pencil. The other is like non-being but not in an absolute sense. So what Levinas wants to achieve in his thinking is to come up with a notion of otherness different from Plato's, an other that is not a category of Being.

Levinas also regards Western philosophy as an egology.<sup>94</sup> Western thought, according to him, seeks to enhance the ego's knowledge (theory), power and freedom by reducing and structuring the world into totalizing concepts and categories. Levinas's critique of Western reason also includes his critique of ideology manifested in "occidental lifestyle, practice, planning and technology."<sup>95</sup> This way of reading Western philosophy coincides with Levinas's phenomenological description of the self as the Same and as enjoyment. For Levinas, the self acquires its initial identity by appropriating what is other than itself. This process of self-identification Levinas describes as enjoyment, a solitary life of innocent satisfaction of things assimilated and possessed. This refers to the self's

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<sup>94</sup> Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite" in Adriaan Peperzak, *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 97, see also Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

<sup>95</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 8.

economic and hedonic existence. But in criticizing Western philosophy, Levinas does not so much seek to overcome it as to accomplish that which it has failed to realize. And this is metaphysics as transcendence, a movement from the self's solitary and complacent existence to the desire of the Other expressed in responsibility. In the history of Western philosophy there are some thinkers who have flashes of insight into the Other but they have failed to fully recognize it. For example, Plato's notion of the Good which lies beyond Being, Descartes' idea of the Infinite in a finite mind, the existence of which is not within the power of the self to produce; Pseudo-Dionysius's supra-ontological notions in his doctrine of *via eminentiae* where there is a surplus in the divine over being, and St. Augustine's distinction in the *Confessions* of the truth that challenges (*veritas redarguens*) and the ontological truth that shines (*veritas lucens*)<sup>96</sup>

Western knowledge or theory, as Levinas claims, tends to put self-mastery and control of things at the pedestal. By theory Levinas means the comprehension of beings which he calls ontology.<sup>97</sup> He reserves the term metaphysics to the desire for the infinite Other—the good beyond Being.<sup>98</sup> Benedict Spinoza's notion of a *conatus essendi*, the Darwinian concept of 'survival of the fittest' and Freud's idea of the *id* that seeks "gratification, possession or power—the *libido dominandi*" will fit well with this basic

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<sup>96</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 25. See also Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 8. For a detailed treatment of how, to Levinas's mind, some Western thinkers dealt with the notion of the infinite, see his "Infinity," in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. By Michael Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 53-76.

<sup>97</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

<sup>98</sup> See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33-35. The notion of "the good beyond Being", the good as "source and provider of truth and knowledge" is from Plato's dialogue *Republic*. See Plato, *Republic*, translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press), 517b and 518d.

structure of the ego<sup>99</sup> Although it appears that this inclination of the ego to reduce the Other to itself is something negative, Levinas understands it positively Burggraeve points out that this egocentrism does not connote a "base fault or perversion" but it is the "'natural' and perfectly healthy attachment of the ego to itself"<sup>100</sup> He thinks that this is really man's way of being in the world. The ego is by nature self-immersed and seeks enjoyment in the world However, this self-absorption of the ego is not what Levinas means by the "true life" since this spontaneous enjoyment is "equivalent to the absorption by a depersonalized realm of pure materiality"<sup>101</sup> The "true life," as will be explicated later, is found in being responsible for, exposed to, wounded by and held hostage by the Other

Ontological inquiry, which serves as the highest form of human enterprise based on the Aristotelian premise that man is a rational animal, secures for the self, as Levinas points out, its own self-possession and independence It also enables the self to acquire mastery of its surroundings through a rationality which homogenizes beings to a totalizing system outside of its vision or comfort zone This results to a kind of consciousness that represents external objects and unifies them under a general concept nullifying their essential differences. From this objectifying vision, climaxes super-

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<sup>99</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 24 See also *Otherwise Than Being*, 4

<sup>100</sup> Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 43

<sup>101</sup> Peperzak, *To The Other*, 18



consciousness *a la* Hegel that includes and does violence not only to others but even to the individual conscious self<sup>102</sup>

Western philosophy, Levinas contends, has always been an ontology subjugating “the other to the same by the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures comprehension of being”<sup>103</sup> This neutral term is equivalent to Parmenides’ Being, Plato’s World of Forms, Aristotle’s notion of man as one who thinks freely and independently, Descartes’ autonomous ego, Hegel’s Absolute Spirit, Husserl’s ontology of self-consciousness, and Heidegger’s impersonal Being<sup>104</sup> Knowledge acquired through the interposition of a middle term “never encounters anything truly other in the world”<sup>105</sup> Here, the object of knowledge is not the object as it is truly in itself but one which reason intends and clothes with meaning “Reason is alone,” as Levinas would remark<sup>106</sup> Thus ontology becomes so abstract and too farfetched from reality that everything is totalized, systematized and synthesized into an impersonal ego, which is wrongly identified as transcendence. For Levinas, this is “the profound truth of Idealism”<sup>107</sup> Metaphysics as transcendence, in so far as it is construed in Western

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<sup>102</sup> For an explanation on how this type of knowledge grounded in traditional metaphysics tends to lead the self not only to do violence to others but even to itself, see Chapter 2 (Violence and the Self) of Benjamin Hutchens *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 36-46

<sup>103</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43

<sup>104</sup> See William Paul Simmons, “Autonomy, Totality, and Anti-Humanism: Levinas’s Critique of the Western Tradition,” Chapter I of his book *An-archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’s Political Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2003), 19-33. See also Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, “Critique of Ontology,” Chapter 1 of *On Levinas* (Belmont, California: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 5-17

<sup>105</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 39

<sup>106</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 39

<sup>107</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 39

philosophical tradition is not real metaphysics, according to Levinas, for it is actually immanence in the guise of transcendence. It is an egology that embraces or encompasses everything with its outstretched arms leaving nothing outside of itself<sup>108</sup>. Alterity or what is other than the self vanishes into the totalizing vision of the Same. The comprehending gaze of the ego eliminates the distance between itself and its other because both have now become parts of a synthesizing thought construct. Hence, transcendence is reduced into immanence, infinity is absorbed into and by totality.

Levinas reckons that Hegel's philosophy exemplifies this totalizing and panoramic tendency of Western reason. He says

It is in fact the whole trend of Western philosophy culminating in the philosophy of Hegel, which, for very good reason, can appear as the culmination of philosophy itself. One can see this nostalgia for totality everywhere in Western philosophy, where the spiritual and the reasonable always reside in knowledge. It is as if the totality had been lost, and that this loss were the sin of the mind. It is then the panoramic vision of the real which is the truth and which gives all its satisfaction to the mind.<sup>109</sup>

Because of this longing for the absolute truth which seems to be lost or forgotten, Western mind wants to recover from this loss in a frenzied enfolding of reality under one unifying vision. Such an effort has given rise to what Levinas calls ontological imperialism<sup>110</sup>. The paradigm of truth is now for thought to coincide with its object so as

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<sup>108</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. R. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 75.

<sup>109</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 76.

<sup>110</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44.

to make this object intelligible to itself. As a consequence, the object is grasped "out of nothing" or is reduced to nothing, "removing from it its alterity"<sup>111</sup>

Western philosophy's portrayal of knowledge is basically akin to assimilation, synthesis, integration and absorption; it makes philosophy a discipline of power since it provides the ego or the Same a god-like vision. Knowledge acquired in ontology becomes absolute and thus corroborates Francis Bacon's now infamous claim that "Knowledge is power." Levinas remarks: "I think' comes down to 'I can'—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. A philosophy of power, ontology is, as first philosophy which does not call into question the same, a philosophy of injustice"<sup>112</sup>

Heidegger's fundamental ontology, according to Levinas, tends to manifest this seemingly obscure will to master and dominate. Is this not what Nietzsche is trying to say in his posthumous work *The Will to Power*? Heidegger's thinking of Being, says Levinas, "subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny"<sup>113</sup>

As ontology of power, Western philosophy "promotes freedom—the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other"<sup>114</sup> The

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<sup>111</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas echoes his critical appraisal of the Western notion of truth: "Truth can consist only in the exposition of being to itself, in self-consciousness. The soul would live only for the disclosure of being which arouses it or provokes it, it would be a moment of the life of the Spirit, that is, of Being-totality, leaving nothing outside of itself, the same finding again the same", 28.

<sup>112</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

<sup>113</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46-47.

<sup>114</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

ego in his totalizing stance becomes autonomous and free. It perceives the world from a standpoint free from limitations and ventures into the vast expanse of reality in order to conquer it and then returns to itself in order to digest what it has in its possession. "Possession," writes Levinas, "is predominantly the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine."<sup>115</sup> "Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy."<sup>116</sup>

In contrast to a philosophy of autonomy, Levinas proposes a philosophy of heteronomy, a philosophy based on the Other. The Other jolts the ego in its autonomous and contemplative state and summons it to a beyond, to a transcendent, and to what Plato calls the "Good beyond Being."

In order to illustrate the difference between autonomic and heteronomic philosophy, Levinas makes use of Odysseus and Abraham as metaphors. Autonomic philosophy is likened to the journey of Odysseus. It is a journey that begins from the ego, its homeland, proceeds to a yonder and then returns to the same ego. "Philosophical knowledge is a priori: it searches for the adequate idea and assures autonomy. In every new development it recognizes familiar structures and greets old acquaintances. It is an Odyssey where all adventures are only accidents of a return to self."<sup>117</sup> Heteronomic philosophy, on the contrary, is similar to the journey of Abraham. It guides the ego to the

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<sup>115</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46

<sup>116</sup> Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," 93

<sup>117</sup> Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 14. See also *Totality and Infinity*, 27, 271 and *Otherwise than Being*, 99

truth beyond which is unfamiliar to it<sup>118</sup> It is the journey of Abraham who “leaves his fatherland for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure”<sup>119</sup> As will be shown later, autonomic philosophy is spurred by need while heteronomic philosophy is motivated by desire

Though Levinas criticizes Western philosophy as an egology and ontology of power, he however does not entirely reject traditional metaphysics. In leaving the climate of traditional Western metaphysics, he does not subscribe to its destruction or deconstruction but to its reorientation from the preoccupation with the Same to the unwavering concern for the Other<sup>120</sup> What he intends to do is not to overcome metaphysics but to correct and complete it by being faithful to its true meaning as transcendence<sup>121</sup> Levinas explains, “We cannot obviate the language of metaphysics, and yet we cannot, ethically speaking, be satisfied with it it is necessary but not enough”<sup>122</sup> His entire project is actually an attempt to reorient the direction of philosophy from egoism to altruism and from freedom to responsibility He sees the task of philosophy as “the wisdom of love at the service of love”<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33

<sup>119</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” trans Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed Mark Taylor (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1986), 348 Quoted in Simmons, *Anarchy and Justice*, 20

<sup>120</sup> Hent de Vries, “Levinas,” in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, edited by Simon Critchley and William Schroeder (Oxford Blackwell, 1998), 245 See also his *Minimal Theologies*, 372

<sup>121</sup> See Jeffrey Kosky, “Ethics as the End of Metaphysics,” in *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis Indiana University Press, 2001), 3-24

<sup>122</sup> Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” 28.

<sup>123</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 162

Unlike Jacques Derrida, Levinas does not “see the deconstruction of the Western metaphysics of presence as an irredeemable crisis” because he looks at it “as a golden opportunity to open itself to the dimension of otherness and transcendence beyond being”<sup>124</sup> The ego’s enclosure with its own thinking, representing to itself the past by retention and the future by protention, does not inevitably lead to the doom of humanity or its disastrous destiny (nihilism) for the presence of the Other gives hope of recovery towards goodness and justice

Western philosophy’s orientation towards totality and the Same does not really merit Levinas’s ire Levinas’s opposition is not against totality but against its absolutization Levinas, Peperzak opines, recognizes the necessity and contributions of “practical and theoretical totalizations” for human planning and organization in “science and technology, economy, law and justice, administration and politics;” the absence of these would spell death to a society<sup>125</sup> Though philosophy works towards an objectivization (what Levinas calls the Said) of something, it can also work towards a reduction of that objectivization that leads to a recognition of infinity, alterity and transcendence (what Levinas calls the Saying).

#### Being without beings The “There is”

The self, prior to its existence as a subject or *existent* and as one which has identity and determination, lays faceless and unknown in the *there is (Il y a)* It is immersed in and engulfed by the *there is* “What we call the I is itself submerged by the

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<sup>124</sup> Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” 28

<sup>125</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 11-12

night, invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it”<sup>126</sup> In the nocturnal chaos of the *there is*, the self lacks identity and is therefore indeterminate. It slowly acquires determination in its effort to realize itself by escaping the *there is* through assimilation, possession, consumption, absorption of things other than itself. It stabilizes and defines itself through these self-interested activities. The self “desire[s] to get out of itself, to rid itself of itself, to ‘save’ itself from the narrow confines of its material self-relationship, to disburden itself of itself”<sup>127</sup> But in its effort to give form to its existence, the self is still haunted and threatened by the *there is*. It still hears the rumblings of its previous anonymous existence in spite of its labors to leave it.

The *there is* is Levinas’s term for anonymous existence, the form of which is the impersonal verb as in “it rains, or it is warm”<sup>128</sup> It refers to a state that, where all things are to disappear including the self, it still exists and “remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied”<sup>129</sup> The *there is* is “being in general,” pure undifferentiated being.<sup>130</sup> Unlike Heidegger where Being is understood as a donation (*es gibt*) to which Dasein must hearken in order to be authentic, Levinas’s *there is* is a milieu out of which the self emerges and acquires identity as a self. While for Heidegger Being encompasses everything there is in the

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<sup>126</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 31

<sup>127</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 139

<sup>128</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents”, 30

<sup>129</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents”, 31

<sup>130</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents”, 30

sense that it confers meaning and worth to existence, Levinas's *there is* refers to a meaningless existence that enwraps the ego and from which the ego must evade. It is "existence without existents", Being without beings and "content without form." It is an anonymous, impersonal existence before the hypostasis of the individuated human subject. There is no consciousness to experience this anonymous existence and yet it is not to be equated with pure nothingness as if it is a substance that has been annihilated. One cannot approach the *there is* cognitively since one is immersed, steeped and bathed in it. Philip Lawton says, "In approaching the question of the *there is*, then, Levinas attempts to describe, or at least indicate, in language a deduced experience that precedes language, precedes deduction, and precedes experience."<sup>131</sup>

If there is an appropriate description to the *there is* where it could be experienced analogically, it would be the silence and stillness of the night. Levinas, in alluding to the metaphor of the night to describe the *there is*, explains

In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*, there is not 'something'. But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us but this silence.<sup>132</sup>

This silence which the *there is* murmurs Levinas depicts as something frightening, a "mute, absolutely indeterminate menace."<sup>133</sup> The horror which the *there is* engenders is due, not to the fact that things are covered by darkness and so obscures vision, but to the

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69 <sup>131</sup> Philip N. Lawton, Jr., "Levinas' Notion of the 'There Is,'" *Philosophy Today* 29 (Spring 1976)

<sup>132</sup> Levinas, "There is Existence without Existents", 30

<sup>133</sup> Levinas, "There is Existence without Existents", 31



fact that “nothing approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens”<sup>134</sup> As the “dark background of existence,” the *there is* is also a monotonous presence, insomnia, impersonal vigilance which strip consciousness of its subjectivity.<sup>135</sup>

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas names the *there is* as the *element* and he describes it as a state which is neither being, nothing nor becoming The element is “wind, earth, sea, sky, air.” It makes the inner or interior life possible The ego is within element but it does not possess it The ego feels the breeze of the wind, stands on earth, swims in the sea, is encompassed by the sky and breathes air but it does not use the element in the same way it fashions or creates things out of pre-existing materials Levinas simply depicts the ego’s relation to the element as “bathing.” The ego is enveloped by the element and it is immersed in it<sup>136</sup>

The element is one-dimensional; it has no width and length but only depth.<sup>137</sup> As depth it is “inextinguishable consummation”, an uninterrupted, indeterminate, nocturnal space<sup>138</sup> The element is formless, indeterminate, without beginning and without end This explains why for Levinas the element is impervious and refractory to thought because it is without qualitative determination and it is not an object which one can approach and determine by circling around it

The importance of *there is* in Levinas’s philosophy is that, for Levinas, consciousness and individual existence are a hypostasis. Consciousness arises out of this

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<sup>134</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents”, 31

<sup>135</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents”, 31

<sup>136</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131-132

<sup>137</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131

<sup>138</sup> Levinas, “There is Existence without Existents,” 31

anonymous general existence or being. It is from the *there is* that the self builds a home and secure possessions through its labors. In doing so, the ego begins to form its own identity. The *there is* is the medium and the milieu where things for enjoyment are situated. It is the ‘common fund or terrain’ which cannot be possessed by any self.<sup>139</sup> It envelops and contains things but which in itself is not contained and enveloped. From and within the elemental, the self lives, appropriates and possesses things.

The emergence of the self from the *there is* serves as Levinas’s strategy for escaping Heidegger’s notion of Being. If Levinas is to move beyond Being in order to affirm the Other, he has to find a concept that does not preclude him from achieving his purpose. And he finds this in his notion of the *there is*. Davis says that the *there is* “plays a vital strategic role in Levinas’s escape from what he calls the ‘climate of Heideggerian philosophy, since it forms the basis of his attempt to cast off the tyranny of Being.”<sup>140</sup> The *there is* also provides a context in which there is a real encounter between the self and the Other.<sup>141</sup> As was already pointed out in Heidegger’s ontology, Dasein is solitary whose primary relationship is with Being and not with others. The existence of others in Heidegger’s philosophy is presumed as part of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. Dasein’s being in the world is also its being-with-others.

Another importance of the notion of the *there is* is that, through it, Levinas is able to come up with the idea that the ego, in its effort to achieve self-sufficiency, is always menaced by this anonymous existence because of the uncertainty it brings to the ego’s

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<sup>139</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 131

<sup>140</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 23

<sup>141</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 23. See also Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: the Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 68

future. Also, through the *there is*, the self is separated from the infinite and so renders the ego atheistic.<sup>142</sup> The ego is *a-theistic* in the literal sense of the word. It is *not-God*, not the infinite.

#### From Anonymous Being to being: The Separated Ego or Self

This section elaborates Levinas's notion of an ego which is master of itself and of the world that it inhabits. It explains further Levinas's concept of the Same whose concrete expression is the ego and its totalizing activities. Levinas calls the world of the ego as interiority, inner self and psychism.

From the *there is* emerges the ego whose essence is to persist in its own being. For Levinas, relatively agreeing with Spinoza, all beings are driven by their essence to strive to become themselves. Every being is attached to and lives for itself. Each is innately egoistic and inclines towards narcissism. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas takes time to describe the egoistic character of the self, which he describes as enjoyment, nourishment and love of life. Enjoyment is for Levinas the primordial existence.

The ego, as was already discussed in the preceding section, is like the *there is* in which it is immersed. It is faceless, anonymous and without an identity. But it slowly and gradually arises from its anonymity by engulfing objects in *there is* in order to establish itself as separate ego. Levinas describes this process of assimilating and taking possession of things in the *there is* as "living from." The ego, being corporeal and endowed with sensibility, lives from "good soup," air, light, spectacles, work, ideas

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<sup>142</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 132

sleep, etc."<sup>143</sup> It is concerned with the worldly necessities of life. Things from the sensible material world are "swallowed, used, enjoyed, integrated in knowledge or practice" in order for the ego to endure in its being.<sup>144</sup> Hence, *living from* establishes the ego's identity. The ego absorbs the other in order to constitute and maintain itself as the Same. It retains itself as the Same as it changes by appropriating things to itself.<sup>145</sup>

Levinas regards life in its elementary form as happiness and enjoyment. Suffering is possible because life is happiness in the first place. It "presupposes a self whose natural tendency is to enjoy the world."<sup>146</sup> He says

The life that is life *from* something is happiness. Life is affectivity and sentiment, to live is to enjoy life. To despair of life makes sense only because originally life is happiness. Suffering is a failing of happiness; it is not correct to say that happiness is the absence of suffering. Happiness is made up not of an absence of needs, whose tyranny and imposed character one denounces, but of satisfaction of all needs. Happiness is accomplishment; it exists in a soul satisfied and not in a soul that has extirpated its needs, a castrated soul.<sup>147</sup>

Moreover, though the ego realizes that it lives in a strange world where things are either subservient or indisposed to it, still it does not find these things radically opposed to its existence. The world is still pleasant and a source of enjoyment to the ego. As Davis

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<sup>143</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110

<sup>144</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 150

<sup>145</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36

<sup>146</sup> Atterton & Calarco, *On Levinas*, 61

<sup>147</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 115. Wyschogrod avers that Levinas provides a novel insight on life in its basic form as enjoyment which runs contrary to the existentialist view of man who in his existence is stricken by anxiety, boredom, nausea, loneliness and absurdity. She enunciates "Levinas posits a self at home with itself, satiable and happy. Suffering is understood against the background of prior satiety and is experienced as destruction of satiety. Levinas introduces into contemporary existential analyses of primordial affective states a radically new understanding of being-in-the-world, a view that upholds human satisfaction within the framework of ontological plenitude." Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 61

explains “The strangeness of the world is its charm, a cause of happiness. *Jouissance* names the process by which the subject makes itself at home in an environment where otherness is not a threat to be overcome, but a pleasure to be experienced”<sup>148</sup> Levinas explains this point crisply:

The primordial relation of man with the material world is not negativity, but enjoyment and agreeableness [agrement] of life. It is uniquely with reference to this agreeableness—unsurpassable within interiority—that the world can appear hostile, to be negated and to be conquered. If the insecurity of the world that is fully agreed to in enjoyment troubles enjoyment, the insecurity cannot suppress the fundamental agreeableness of life.<sup>149</sup>

For Levinas, the world is fully available to the ego for its nourishment. It gives the ego a way of gratifying itself. The world as other is transformed into the Same and this for Levinas is “the essence of enjoyment”<sup>150</sup>. As enjoyment, the self is at home in the world. It enjoys its economic life. The world, which the self inhabits, is a world where it finds enjoyment and not merely derives its sustenance. Enjoyment is spontaneous and it has no other goal except enjoyment itself.

Life is not the naked will to be, an ontological *Sorge* for this. Life’s relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth [prix] of my life. When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into a shadow. Life is an existence that does not precede essence. Its essence makes up its worth [prix], and here value [valeur] constitutes being. The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense

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<sup>148</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 43

<sup>149</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 149-150

<sup>150</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 111

beyond ontology Happiness is not an accident of being, since being is risked for happiness<sup>151</sup>

The ego absorbs and consumes the things in the world It "lives from" the world Things are consumed and absorbed not for any utilitarian purpose like survival and the satisfaction of a need but for the sake of enjoyment "To enjoy without utility, in pure loss, gratuitously, without referring to anything else, in pure expenditure—this is the human"<sup>152</sup> The essence of existence is enjoyment This kind of life manifests not only the physicality or concreteness of the ego but also its self-centeredness, which for Levinas is a kind of innocence This is an unconscious egoism devoid of any malice Wyschogrod explains this poignantly

In acknowledging man as need Levinas is maintaining dialectically that from the point of view of a developed ethical consciousness man is hopelessly guilty, but from the point of view of natural man he remains innocent. Natural man thus behaves no differently from fallen man, but natural man simply has not experienced the conditions that make his behavior be nonethical behavior He has not yet encountered the upsurge of the Other<sup>153</sup>

What the ego incorporates in enjoyment is not the Other but the other The former puts up a stand before the transcendental ego and refuses to be included in the world the ego constructs for itself The latter is absorbed into the Same and is the "source of jouissance" or enjoyment The Same, as it assimilates the Other, "confirms totality" while

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<sup>151</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 112

<sup>152</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 133

<sup>153</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 62-63 Peperzak endorses the same judgment on the innocence of the ego as enjoyment He says "The hedonism and utilitarianism of the 'economy' is not an evil, but rather the constitution of a provisional world which waits for and 'desires' a more properly human meaning" Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 122

the resistance of the Other “reveals infinity”<sup>154</sup> Levinas emphatically makes a distinction between the other and the Other

The other metaphysically desired is not “other” like the bread I eat, the land which I dwell, the landscape I contemplate, like, sometimes, myself for myself, this “I,” that “other.” I can “feed” on these realities and to a very extent satisfy myself, as though I had simply been lacking them. Their *alterity* is thereby reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or a possessor. The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else*, toward the *absolutely other*<sup>155</sup>

The ego finds enjoyment in the world because, as a bodily living entity, it has sensibility. Sensibility is the ego’s way of first engaging with the world of things. It is the ego’s mode of enjoyment. Sensibility is even enjoyment itself<sup>156</sup>. The ego, as sensibility, has needs which it must satisfy. It has affectivity and sensation which renders it to encounter and enjoy the contents of life.

Levinas makes a careful distinction between need and desire. Need is natural while desire is spiritual. The former, he says, can be satisfied by something finite that the ego lacks, while the latter is insatiable because it intends the infinite. As corporeal, the ego seeks satisfaction for its needs by appropriating the world to itself while remaining within itself<sup>157</sup>. “It would coincide with the consciousness of what has been lost, it would be essentially nostalgia, a longing for return”<sup>158</sup>. Need converts the “*other*” into the *same*

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<sup>154</sup> Davis, *Levinas, An Introduction*, 43

<sup>155</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33

<sup>156</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 135-136

<sup>157</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 350. Cited in Simmons, *An-archy and Justice*, 37

<sup>158</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33

by labor”<sup>159</sup> Desire, on the other hand, moves towards that which cannot complete it. It desires the Good, which as desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.<sup>160</sup> It is the desire for the “alterity of the Other and of the Most-High.”<sup>161</sup> Desire is nourished by its hunger. It wrenches the ego from its self-sufficient existence and directs it to the beyond—the Other.<sup>162</sup> Thus, it is the Other’s egression that answers the deepest desire, which propels the ego to goodness. Levinas however argues that a need resides in desire. Need is the primary movement of the Same and as such it surmounts, suspends and obliterates the alterity of the world.<sup>163</sup> “The human being thrives on his needs, he is happy for his needs.”<sup>164</sup> While this is true for the primordial natural life, the ethical life is animated by desire for the Other which as Infinite awakens this very desire in the self. Need and self-gratification is what characterizes the natural self while desire and responsibility for the Other is what constitutes the subjectivity of the ethical self.

The desire for the Other however is not possible if need, which is a natural inclination, is suppressed. As Levinas writes, “Having recognized its needs as material needs, as capable of being satisfied, the I can henceforth turn to what it does not lack. It distinguishes the material from the spiritual, open to Desire.”<sup>165</sup> In other words, the self

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<sup>159</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 117

<sup>160</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34

<sup>161</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34

<sup>162</sup> Simons, *An-archy and Justice*, 37

<sup>163</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 116-117

<sup>164</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 114

<sup>165</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 117



cannot open its arms to embrace the Other unless it has satisfied its biological and material needs

It must be noted however that Levinas's notion of the ego as "living from" the world is in stark contrast to Heidegger's Dasein as "being-in-the-world." Living from nature does not denote that the ego consciously confronts the world and utilizes it for its own needs. It does not also mean that things from which the ego lives from are a "means of life."<sup>166</sup> It likewise does not mean that the ego is saddled by anxiety as a consequence of its awareness of its own death. Rather, living from nature is the ego's primordial immersion in the *there is* prior to making nature an object of representation and praxis. It is the ego's experience of nature at the level of sensibility before this experience is brought to the level of conscious intentionality. Levinas says "The sensibility we are describing starting with enjoyment of the element does not belong to the order of thought but to that of sentiment, that is, the affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates."<sup>167</sup> Or in the words of Peperzak, "Ego is concerned and takes care of itself before it becomes conscious of itself."<sup>168</sup>

Sensibility does not constitute the world as representation but it constitutes "the very contentment of existence."<sup>169</sup> Here, Levinas is rejecting Husserl's notion of a transcendental ego whose contact with the world is first and foremost an "objectifying relation" "mediated through representation."<sup>170</sup> The objectifying vision of the ego

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<sup>166</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110

<sup>167</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 135

<sup>168</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 150

<sup>169</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 135

<sup>170</sup> Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 20

through representation precludes the appearance of the Other as a genuinely other to the self. But in the level of sensibility, the presence of the Other is strongly felt and he is regarded with esteem and warm affection.<sup>171</sup> Peperzak makes an interesting remark on the significance of sensibility. He explains that "the importance of Levinas's description of sensibility lies in its overcoming the old dualism of body and spirit. In enjoying the world, I am a body that feels itself as an affected and affective, corporeal and sensitive I, not as a disincarnate, invisible, or ethereal consciousness."<sup>172</sup> Though sensibility, like representation, is reflexive and incorporates the other to itself, Levinas thinks that the ethical encounter between the self and the Other is principally in the sensible level of experience before it is raised to consciousness. The poverty of the Other wounds and painfully affects the ego at the level of sensibility rather than cognition.

For Levinas, the ego does not rise above the world as it seems in Husserl's transcendental ego. It has a body which assigns it to inhabit the world. Through the body, the ego labors in order to satisfy its needs. The body, having needs, is the ego's way of overcoming the alterity of what the ego lives from. "For a body that labors everything is not already accomplished, already done, thus to be a body is to have time in the midst of the facts, to be *me* though living in the *other*."<sup>173</sup> Levinas thinks that when the ego first relates with alterity, it does so not on the cognitive level but in the immediacy of bodily contact and experience. The body for Levinas is indigent and naked, and as such it derives nourishment from the world it inhabits. The body however is not an instrument

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<sup>171</sup> This is now the theme of Levinas's second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In this work Levinas reinterprets sensibility as proximity and sensitivity to the Other. See Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 21.

<sup>172</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 156.

<sup>173</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 117.

that the ego uses in order to satisfy its needs. It is not like other things because it is the ego incarnating itself in the world. The ego as a body is already concretely involved in the world before it affirms and represents the world.<sup>174</sup>

The ego as "living from" exhibits its dependence on the things in the world. Although as enjoyment, the ego, like a Leibnizian windowless monad, has acquired independence and mastery of the world, it also relies on the world in the sense that its enjoyment is conditioned by it. The ego can only enjoy what is made available to it by the world. While it is true for example that in the enjoyment of food, sunlight, fresh air, shelter, etc., the ego becomes nourished, warm and healthy, and thus gains independence and self-sufficiency, it is also determined by the world in the sense that its identity is constituted by it. Levinas calls this "mastery in this dependence."<sup>175</sup> Hence, the ego is a master and a slave of what it lives from.<sup>176</sup>

It was explained above that the ego needs to fill its lack or emptiness by appropriating things in the *there is*. It finds enjoyment in doing such activity. In spite of the ego's happiness and enjoyment, it is still disturbed, haunted by the rumbling and horror of the *there is*. According to Peperzak, "Sensibility is an incurable unrest dependent on the contingencies of a future that remains uncertain. After moments of happiness, in which we feel no care, the menaces of the world come back."<sup>177</sup> As one which has sensibility, the ego still finds its happiness insecure. Though the ego finds enjoyment in the elemental, yet its happiness lies in assimilating what is other than itself.

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<sup>174</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 127

<sup>175</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 114

<sup>176</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 65

<sup>177</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 156

and never of itself. Levinas calls this “an enchainment to self, the very enchainment of identification”<sup>178</sup> Enjoyment, although it manifests the freedom and independence of the ego, is still an insufficiency, an independence based on dependence<sup>179</sup> The ego is menaced by the insecurity and anxiety posed by the *there is* And so it takes a slice or piece from the elemental in order to build its own home and accumulate possessions through labor<sup>180</sup> “Labor” for Levinas “recoups the lag between the element and the sensation”<sup>181</sup> It “can surmount the indigence with which not need, but the uncertainty of the future affects being”<sup>182</sup> The ego, confronted by the uncertainty of the future, withdraws in a dwelling in order to find security and stability This is what Levinas calls inhabitation and economy<sup>183</sup> This is the economy of existence where things are ingested to the “establishment and maintenance of a house or home”<sup>184</sup> Hence, “The ‘law’ (*nomos*) of ego’s ‘home’ (*oikos*) rules the universe”<sup>185</sup>

For the ego to escape the horror of existence it must acquire mastery through possession, recollection and representation of the things in the world by extending its domain in and dominion over them “Possession masters, suspends, postpones the

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<sup>178</sup> Levinas, “Time and the Other,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 38

<sup>179</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 143-144

<sup>180</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 156-157

<sup>181</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 141

<sup>182</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 146

<sup>183</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 110

<sup>184</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond*, 9

<sup>185</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond*, 9 See also his *To the Other*, 24

unforeseeable future of the element—its independence, its being.”<sup>186</sup> Consciousness arises as a consequence of planning and annexing things, which actually refers to the ego’s economic activities, in order to find security in the future and allay disquietude.<sup>187</sup> The indeterminacy of the *there is* from which the ego arises causes the ego to think and reflect about its own being. “The indetermination of the future alone brings insecurity to need, indigence the perfidious elemental gives itself while escaping.”<sup>188</sup> “Hence the subject contemplating a world presupposes the event of dwelling, the withdrawal from the elements (that is, from immediate enjoyment, already uneasy about the morrow), recollection in the intimacy of the home.”<sup>189</sup> Without a home, the ego has no orientation and is drowned in the *there is*.<sup>190</sup>

From the above discussion regarding the notion of the self as enjoyment, Levinas is moving beyond Husserl in terms of prioritizing sensibility over representation. While Husserl emphasizes the intentional character of consciousness that founds subjectivity, Levinas rules this out saying that consciousness “is not the ultimate legitimation of subjectivity” and subordinates this to the intentional character of sensibility, which translates to responsibility for the Other.<sup>191</sup> This prepares him for his phenomenology of the Other, the existence of whom is encountered in sensibility. In his *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas reinterprets and extends further this notion of sensibility to a point where

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<sup>186</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 158

<sup>187</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 153

<sup>188</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 141

<sup>189</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 153

<sup>190</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 23

<sup>191</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183

it is now understood as contact with the other's skin and proximity. There is now a deepening of the meaning from a notion of sensibility which allows the self to appropriate in the immediacy of the sensuous elements such as light, air, water, food, etc. to a notion where the self is now construed as sensitivity to the needs of the Other. In other words, sensibility in *Totality and Infinity* is understood within the context of interiority and enjoyment while in *Otherwise than Being*, sensibility is construed as the self's openness, embodied exposure, disposal, subjection, vulnerability, passivity and susceptibility towards alterity. The former notion of sensibility prepares for the latter notion since a self which does not enjoy and does not experience pain and suffering cannot be ethical or become responsible for the Other. As Levinas says, "only a being who eats can be for the other."<sup>192</sup> A being who knows and experiences misery is vulnerable to the miseries of others.

Levinas's discussion of the interiority of the self presages the approach of the Other from a dimension of height. The self, while enraptured by its delight of the world, cannot avoid the presence of the Other. Though the self is solitary and independent, it is suddenly confronted by the comportment of the Other who challenges his autonomous existence. Levinas's phenomenology of the self as interiority and economy is part of his strategy to leave the climate of Heidegger's thinking of Being. Levinas says: "To be I is to exist in such a way as to be already beyond being, in happiness."<sup>193</sup>

Levinas maintains that no real ethical relationship is possible if the ego and the Other are not separate. "Separation is solitude, and enjoyment—happiness or

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<sup>192</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 74

<sup>193</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 120

unhappiness—is isolation itself.”<sup>194</sup> “Egoism, enjoyment, sensibility, and the whole dimension of interiority—the articulations of separation—are necessary for the idea of infinity, the relation with the other which opens forth from the separated and finite being”<sup>195</sup> Levinas’s phenomenology of the self as enjoyment, as interiority, is necessary in order to punctuate the independence of the ego from any form of totalization. Unlike Hegel’s philosophy where the self is a moment of and subsumed under an absolute self, which to Levinas’s judgment is simply a neuter term that neutralizes alterity, the self as interiority is sovereign and master of his own dwelling. Only through the self’s independence can Levinas establish the ethical relation between the self and the Other without constituting a totality.

For Levinas, the egoism of the ego is important for the possibility of ethical metaphysics. Egoism should rather be viewed as separation of desire and the desired so as to maintain the claim that the desired does not fulfill desire but deepens it. In Levinas’s mind, desire provokes the ego to the elusive Other. Egoism, however, must not also be construed as an opposition to the Other or else this opposition assumes a neutral standpoint which would form a “totality encompassing the same and the other”<sup>196</sup> Levinas describes the egoism of the ego as “an incomparable unicity, it is outside of the community of genus and form, and does not find any rest in itself either, unquiet, not coinciding with itself”<sup>197</sup> Hence, man is a unicity which recoils from Being or essence

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<sup>194</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 117

<sup>195</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 148

<sup>196</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38

<sup>197</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 8. See also *Totality and Infinity*, 118

Subjectivity and the Face of the Other: Responsibility to-and-for-the-Other

This section gives an account of the notion of the Other who appears, confronts and challenges the egoism of the self-same. The self, in its encounter with the Other, becomes cognizant of the infinity of the Other. As infinite, the Other lies beyond the range of the self's synthesizing gaze. Levinas asked: "But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into a relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?"<sup>198</sup> It was seen in the previous section that the ego is naturally egoistic, withdrawing and seeking refuge into a home it constructs in order to shelter itself from the dubious future and anonymous being. If this is so, then how is responsibility for the Other induced in the self as basically solitary, egoist, blind and "entirely deaf to the Other?"<sup>199</sup> How can a monadic ego truly encounter another person?<sup>200</sup> Here, Levinas proffers an ethical subject who is neither master, virile, sovereign nor autonomous but one who is a dedicated and generous servant to his fellow human being. He defends a selfless and affective subject who, by being faced by the Other, is summoned to sacrifice and give up his comfort and even his life for the sake of the Other. His notion of a subject whose identity is formed by obsessive responsibility for the Other supplants the

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<sup>198</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38

<sup>199</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134

<sup>200</sup> Husserl poses quite the same question in one of his writings. He asked "How can my ego, within his peculiar ownness, constitute under the name 'experience of something other' precisely something *other*—something that excludes *the constituted* from the concrete make-up of the sense-constituting 'I-myself' which I ascribe to this something other as *alter ego*?" *Cartesian Meditations*, 94. The difference between Husserl and Levinas as regards the problem of the self and the Other is quite obvious. Levinas views the problem as an ethical one whereas Husserl looks at it from the perspective of epistemology. Levinas thinks that Husserl's way of looking at the problem (and all those philosophers who consider the problem as primarily epistemological) jeopardizes ethics in that one does not need to prove first that the Other exists before one can be responsible for him. In other words, one does not ask oneself if the person who needs his immediate help exists or not before he extends his assistance. This demeanor, Levinas would perhaps think, is preposterous.



hegemonic subject reduced to consciousness by Western philosophy “The reduction of subjectivity to consciousness,” Levinas observes, “dominates philosophical thought, which since Hegel has been trying to overcome the duality of being and thought, by identifying, under different figures, substance and subject”<sup>201</sup>

*Ethics as Critique of the Freedom and Hegemony of the Self* The ego’s self-absorption, its being at home and solitary in the world, is interrupted and opened up by the presence and approach of the Other. Levinas succinctly puts it this way “The presence of the Other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world”<sup>202</sup> He names as ethics this state of affair where the Other thwarts the self’s enjoyment and freedom.<sup>203</sup> He construes ethics not merely as a theoretical and norm-giving discipline. He does not also understand it as a theory based on “rationalist self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics)”<sup>204</sup> Likewise, he does not think that ethics must be founded on “altruistic will, instinct of ‘natural benevolence’ or love” because this would imply that they are attributes inherent in the subject and this runs contrary to the self’s egoistic nature.<sup>205</sup> For Levinas, the subjectivity of the self is shaped by and within the matrix of the ethical relation. Hence, ethics is more of a “face to face” meeting between

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<sup>201</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 103

<sup>202</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75-76

<sup>203</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43

<sup>204</sup> Betina Bergo, “Emmanuel Levinas” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, editor, available from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/levinas/>

<sup>205</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 111-112. See also Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 80

the self and Other, where the latter, as an almost overwhelming presence (which Levinas calls '*the other in the same*'), stands as a critique of the "liberty, spontaneity and cognitive enterprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself" <sup>206</sup>

As a critique, ethics always keeps vigil of the possible threat posed by totalizing philosophical systems and the ways of life these systems engender. It will see to it that the relation between the self and the Other is not subsumed under a unifying and mediating principle which issues from and still prioritizes the sovereign ego. Levinasian ethics also stresses the urgency and compelling responsibility that the self must immediately assume as a result of its passivity for the Other. This ethical exigency is enkindled by the Other's proximity to the self. Levinas criticizes previous ethical theories because they are preoccupied with matters concerning the validity and the justification of moral standards. These theories seem to overlook the necessity of responding immediately to the ethical demand exhibited by the Other. More importantly, these ethical theories hinge on human reason or freedom which, according to Levinas, tends to lapse into or even encourage egoism and eventually violence. Moreover, Levinas's ethics sheds light on the problem raised by some ethicists since Hume that the *ought* (moral obligation) cannot be derived from the *is* (fact). Viewed from within Levinas's ethics, this problem does not yet exist since it dwells on the plane of consciousness. Ethics for Levinas is prior to theoretical philosophy. It is "the immediate experience of another's

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<sup>206</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 111, Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 15. See also Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, second edition (George Square, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 5.

emergence” which “contains the root of all possible ethics as well as the source from which all insights of theoretical philosophy should start”<sup>207</sup>

The presence of the Other, according to Levinas, makes the ego feel guilty and ashamed. But this culpability, as will be shown later in this section, does not necessarily obliterate the ego, for such effacing would constitute violence. For Levinas, the Other is the unexpected visitor or stranger who shakes and disturbs “the being at home with oneself”<sup>208</sup>. The epiphany of the Other makes the ego ask whether in his happy existence, in his “being-in-the-world” or “place in the sun”, he is not depriving the Other of his own rightful place in the world whom he has “already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world”<sup>209</sup>. Unlike other beings, the Other defies representation in thought and thus cannot be assimilated into the ego’s world (as in Husserl’s transcendental constitution). The Other rather awakens the self to its real authentic existence—a life anchored in the ethical relation referred to by Levinas as metaphysical desire. The revelation of the Other poses a challenge to the ego’s monadic existence and its power to engulf things outside of its own milieu. The Other represents an excess to thought, a transcendence and a “Good beyond Being”. It is not a phenomenon falling within the noesis-noematic phenomenological schema but an enigma, an entity that surprises and addresses the self that wallows in its complacent existence in the world<sup>210</sup>. He signifies an unreachable height that commands and demands infinite and unconditional responsibility.

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<sup>207</sup> Peperzak, *To the Other*, 22

<sup>208</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39

<sup>209</sup> Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 82, 85. Levinas, alluding to Heidegger, asks “if the Da of my Dasein is not already the usurpation of somebody else’s place.” Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, 85

<sup>210</sup> See Levinas, “Enigma and Phenomenon,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 65-77

Levinas says that the presence of the Other is the ego's source of meaning, liberating it from its previously egoistic existence. In an interview, Levinas enunciates the following: "My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness"<sup>211</sup> This is because the Other is the heart of the same, the very psyche of the soul of the self<sup>212</sup> The very structure of the self is its responsibility for the Other. The self is "one-for the other." If the Other is the heart of the self, the self is the lung and support of the Other

*Exposure* The ego finds its life weighed down by the *there is* unless it answers the ethical claim of the Other. It suffers from "ennui, that is, from enchantment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity," failing to open its home and offer it to the Other<sup>213</sup> The self, in its effort "to be" (or as *conatus essendi*), will become restless if it keeps on "equalizing difference" or otherness to itself<sup>214</sup> This uneasiness or anguish however is due neither to the self's preoccupation with itself nor to its "existential 'being-for-death'," but due to its exposure and proximity to the Other which Levinas describes as "the anguish of contraction and breakup"<sup>215</sup> Levinas explains

This contraction is not an impossibility to forget oneself, to detach oneself from oneself, in the concern for oneself. It is a recurrence to oneself out of an irrecusable exigency of the other, a duty

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<sup>211</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 24

<sup>212</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 109

<sup>213</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 124

<sup>214</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 107

<sup>215</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 108

overflowing my being, a duty becoming a debt and an extreme passivity prior to the tranquility, still quite relative, in the inertia and materiality of things at rest. It is a restlessness and patience that support prior to action and passion. Here what is due goes beyond having, but makes giving possible. This recurrence is incarnation. In it the body which makes giving possible makes one *other* without alienating.<sup>216</sup>

For Levinas, hypostasis—the emergence of the self from anonymous being—is exposure to the Other.<sup>217</sup> And this exposure so strikes the self that it returns and contracts to itself, feeling the weight of responsibility inflamed by the Other. Exposure is the “risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability.”<sup>218</sup> The recurrence of the self is not a process of self-conscious activity where consciousness reaches out to external objects and returns to itself fully aware of its own being.<sup>219</sup> This is Hegel’s philosophical project. Rather, this recurrence is an assignation where the self’s responsibility for the Other is unique and irreplaceable. The intentional nature of the self to grasp what is other than itself is deflected by the human Other (or what Levinas calls the ‘inversion of intentionality’)<sup>220</sup> and goes to affect the very core of the self and prompts him to acknowledge and respect that which it cannot be integrated into its being. Levinas makes use of a variety of terms to describe this condition where the Other affects the nucleus of the self. He says that the self is hostage, disturbed, interrupted, traumatized, beleaguered, persecuted, deposed, besieged, assailed, expelled, stripped, dislodged, attached, exposed, denuded, defeated,

<sup>216</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 109

<sup>217</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 106. See also Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 202

<sup>218</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48

<sup>219</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146

<sup>220</sup> See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 47

extradited, deported and subjugated<sup>221</sup> All these can be summed up in a central theme in his second major work (*Otherwise than Being*) namely, substitution.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas now sets up the precedence of the notion of a subject being affected in its passivity and susceptibility by the Other over the notion of a subject in *Totality and Infinity* as first and foremost sensuous and *jouissance*. The subject in the earlier work seeks to escape from the *there is* in order to constitute itself as a subject that enjoys its immersion in the world. But in the second major work, it is alterity or the Other that makes the ego recoil to itself in order to assume responsibility not only for itself but for the entire universe<sup>222</sup>. The ego is made to bear the weight of the world upon its shoulder like Atlas in Greek mythology. This is then the origin of his infinite responsibility to the Other. As will be explained in the paragraphs that will follow, the self is singled out, the reason of which it knows not, to put himself in the place of the Other (substitution) and to act as the very breath of his life.

*The Face of the Other* Levinas argues that the Other discloses himself as a face. The face is the "way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*."<sup>223</sup> "The face approaches with a glance, a word, a gesture or a movement of the whole body. It addresses, expresses an appeal to, and makes demands of the Self."<sup>224</sup> The Other, which reveals himself as a face, touches the self to the very core of its being. The look of the Other pierces the heart of the self so that the self cannot evade the Other's call.

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<sup>221</sup> Andrius Valevičius, *From the Other to the Totally Other: The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 2-3.

<sup>222</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 116.

<sup>223</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50.

<sup>224</sup> Virginia L. Jayme, "Emmanuel Levinas' Philosophy of Responsible Subjectivity," *Philippiana Sacra* 26 (May-August 1990): 245.

for help, generosity and sacrifice. This look is the look of the poor, the orphan and the widow that begs for mercy and compassion. The presence of the Other that strikes the very being of the self Levinas would call passivity, affectivity, vulnerability, persecution and trauma. Some of these themes would be elaborated later in this section.

The self encounters the face in sensible experience but it also transcends that experience.<sup>225</sup> The face of the Other is not a phenomenon that can be turned into an object of representation. It is not the physical face that one sees because it is beyond perception and cognition. The Other as the face is not exposed to the thematizing gaze of the self but approaches the self from outside its horizon. The Other appears not according to the self's initiative or illumination but according to its own light.<sup>226</sup> "The relation with the face is not an object-cognition. The transcendence of the face is at the same time its absence from this world into which it enters, the exiling [depaysement] of a being, his condition of being stranger, destitute, or proletarian."<sup>227</sup> Thus, as someone who appears outside of the self's vision, world, home and horizon, the status of the Other is then "absolute." He is not limited or confined by the self's synthesizing knowledge because he absolves from it. He continually slips away from the self's intellectual grasp. And as such, he is homeless, a total stranger who deserves to be taken care of. The Other is also not just a mere exteriority which lies outside of the self; the Other "approaches me not

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<sup>225</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198. See also Roland Paul Blum, "Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XLIV (December 1983) 152.

<sup>226</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65-66.

<sup>227</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75.

from outside but from above”<sup>228</sup> For this reason, the Other is not wholly in the ego’s site but he is transcendent<sup>229</sup>

Although the face is opaque to physical and intellectual vision, it is nevertheless the living presence and expression of the Other who continually unmakes and eludes the thematization of the Same “The face is a living presence, it is expression The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as theme, is thereby dissimulated.”<sup>230</sup> Precisely as expression, the face defies the power of the self to contain the Other in its thought, for the Other “is incessantly and infinitely withdrawing and surpassing its revelations”<sup>231</sup> The face reveals, and so the self wants to make it present in its consciousness And yet the more the self attempts to represent it, the more it withdraws This impossibility of catching up manifests the infinity and radical alterity of the Other The face of the Other evinces indigence and defenselessness and so it begs and summons the self to deeds of kindness and generosity. And because the face expresses misery and helplessness, the face of the Other commands the self to respond by doing something to relieve the Other of his suffering Paradoxically, this command makes the Other lord and master in his frailty “The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement—glorious abasement, he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time of the master called to invest and justify my freedom”<sup>232</sup> As Levinas describes

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<sup>228</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171

<sup>229</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39

<sup>230</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66

<sup>231</sup> Jayme, “Emmanuel Levinas’ Philosophy of Responsible Subjectivity,” 252

<sup>232</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 251



This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving (as one “puts the things in question in giving”)—this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to whom one approaches as “You” in a dimension of height.<sup>233</sup>

For Levinas, the epiphany of the Other evokes a command “you shall not commit murder.”<sup>234</sup> It is the first ethical injunction as soon as the self encounters the Other. Levinas claims that the ego cannot assimilate, absorb and comprehend the Other in the same way it negates the non-human other.<sup>235</sup> The ego can only negate the non-human other partially, otherwise, it cannot enjoy what it assimilates completely.<sup>236</sup> The ego cannot totally absorb the nonhuman other. It partially preserves and neutralizes the otherness of the nonhuman other in order to absorb it. In the case of the human Other, it is the only being that the ego can kill because it resists total annihilation or negation.<sup>237</sup> Though by reducing the Other to the Same, the Other may be murdered and the command defied, but before this horrible act can be done, the Other already orders the prohibition of murder. Murder, to Levinas’s mind, is the self’s refusal to recognize and respect the radical alterity of the Other. It is the utter disregard of the Other’s paralyzing power over the self’s power to annihilate. As Levinas explains

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<sup>233</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75

<sup>234</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199, 201, 230, 251, 297, 302, 303

<sup>235</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194

<sup>236</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198

<sup>237</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198. See also Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion*,

To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate, it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. I can wish to kill only an existent which is absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely and therefore does not oppose them but paralyses the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.<sup>238</sup>

The very reason why the Other cannot be contained or integrated into the Same is that only the Other is the being whom the Same wants to kill. The Same cannot murder a being which easily succumbs to its wishes. But the Other, as infinitely transcendent and infinitely foreign and one whom the Same wishes to kill, cannot be annihilated by the murderous power of the self because it exceeds its powers infinitely.<sup>239</sup>

The Other opposes and disarms the ego of his freedom, power and imperialism. As naked and destitute, the Other poses a defiant stand against the ego's sovereignty not with violent force but by its frailty. Levinas describes it as a "resistance of what has no resistance—the ethical resistance."<sup>240</sup> It is a force of infinite transcendence "stronger than murder" and "convinces even 'the people who do not wish to listen'"<sup>241</sup> To oppose power with power is to subscribe either to the Hobbesian state of nature wherein man is at war with other men, the Hegelian dialectics of master and slave relation where there is a struggle for recognition, or the Sartrean notion of Being-for-itself which culminates in absolute power, freedom and reason. In these three philosophies, the Other is viewed as a threat to the ego's existence. When seen within the Levinasian ethical project, these three philosophies is "ethically dangerous" because it reduces the primordial ethical relation to

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<sup>238</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198

<sup>239</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194

<sup>240</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198

<sup>241</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199, 201. Here Levinas quotes Plato's *Republic* 327 b

that of struggle and war instead of welcome and peace<sup>242</sup> In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says “The whole of this work aims to show a relation with the other not only cutting across the logic of contradiction, where the other of A is the non-A, the negation of A, but also across dialectical logic [Hegel], where the same dialectically participates in and is reconciled with the Other in the Unity of the system”<sup>243</sup> Furthermore, the Other’s resistance is not only nonviolent but it also calls the ego to responsibility and invests it with freedom. It does not limit the freedom of the self because his freedom has not yet emerged. Instead it promotes his freedom by arousing its goodness<sup>244</sup> As Levinas says, the “absolutely other—the Other—does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it”<sup>245</sup>

*Election and Passivity* Levinas contends that the self’s responsibility to and for the Other is already established prior to the self’s existence. The responsibility is already assigned before the self is born. The responsibility for the Other does not only precede one’s birth but also one’s freedom and commitment. This is so because freedom “already presupposes a theoretical consciousness, as a possibility to assume, before or after the event, a taking up that goes beyond the susceptiveness of passivity.”<sup>246</sup> For Levinas, responsibility is placed on one’s shoulder from an immemorial past, “a past more ancient than every origin, a pre-original and anarchical past” and “a past more ancient than any

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<sup>242</sup> David Couzens Hoy, *Critical Resistance: From Poststructuralism to Post-Critique* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 155

<sup>243</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 150

<sup>244</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200, 203

<sup>245</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197

<sup>246</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 136.

present, a past which was never present”<sup>247</sup> This responsibility from an anarchical past is already assigned to the self in creation. The self is already created as an ethical being and its subjectivity is precisely this responsibility for the Other. Levinas says, “The miracle of creation lies in creating a moral being”<sup>248</sup> The subject was not created and then was given freedom in order to decide whether it should assume responsibility for the Other or not. Rather, its very subjectivity is its subjection to the other. Being a creature, the self is “more passive than the passivity of matter” in the sense that it bears responsibility for the Other from nothingness “before hearing the order”<sup>249</sup> Passivity implies the vulnerability of the self to the Other to the point of being accused, traumatized and persecuted. This means then that the self is not the cause and origin of responsibility. Moreover, passivity also connotes that the self has “nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation” and appeal of the Other.<sup>250</sup> The self is already singled out prior to its encounter with and even what is legally due to the Other.<sup>251</sup> Peperzak has this to say about Levinas’s passivity of the subject

This passivity without choice can only be thought of as patience and pain or suffering, for otherwise—as enjoyer—I would myself still be the focus and neither handed over nor dedicated to the other. My suffering must even be—at least partially—meaningless. For were I able to grasp its meaning, I would be able to integrate it into my consciousness in the form of some piece of knowledge.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 9, 24

<sup>248</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89

<sup>249</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 113

<sup>250</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 105

<sup>251</sup> Atterton and Calarco explains “An unargued assumption of many modern moral philosophers is that the Other only has the right to demand what is his or legal due, and that anything he or she receives beyond that is purely optional and a matter of private philanthropy on the part of the benefactor. It has to be said time and time again that Levinas is opposed to that way of conceiving ethics.” *On Levinas*, 70-71

<sup>252</sup> Peperzak, *To The Other*, 221

Passivity implies accusation. The obligation imposed by the Other on the self makes the self guilty. It is as if the self owes the Other a debt without really incurring it. But this debt actually has its roots in the self's dependence on the Other. Since the Other defines the subjectivity of the self as a "being-uniquely-responsible for the Other," it then follows that the self is indebted to the Other.<sup>253</sup> "My relation to the Other," James Richard Mensch poignantly describes, "individualizes me."<sup>254</sup> Moreover, the responsibility of the self to the Other increases to the measure in which the self fulfills this obligation. The self cannot really pay off the burden of its guilt. More is demanded of him than what he can accomplish. This is an accusation which the self does not deserve. This unearned accusation Levinas calls persecution. The self is persecuted against his will. He is one who lives for the Other and has no complete possession of his own life. All these can be summed up as substitution. In substitution, the self is totally responsible for the other, not only for the other's misery but also for his crimes—even for the outrage that the other initiates against the suffering subject.<sup>255</sup>

Levinas describes the passivity of the self to the Other as maternity. "Maternity in the complete being "for the other" which characterizes it . . . is the ultimate sense of this vulnerability."<sup>256</sup> This best describes the way the self bears and serves the Other. Like a mother, the self carries the Other without thought of reward or reciprocity. It is purely

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<sup>253</sup> James Richard Mensch, *Postfoundational Phenomenology: Husserlian Reflections on Presence and Embodiment* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2001), 208.

<sup>254</sup> Mensch, *Postfoundational Phenomenology*, 207.

<sup>255</sup> See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 108-113.

<sup>256</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 108.

giving, nourishing and sacrificing. The self nurtures the Other in the same way that a mother selflessly takes care of her child.

According to Levinas, the Other is 'the first one on the scene' and he orders the self even before the self recognizes him.<sup>257</sup> Prior to the self's awareness of the Other, responsibility for the Other is already firmly instituted as if the self is obsessed, persecuted, wounded, and accused by the Other. The Other already provokes and inflicts the self with responsibility before the self can respond either by acceptance or refusal. The self is singled out to serve the Other and he is irreplaceable in his obligation to the Other. It cannot renounce its irreplaceable responsibility because to do so would mean giving up its own being.<sup>258</sup> Its own being, it must be noted, is a result of its responsiveness to alterity. He is exposed and vulnerable to the Other's call for help. In a very touching expression, Levinas says

In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give. It is thus one and unique, in passivity from the start, having nothing at its disposal that would enable it to not yield to the provocation. It is one, reduced to itself and as it were contracted, expelled into itself outside of being. The exile or refuge in itself is without conditions and support, far from the abundant covers and excuses which the essence exhibited in the said offers. In responsibility as one assigned or elected from the outside, assigned as irreplaceable, the subject is accused in its skin, too tight for its skin.<sup>259</sup> This responsibility placed on the shoulder of the self before its birth is what

Levinas calls "unjustifiable election." The self is chosen to take care of the Other, the reason of which is oblivious to the self, except that the self's "election is in the

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<sup>257</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 87

<sup>258</sup> Mensch, *Postfoundational Phenomenology*, 208

<sup>259</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 105-106

subjection<sup>260</sup> Election refers to the self's unforeseeable and singular or unique obligation to the Other<sup>261</sup> It is the 'Good', Levinas says, that elects the self to serve the Other

The Good cannot become present or enter into a representation. The present is a beginning in my freedom, whereas the Good is not presented to freedom, it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily We can see the formal structure of nonfreedom in a subjectivity which does not have time to choose the Good and thus is penetrated with its rays unbeknownst to itself But subjectivity sees this freedom redeemed, exceptionally, by the goodness of the Good. The exception is unique And if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to the Good<sup>262</sup>

For Levinas, election is not a privilege but "the fundamental characteristic of the human person as morally responsible. Responsibility is a principle of individuation."<sup>263</sup> It is not the Heideggerian anxiety over one's death that singularizes the self but its assumption of responsibility instigated by the face of the Other Being already chosen to be responsible for the Other before one's birth signifies not prestige but responsibility The self must take up this challenge that gives worth and dignity to his being

*Subjectivity and Substitution* For Levinas, the subjectivity of the subject is its subjection to the Other The self is one-for-the Other, built and structured to respond to another human being. This is what is precisely meant by the self's radical passivity to the Other Once the Other appears on the scene, the self is immediately responsible and no one can take his place Right there and then, the self is summoned to responsibility even

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<sup>260</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127

<sup>261</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 145

<sup>262</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11

<sup>263</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans Michael B Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 108

to the point of substituting for the Other Levinas writes: "I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me Such is my inalienable identity of subject"<sup>264</sup> The self's irreplaceable substitution for the Other, its being accused by the Other is what, according to Levinas, makes the self unique<sup>265</sup> This excessive responsibility of the self for the Other, however, does not negate the identity of the self It is not "a flight into the void, but a movement into fullness" which establishes the subjectivity, identity and unicity of the self<sup>266</sup> As Levinas explains

It is, however, not an alienation, because the other in the same is my substitution of the other through responsibility, for which I am summoned as someone irreplaceable I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation. I am inspired<sup>267</sup>

Subjectivity for Levinas is not primarily consciousness. The "appearance of being is not the ultimate legitimization of subjectivity"<sup>268</sup> As Jeffrey Kosky says, "The subject is not, finally, reducible to the field or the event wherein beings are deployed in their being"<sup>269</sup> Levinas remarks, "consciousness, knowing of the self by the self [*savoir de soi par soi*], is not all there is to the notion of subjectivity It already rests on a 'subjected' condition"<sup>270</sup> which is "the very sub-jection of the subject obsessed with responsibility for the oppressed"<sup>270</sup> Levinas rejects Descartes' central claim "I think, therefore I am"

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<sup>264</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 101

<sup>265</sup> Levinas *Otherwise than Being*, 139

<sup>266</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 108

<sup>267</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114

<sup>268</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 183

<sup>269</sup> Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion*, 83

<sup>270</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 102, 55



and replaces it with an accusative statement "Here I am"<sup>271</sup> The latter expression signifies an unconditional offering of oneself to another. This means that the self as sensibility already encounters and is already affected by the other at the level of sensibility before the other becomes an object of consciousness<sup>272</sup> As Critchley says, "The ethical relation takes place at the level of sensibility, not at the level of consciousness The Levinasian ethical subject is a sensible subject, not a conscious subject"<sup>273</sup> In fact, subjectivity is the Other in the Same "The other in the same determinative of subjectivity is the restlessness of the same disturbed by the other"<sup>274</sup> Furthermore, this subjectivity is a condition of being hostage to the Other<sup>275</sup> The self as hostage does not only mean that the self must answer the call and satisfy the hunger of the Other but it also implies that the self is responsible for the behavior and misdeeds of the Other, including those acts that persecute other persons including the self.<sup>276</sup>

According to Michele Saracino,

The term hostage is a powerful image for Jews and Christians alike, for one cannot help but think of the moments in which Abraham's son, Isaac, and God's son, Jesus, are held hostage for others. Importantly, these situations are not ones of simple exchange. It is . . . sacrifice beyond a symmetrical substitution or equal trade<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 145-146, 149, 152, 185 Here Levinas echoes Abraham's reply to God in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 22:1) when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac "Here I am" (in Hebrew 'hineni' and Levinas translation in French is 'me voici') is the self's unconditional obedience to the call of the Other

<sup>272</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 101

<sup>273</sup> Critchley, "Introduction," to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 20-21

<sup>274</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 25

<sup>275</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127

<sup>276</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117-118

<sup>277</sup> Michele Saracino, *On Being Human: A Conversation with Levinas and Lonergan* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), 96

To be hostage to the Other is a deposition that draws the self out of its home to meet and welcome the Other even to the point of offering his comfort and life <sup>278</sup> The real meaning of subjectivity is subjection to the other <sup>279</sup> Subjectivity is synonymous to responsibility. Such responsibility is non-reciprocal or asymmetrical. The self cannot demand from the other the same responsibility he gives to him. As such, responsibility is disinterested and non-transferable. No one can take the place of the self's responsibility for the Other <sup>280</sup> The subject, before it can form an image of the Other, is already affected and shocked by the Other's presence. The outward movement of its consciousness in order to apprehend and possess the exterior is reverted by the Other. Before the ego can exercise its sovereign will, it is already persecuted by the Other <sup>281</sup> For Levinas, "The other individuates me in the responsibility I have for him" <sup>282</sup> This varies from Heidegger's notion of subjectivity because it is death that individuates Dasein.

The self's responsibility for the Other does not happen by chance, rather, it is placed in the subject and takes the form of an accusation. Levinas says, "I have not done anything and I have always been under accusation—persecuted" <sup>283</sup> The self does not know the reason why, except that from the very beginning he is already de-posed from his home as a subject. "It is a withdrawal in-onself which is an exile in onself, without

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<sup>278</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127

<sup>279</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 98

<sup>280</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 100-101

<sup>281</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 101-102

<sup>282</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 12

<sup>283</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114

a foundation in anything else, a non-condition. The withdrawal excludes all spontaneity, and is thus always already effected, already past."<sup>284</sup>

For Levinas, the form that the subject's subjection to the Other assumes is that of sensibility or sentience. This sensibility is a vulnerability and passivity towards the Other. Sensibility is proximity to the Other and it is the foundation of intentionality.<sup>285</sup> Hence, for Levinas the self is an embodied subject capable of being affected and vulnerable to the needs and sufferings of the Other. As Critchley describes: "The ethical subject is an embodied being of flesh and blood, a being that is capable of hunger, who eats and who enjoys eating."<sup>286</sup> For Levinas, responsibility is concrete. The self is incarnated so that it can support the material needs of the other. The self in hypostasis builds a home in order to welcome and play host to the stranger who knocks at the door. As Levinas explains, sensibility

has meaning only as a "taking care of the other's need," of his misfortunes and his faults, that is, as a giving. But giving has meaning only as a tearing from oneself despite oneself, and not only *without me*. And to be torn from oneself despite oneself has meaning only as a being torn from complacency in oneself characteristic of enjoyment, snatching the bread from one's mouth. Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify.<sup>287</sup>

The intimate relation between the self and Other is what Levinas calls proximity. Levinas describes proximity in the following way.

Proximity is thus *anarchically* a relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality. The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical

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<sup>284</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 107

<sup>285</sup> Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 21

<sup>286</sup> Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 21

<sup>287</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 74

contiguity, nor to the simple "representation" of a neighbor, it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment. This formula expresses a way of being affected without the source of affection becoming a theme of representation. We have called this relationship irreducible to consciousness obsession.<sup>288</sup>

In other words, proximity, although it puts into contact the self and the Other, does not reduce the contact into a union where the independence or separation of both is annihilated. It is a difference which is "non-indifference."<sup>289</sup> This explains why Levinas calls the Other as the *stranger* because he is outside of the ego's intentional grasp and a *neighbor* because he touches the very sensibility of the self.

One's responsibility for the Other, according to Levinas, is not motivated by a debt the former owes to the latter. Such a motivation manifests the ego's need to persist in his being. The motivation is not intrinsic but extrinsic to the self although the Other as the infinite is already in the finite self.<sup>290</sup> What the Other does is that it awakens the self to its responsibility. But this awakening is "produced concretely in the form of an irresistible call to responsibility."<sup>291</sup> This concrete responsibility means "To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting."<sup>292</sup>

As already noted above, Levinas says that the infinite is already contained in a thought that exceeds and cannot contain it. The prefix "*in*" of infinite both signifies that

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<sup>288</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 100-101

<sup>289</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 139, 166

<sup>290</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 48-52

<sup>291</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 23

<sup>292</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 56

the infinite is *inside* the finite self as well as *outside* of it<sup>293</sup> How is this possible? The infinite is already in the finite because, as already explained, somebody from an immemorial past placed it there. The self is already made responsible to Other prior to its creation or birth. The infinite is at the same time outside of the finite self because the self is not the reason or the cause of the infinite Other's existence. The infinite Other is in fact the reason for the finite self's being. It must be remembered that the subjectivity of the subject is its subjection to the Other. It is the Other that constitutes the very subjectivity of the self, a subjectivity that is "a passivity more passive than all passivity." Thus, the self is passive and vulnerable to the disturbance of the Other. This passivity and vulnerability, however, is not tranquility because it is a passivity and vulnerability of a hostage.<sup>294</sup>

The self's responsibility to the Other, just like desire, is infinite and insatiable. It is infinite because the more the ego responds to the Other, the more the responsibility deepens. As Levinas says, "The debt increases in the measures that it is paid."<sup>295</sup> Levinas quotes Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* to stress this point: "Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others."<sup>296</sup>

For Levinas the relation between the self and the Other is not reciprocal but asymmetrical. The self's responsibilities to the Other is not equal to the responsibilities of the Other to the Same. To construe the relation as reciprocal would place both in the

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<sup>293</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 63.

<sup>294</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 23.

<sup>295</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 12.

<sup>296</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 72.

same category or genus which implies a totality. Reciprocity is equality and this makes both sides of the equation identical. Such identity is not ethical but ontological. The asymmetrical relation between the self and the Other is due to the self's irreplaceable substitution (or unicity) for the Other. The self can substitute for the Other but no one can substitute him in his responsibility for the Other. The self alone bears this responsibility upon himself and cannot place this burden on others. The self's responsibility is unique and non-transferable. For this reason, Levinas argued that responsibility is excessive, infinite and irreplaceable. As such, the responsible self cannot demand the same amount of responsibility from the Other. To do so, Levinas says, "would be to preach human sacrifice" and it is "criminal."<sup>297</sup> One's responsibility cannot be universalized (as in Kant) otherwise the responsible self would just be something abstract and not a concrete one. The responsible subject is "me", unique and particularly elected to respond to the approach of the Other.

The Other's destitution makes the self question its own existence as regards his contribution to the Other's misery even if the self is not directly and consciously involved. This shows how powerful the Other is despite his weakness. In the face of the Other, the self's freedom is questioned and he is summoned to surrender it in order to preserve it. But this relinquishment of freedom is not in line with Hobbes' (and, to a certain extent, Hegel's) conception where individual freedom is subordinated to the State. Such a renunciation is self-serving because one gives up one's liberty in order to have peace and consequently preserve one's being. As Peperzak explains

The incentive to peace remains selfish-striving toward a secure life in mutual exchange with other humans. The self-interested repression of

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<sup>297</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 113, 126

violence secures rational coherence and association Reason and politics fight every possible anarchy<sup>298</sup>

Levinas thinks that this notion of freedom subordinated to the ideals of the State is bound to create trouble and violence because it is not grounded on a selfless or disinterested ethical relation. For him, freedom is given up not to the abstract goals of the State but to the Other who is concrete In this sense, the freedom of the self is not dissolved into a blind acquiescence to an anonymous power as in Heidegger, which is still a vestige of ontology

*Language and Proximity.* The ethical relation between the self and the Other is not a perceptual or visual encounter Instead, it is a linguistic event<sup>299</sup> The Other who discloses himself as the face Levinas designates as “*primordial* expression” or language whose first word is “you shall not commit murder”<sup>300</sup> The face is not something that the self sees but someone to whom it speaks This close encounter and contact between the self and the Other through language, Levinas names proximity Proximity is the pre-original approach of the Other that establishes non-cognitive and non-spatial intimacy of the self with the Other. It is non-cognitive because the ethical encounter takes place at the level of sense and affective experience It is also non-spatial because it preserves the distance between the two Otherwise, this relation is reduced into a unity or synthesis which constitutes a totality

The face as expression or language is a signification that signifies an ethical command His presence speaks the language of an ethical appeal, of prayer or

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<sup>298</sup> Peperzak, *To The Other*, 217 Cf Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 77-83

<sup>299</sup> Critchley, “Introduction,” to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 12

<sup>300</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199

supplication<sup>301</sup> The Other beseeches the self to recognize and respect him This in turn instigates the self to express the language of greeting, a “hello” which signifies a blessing and availability<sup>302</sup> The self is beckoned to offer himself and say “Here I am ” Through language, the Other opens and offers himself to the self The Other who approaches communicates to the self and this touches the self’s sensibility In language, the self finds that it cannot assimilate the Other in its world The self discovers through language that he does not inhabit the world alone and that there are others who also share this world with him. Language is the place where different worlds come together Hence, it becomes the birthplace as well as the matrix of the ethical relation For Levinas, language “announces the ethical inviolability of the Other”<sup>303</sup> Its essence is hospitality and goodness.<sup>304</sup> As an ethical event, language welcomes the Other The following lines from *Totality and Infinity* best capture this notion of language as ethical and therefore communal

Language is universal because it is the very passage from the individual to the general, because it offers things which are mine to the other To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in common It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment The world in discourse is no longer what is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me, it is what I give the communicable, the thought, the universal<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5

<sup>302</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 92

<sup>303</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195

<sup>304</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 174

<sup>305</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 76



When Levinas claims that the face is language and speech, the kind of language he refers to is the primordial expression he calls Saying. This is non-thematizing and non-violent language prior to conceptualization and philosophizing. Conceptual and discursive language Levinas calls the Said. It is the language that dominates Western philosophy. Hence, language “as saying is an ethical openness to the other; as that which is said—reduced to a fixed identity or synchronized presence—it is an ontological closure to the other.”<sup>306</sup>

In language, the one who is usually given attention is the subject who speaks and the content of his words, the Said. The Other, the person spoken to, takes secondary importance. Moreover, “In the realm of the said, the speaker assigns meanings to objects and ideas.”<sup>307</sup> This is a process which identifies, names, or labels things. Levinas challenges this view of language by reversing it so as to emphasize the Other. For him language does not only disclose being or represent things, but it also solicits concern.<sup>308</sup> “The activity of speaking robs the subject of its central position; it is the depositing of a subject without refuge. The speaking subject is no longer by and for itself, it is for the other.”<sup>309</sup>

Levinas insists that the Said should be referred back to the Saying, otherwise the self would overlook its “essential exposure to the Other without which there would be neither utterance nor meaning.”<sup>310</sup> He says

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<sup>306</sup> Levinas and Kearney, “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 29

<sup>307</sup> Simons, *An-archy and Justice*, 51

<sup>308</sup> Hoy, *Critical Resistance*, 158

<sup>309</sup> Peperzak, *To The Other*, 221

<sup>310</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 75

Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it [saying] is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification<sup>311</sup>

For Levinas, the Saying is what conditions the possibility of the Said<sup>312</sup> It is Saying which exposes the self “to the Other as a speaker or receiver of discourse”<sup>313</sup> It is the site where contact with the Other takes place because it “uncovers the one that speaks, not as an object disclosed by theory, but in the sense that one discloses oneself by neglecting one’s defenses, leaving a shelter, exposing oneself to outrage, to insults and wounding”<sup>314</sup> Moreover, Saying does not only expose the self to the Other but it also assigns the former to the latter. Saying is an assignation, an encounter, where the self is separated from its inwardness and is exposed towards the Other. Thus, the self is deposed or de-situated from its interiority because “the saying tears the ego from its lair”<sup>315</sup>

The Said, on the other hand, thematizes Saying. It is the verbalization of Being, which is the realm of ontology<sup>316</sup> The Said, according to Levinas, betrays Saying because it transforms the ethical contact of the self with the Other into a theme or object of knowledge<sup>317</sup> Once the ethical relation becomes an object of thought, the Other is no longer treated as absolute alterity and this denies the justice and respect due to him. For Levinas, the Said could not exhaust the meaning of Saying. Saying always overflows the

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<sup>311</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5

<sup>312</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 48

<sup>313</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 75

<sup>314</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 45, 49

<sup>315</sup> Simons, *An-archy and Justice*, 51

<sup>316</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 42-43

<sup>317</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 7

Said. And yet, Levinas argues, it is only through the Said that one can have access to and express Saying.<sup>318</sup> Thus the Said is indispensable since without it there would be no philosophy.<sup>319</sup> Also, without the Said, no society, justice, judgment or moral norms would be possible.<sup>320</sup>

The Saying and the Said occur at different temporal levels. The realm of the Saying is diachronic time where the self encounters the Other prior to its synchronizing and thematizing vision. Diachronic time is the realm of transcendence and infinity. It is time outside of Husserlian phenomenology where the past is gathered into the simultaneity of the present by retention (or memory) and the future by protention (or hope). Most importantly, it is also the time where the self as passivity and sensibility is opened to the ethical supplication demanded by the face of the Other.

Happening in a different temporal plane, is the realm of the Said. This realm is synchronic time where the Other is represented as a theme in the mind of the ego. Here, the Other loses its singularity or uniqueness because it is reduced into a general concept. Synchronic time is the realm of totality and immanence. It is the time of Being where beings or entities become manifest and where they are gathered together by a synthetic vision (of retention or protention) that reduces them to concepts and themes or a Said.

The importance of the distinction Levinas makes between Saying and the Said could be seen in the issue that Derrida raises in his essay *Violence and Metaphysics*.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>318</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 37-38, 45-48

<sup>319</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 85

<sup>320</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 79

<sup>321</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79-153

against Levinas's reliance on ontological language to propound an ethical metaphysics<sup>322</sup>

Derrida points to the contradiction implicit in Levinas's thought because in describing the

Other as Infinite, for example, Levinas makes use of inherited philosophical language<sup>323</sup>

Simmons succinctly explains it this way

Levinas who desires to replace ontology with ethics, relies, at least in *Totality and Infinity*, on terms which are permeated with ontological connotations such as 'being', 'truth', 'objectivity', and 'in-finite' In other words, Levinas cannot transcend the philosophical tradition because he is using its language<sup>324</sup>

This language does violence to the Other because it assimilates alterity into the ego

"Since language is thematizing, violent, and appropriative, our first encounter with the Other will be thematizing, violent and appropriative. Thus, the first relationship is not ethical"<sup>325</sup>

In other words, Levinas cannot escape the very language he attempts to overcome.

If the Other is unthematizable and oblivious to thought, then philosophical language is impossible But Levinas answers that the original approach of the Other is a Saying which, when stated in propositions (Said), betrays the ethical encounter The ethical encounter happens in a diachronic time where the self strongly feels the weight of the

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<sup>322</sup> This is the opinion of Jacques Rolland, see *Parcours de l'autrement Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), as cited in Smith, *Toward the Outside*, 148 But Michael B Smith holds a different opinion He says "it would be both unnecessary and unlikely for Levinas to have shaped his future work on Derrida's critique" He is inclined to believe "that Levinas's thought already contained, for such an astute reader as Derrida, the exigencies that were to be worked out until later, but so clearly inscribed *in potentia* that Derrida's essay was able to decipher some of them" Smith, *Toward the Outside*, 149, 148

<sup>323</sup> Levinas is already aware of this weakness in his philosophy, particularly in *Totality and Infinity* In his 1962 essay *Transcendence and Height*, Levinas writes "One could reproach it for using classical rationalist terminology and for mixing it up and dressing it up with empirical givens" Levinas, "Transcendence and Height", *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 22

<sup>324</sup> Simmons, *An-archy and Justice*, 5

<sup>325</sup> Simmons, *An-archy and Justice*, 5

Other's ethical plea. Although the Said is indispensable because it is necessary for order, law and justice, the Saying must be preserved because it is the heart of ethical relations. There should be a constant unsaying or deconstruction of the Said in order to allow the Saying to "circulate as residue or interruption within the said" and avoid the complete reduction of the otherwise than Being to ontological language.<sup>326</sup> This movement from the Said to the Saying, which should be the task of ethics as first philosophy, point to a beginning where the subject, prior to the birth of his consciousness as well as his freedom, is exposed to the Other, capable of being affected by and therefore respond to the Other's ethical appeal.<sup>327</sup> As Levinas would say "saying is to be responsible for others."<sup>328</sup>

The Heideggerian play of unconcealment and concealment is a dialectic that still belongs to ontology (or Being) and hence, of synchronic time. In order to break away from this dialectics of perpetual uncovering of the Unsaid from the Said, Levinas redirects philosophical questioning from repeatable time to an immemorial time of the Saying where the Said is constantly examined and re-examined so as to bear witness to the infinite and transcendence.

*Skepticism* At this point it is significant to introduce the role skepticism plays in the philosophy of Levinas. Skepticism, according to Levinas is philosophy's "legitimate child."<sup>329</sup> The history of Western philosophy has shown that skepticism periodically

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<sup>326</sup> Critchley, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 18

<sup>327</sup> Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 77

<sup>328</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 47

<sup>329</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 7, 183

recurs and this, according to Levinas, indicates that philosophy cannot exhaust the truth about everything Levinas says.

Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for western philosophy the saying is exhausted in this said. But skepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and the said Skepticism is refutable but it returns<sup>330</sup>

Indeed, skepticism cannot escape its contradictory assertion but it performs an important role by constantly reminding philosophy of its ethical origin and task which is to continually unsay what has been said It redirects philosophy to a transcendent (diachronic) time where alterity and infinity is otherwise than Being As Levinas says. "Skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said"<sup>331</sup>

The skeptic's claim that truth is not possible is refuted at the level of logic and rationality because the assertion implies that it is not possible that truth is not possible But it is precisely this sphere of thought which skepticism attacks and this spares skepticism from the refutation The contradictory remarks of skepticism are only contradictory in the realm of the logical Said but not so in the skeptical Saying<sup>332</sup> The periodic recurrence of skepticism in the history of western thought, according to Levinas, would just be "pure nonsense" if its critique of the Said is to be refuted under the auspices of logical thought since skepticism inhabits in and judges from the realm of the

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<sup>330</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 168

<sup>331</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 167

<sup>332</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 168

Saying<sup>333</sup> The approach of the other as Saying cannot be totally congealed in a Said for the Other continually recedes from synchrony and thematization.

Levinas is not saying that the skeptic's claim is true What he means, according to Peperzak, is that the

'truth' that attempts to pronounce itself in skepticism is rather the necessity. .of recalling (*dédire*) the Said, and of replacing it by a new Saying (*redire*) that is just as little a final Saying as the previous one was. The enigma of transcendence, which can never become evident, does not come into its own by synoptic expositions in which time stands still but only by continual attempts through new speeches to rectify the unavoidable contradictions of speaking<sup>334</sup>

*The Third Party* For Levinas, the ethical or face to face relation is not merely a private or exclusive affair between the self and the Other.<sup>335</sup> The face as expression and as language opens up to the rest of humanity which Levinas calls the third party<sup>336</sup> The third party is the neighbor of the self's neighbor and represents every person He is the neighbor of every Other

The third party is other than the neighbor, but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow. . The other stands in a relationship with the third party, for whom I cannot entirely answer, even if I alone answer, before any question, for my neighbor The other and the third party, my neighbors, contemporaries of one another, put distance between me and the other and the third party It [third party] is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, co-existence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in the

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<sup>333</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 171

<sup>334</sup> Levinas, *To The Other*, 228

<sup>335</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212

<sup>336</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213

intentionality and intellect, the intelligibility of a system and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.<sup>337</sup>

The emergence of the third party which is revealed in the face of the Other disturbs the intimacy and asymmetrical relationship between the self and the Other. This is so because the third party demands for justice. The neighbor and the third party simultaneously call to and demand for responsibility from the Other. It is the third party which prompts the self to weigh, evaluate, compare, calculate and think which for him needs most his attention and service. The arrival of the third party is the inception of justice, symmetry, philosophy and law. It is the third party that divides the attention of the self. If there were only the self and the neighbor, then there would have been no problem, for in this situation the self has undivided attention for the Other. But the surfacing of the third party limits the self's unbounded care for the Other and poses problems as regards priority as well as the nature of relationship between the Other and the third party.

Because of the third, the self now becomes a judge for he must compare, calculate, correct, order and treat others as equals. This now necessitates the rational organization of society and the creation of laws in order to carry out justice. The entry of the third legitimates the state, politics and philosophy. It corrects the asymmetry in the relation of the self and the Other. It also upholds the welfare of the self because his responsibility is no longer solely for others but also for himself since he is also a neighbor to others.<sup>338</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 157

<sup>338</sup> See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 158-161



To be sure my responsibility for all can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with itself. The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice and philosophy.<sup>339</sup>

#### Conclusion: Ethics as Beyond Nature or Ontology and Towards God

This final section will discuss the movement of the ethical relation between the Same and the Other towards transcendence. Levinas names this ethical bond religion.<sup>340</sup> Religion presupposes an ethics that points in the direction of God. It is an ethical proximity that manifests God's presence. In this proximity, God leaves only a trace which cannot be traced at all since it redirects the self to his responsibility to the Other. "Divinity", William Paul Simmons writes, "is experienced through the trace."<sup>341</sup>

Levinas asserts that "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."<sup>342</sup> He says that "the Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed."<sup>343</sup> God therefore is revealed in the human face as the Good beyond Being and yet the human face is not God's embodiment. "The alterity of the face 'points' to God's transcendence, but without being its incarnation, symbol, or self-expression."<sup>344</sup> God instead leaves a trace in the face of the other person whose face summons the self to

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<sup>339</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 128

<sup>340</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40

<sup>341</sup> Simmons, *An-archy and Justice*, 54

<sup>342</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78

<sup>343</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79

<sup>344</sup> Burggrave, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 117

responsibility. What Levinas is saying is that ethics provides an opening towards the Divine because the Other “resembles God” and he is “closer to God than I”<sup>345</sup> Ethics, in the words of Cohen as he interprets Levinas, is the “authentic entry” to God<sup>346</sup> It leads to a vision of God because “responsibility”, as Kosky elucidates, “would be the image of God in man”<sup>347</sup> But this vision is “without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, a relation of intentionality of wholly different type”<sup>348</sup> This “relation of intentionality of a wholly different type” is not the Husserlian noesis-noematic correlation, but the intentionality of desire inflamed by the ethical appeal of the Other

For Levinas, God is only accessible through responsibility for the Other God as Infinite is refractory to human thought He cannot become an object of conscious representation As Levinas remarks: “There is witness . . . only of the Infinite The infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it On the contrary, the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified”<sup>349</sup> For Levinas, the self who is addressed by the Other through his ethical appeal bears witness to Divine transcendence The self’s responsibility to the Other is the living testimony of God’s presence As Wyschogrod says, “The one who, in

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<sup>345</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 293, Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite” in Peperzak, *To the Other*, 112

<sup>346</sup> Cohen, *Elevations The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, 188

<sup>347</sup> Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion*, n 10, 211

<sup>348</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23

<sup>349</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146

self-giving, says to the Other, 'Here I am,' placing the self at another's disposal, bears witness to the Infinite"<sup>350</sup>

Levinas employs the word *illeity* or he-ness to name this incomprehensible God. God is designated as this third person demonstrative pronoun in order to preserve his transcendence as well as to show respect to Him. *Illeity* "designates something present but at a distance, such as 'that great man over there' or anything to which one refers with respect"<sup>351</sup> For Levinas then, images or concepts of God arrived at through intellectual vision or proof would be artificial since they reduce God's transcendence to immanence. God's withdrawal from the clutches of man's intellectual grasp is instead God's way of redirecting man's gaze to the Other. As Levinas explains "A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is the spiritual optics. The other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God"<sup>352</sup>

In saying that ethics enables the self to bear testimony to the presence of God through its infinite responsibility to the Other, Levinas does not imply "that religion is reducible to ethical intersubjectivity but rather that intersubjectivity is raised to religion, that is to say, raised above its own ontological possibilities"<sup>353</sup> This means that

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<sup>350</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, xvii

<sup>351</sup> Smith, *Toward the Outside*, 89. For Smith, God is in the third person because Levinas wants "an important distinction to be made between the relation to God and the dialogical relation to the other person." Levinas intends to depart from Martin Buber's implied reciprocity in the "I-Thou" dialogical relation. As Smith explains "The dialogical relationship brings with it elements that make it inadequate structure for transcendence because of the reciprocity and eventual play of gratitude and psychological interplay to which both parties of the dialogue are open. The otherness of the other person is preserved and his or her stature as "greater than myself" safeguarded only if the face of the other is 'in the trace' of illeity. 'The illeity of the third person is the condition of irreversibility.'" Smith, *Toward the Outside*, 89.

<sup>352</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

<sup>353</sup> Cohen, Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, 187.

God is neither identical with the ethical relation, nor is He the being or the foundation of this relation. Ethics is rather a spiritual optics, an optics of the divine. It makes visible the invisible, reveals the infinite in the finite and manifests transcendence without incarnation. Though the ethical is the space through which God reveals, the face of the Other does not function as a mediator between the self and God. God remains transcendent and wholly Other. He is other than and outside of Being. To construe God as someone who dwells in the Other is an infringement of his *illegitimacy*.

For Levinas, ethics is not only first philosophy. He also considers it as “first theology.”<sup>354</sup> Theology, according to Michael Purcell, “is both ethical in content and ethical in origin.”<sup>355</sup> The realm of the ethical face to face is the condition that makes theology receptive to revelation. Discourse about God and His revelation, Purcell says, “can have no other point of departure than in the subject who is capable of asking the question about God, or the subject for whom God can become a possible question.”<sup>356</sup> Moreover, “the question of God cannot be asked without raising the prior question of the one who is able to ask the question of God. Theology begins as theological anthropology, and to reflect on the human person is already to be involved in an ethical enterprise.”<sup>357</sup>

Levinas has already pointed out that human subjectivity is responsibility and deference to the Other. It is a subjectivity constituted not by a satisfaction of a natural

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<sup>354</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Jill Robbins (Stanford, California: Stanford University, 2001), 182.

<sup>355</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>356</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 47. Purcell, however, does not here imply “that the subject is the absolute origin of theology. Rather, it means that the starting point for theological reflection on God takes its point of departure in the *here* of human subjectivity.” Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 47.

<sup>357</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 2.

need but by a metaphysical or spiritual desire. Man's basic structure is not merely a *conatus*, a perseverance in being but an inescapable love for the Other. Levinas says "The metaphysical desire has another intention, it desires beyond everything that can complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it."<sup>358</sup> This metaphysical desire is an eschatology which is a "relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality."<sup>359</sup> Wyschogrod explains the transition from the natural life to the religious life in Levinas thought in this way:

Once need is established phenomenologically as belonging to natural man, Levinas has prepared the ground for *homo religiosus*, who remains man as need but who cannot fulfill his need in natural existence. It is the need for transcendence that characterizes fully human ethical existence. This transcendence . . . is founded in the experience of other persons.<sup>360</sup>

For Levinas, the true life "is not a *conatus* but disinterestedness and *adieu*."<sup>361</sup> It is a life of selfless giving to others motivated by a desire for God. Levinas asserts that his ethical philosophy is not purely of this world in the sense that it seeks to transcend the natural tendency of the ego to persevere in its being. "Ethics is, therefore, *against nature* because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first."<sup>362</sup> For Levinas ethics is rooted neither in being nor in Being but in a Platonic "Good beyond Being." As he nicely puts it:

The ethical situation is a human situation, beyond human nature, in which the idea of God comes to mind (*Gott fällt mir ein*). In this

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<sup>358</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34

<sup>359</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 22

<sup>360</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, 62

<sup>361</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 15

<sup>362</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 24

respect, we could say that God is the other who turns our nature inside out, who calls our ontological will-to-be in question. This ethical call of conscience occurs, no doubt, in other religious systems besides the Judeo-Christian, but it remains an essentially religious vocation. God does indeed go against nature, for He is not of this world. God is other than being.<sup>363</sup>

From these eloquent words, Levinas seems to imply that ethics points to man's fundamental relation to God as evidenced by his desire that is inflamed by the Other. Man's inescapable primordial ethical relation with the Other, this "obsession of responsibility is, in a sense, the "latent birth" of religion."<sup>364</sup> Subjectivity as desire is intentionality. It seeks transcendence and it takes the form of responsibility for the infinite Other. This structure of subjectivity as transcendence points to the religious orientation of human existence. Levinas puts it succinctly in the following words. "The impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity."<sup>365</sup>

The next chapter will elaborate the notion of divinity in Levinas's philosophy as revealed in man's ethical responsibility for the other as well as Levinas's ideas on atheism, religion and idolatry.

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<sup>363</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, 25

<sup>364</sup> Hent de Vries, "Levinas" in *A Companion to Continental Philosophy*, edited by Simon Critchley and William S. Schroeder (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell, 1998), 246

<sup>365</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 129

### Chapter 3

#### A-DIEU APPROACHING THE DIVINE

Levinas's ethics provides an opening to religion. "Ethics", according to him, is "an optics of the Divine"<sup>1</sup> In another work he says, "Ethics is the spiritual optics"<sup>2</sup> What he means by these declarations is that God can only be approached through an ethical relation with the neighbor or the stranger He says that "through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God"<sup>3</sup> For Levinas, there is no "direct or immediate" relation with the Divine<sup>4</sup> The Divine can only be accessed through ethics God leaves an irretrievable trace in the face of the Other to whom the self is infinitely responsible "The dimension of the divine," Levinas maintains, "opens forth from the human face"<sup>5</sup>

There have been debates whether what Levinas is doing is really philosophy when, on many occasions in his writings, he seems to propound Judaism. Aside from expounding an ethical philosophy, Levinas is also actively involved in Talmudic hermeneutics For this reason, some critics accused Levinas of championing a thought which is not really philosophical because what he is doing is simply making a case for a religious tradition (i.e. Jewish) which he is already committed to uphold This view,

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, translated by Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 159

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 78

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 17 Levinas then continues "The moral relation therefore reunites both self-consciousness and consciousness of God Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression "

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 159

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78

according to Michael B. Smith, is flawed.<sup>6</sup> There is confusion on the alleged collusion between Levinas's philosophy and his professed faith because some who read him do not discriminate his philosophy from his Jewish writings.<sup>7</sup> The failure to separate Levinas's philosophical works from his confessional texts would blur his primary concern which is to work out a philosophy purified of an authority or tradition that harbors the primacy of the self-same. Though Levinas declares that philosophy cannot be separated from its pre-philosophical sources (i.e. religious sources), what he is really trying to convey is that these pre-philosophical sources help philosophy articulate meanings which reason (or Greek philosophy) alone cannot adequately express. In this case, though Levinas explicitly announced that what he is doing is philosophy and not theology, his thoughts are enriched and informed by Jewish sources.<sup>8</sup> He also employs religious vocabulary to transcend the trappings of ontology.

God-talk in theology can lean on philosophy if it desires to express itself in a clear and coherent language. But this language must not be restricted to a purely ontological grammar, otherwise, God is reduced into a mere being (or object) just like any other being and theology is rendered trivial or lapses into irrelevance. To evade the strictures of

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<sup>6</sup> See Michael B. Smith, *Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 6-11.

<sup>7</sup> Levinas himself insists on this distinction between his philosophy and his Talmudic interpretations when he said "I always make a clear distinction, in what I write, between philosophical and confessional texts. I do not deny that they may ultimately have a common source of inspiration. I simply state that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between them as distinct methods of exegesis, as separate languages. I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts, to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument." Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" in Richard A. Cohen, ed., *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Colin Davis claims that "Levinas's texts on religious themes, whilst focusing on his Judaic roots and their importance for the modern world, are largely consistent with his philosophical texts in their vocabulary and concerns." Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 94-95.



ontological language, theology much be enriched by philosophical language grounded in an ethical metaphysics. In his recent work *Levinas and Theology*, Michael Purcell claims that theology is somehow phenomenological. He asserts that “in so far as theology is a word about humanity in its dealings with God, or, minimally, a word about the religious dimension of human existence which opens on to questions of God, it cannot operate other than in a mode which is phenomenological.”<sup>9</sup> In making this claim, Purcell heavily relies on Levinas’s ethical metaphysics rather than on Husserl’s or Heidegger’s phenomenology.

In this chapter, the importance of Levinas’s thought within the current postmodern discussion on God and religion will be highlighted. It will begin with a brief discussion of what Heidegger calls “ontotheology.” This is necessary in order to understand how Levinas takes issue with it. Nietzsche’s proclamation of the demise of God will also be taken into consideration as a way of situating and deepening Heidegger’s ontotheology. In addition, Kant and Hegel’s thoughts will be surveyed in order to shed more light on the meaning of ontotheology and the death of God. The remaining sections of the paper will discuss some concepts relevant to a better understanding of religion such as idolatry, atheism, and God and transcendence.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 32.

### Ontotheology and The Death of God

It was Heidegger who characterized Western thought or philosophy as ontotheology.<sup>10</sup> Philosophy's ultimate aim is to arrive at the knowledge of the foundation and unity of all beings. This knowledge is what is known as metaphysics, the highest branch of philosophy. It is the highest because it is considered as the study of the ultimate meaning of reality or Being.

For Heidegger, traditional metaphysics must be rethought because the ultimate meaning of reality or Being has been identified with a particular being, thereby obscuring its true worth and significance. This particular being that Being has been identified with in the metaphysics of the past is God. God, as the highest being and the cause of all beings, is the best candidate to define Being. Thus *Being* becomes a *being* and metaphysics, the study of *Being*, becomes ontology, the study of *being*. Since God is the highest being, then the study of ontology becomes the study of theology. This is the reason why Heidegger calls traditional metaphysics ontotheology.

However, Heidegger thinks that ontotheology is a misconception. It forgets and conceals the true meaning of Being. Being for him is not God because the latter precedes the former. Before one can talk about beings like God, there is already Being. Being and God are radically different. Being's connotation is verbal because it means "to be" while that of being is nominative. Being therefore is not a noun or substance just like any other beings that are found in the world. So for Heidegger, in order to understand the true

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant has already used the word 'ontotheology' but his employment of the word is different from Heidegger. For Kant, ontotheology is the belief that God's existence can be known through mere concepts "without the help of any experience." *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Marcus Weigelt (London, England: Penguin Books, 2007), 525.

meaning of Being, the question about its meaning must be asked again. Doing so would reopen the search for Being which has been concealed by ontotheology

On ontotheology, Levinas has this to say "But a question arises did onto-theology's mistake consist in taking being for God, or rather in taking God for being? . . . To contrast [*opposer*] God with onto-theo-logy is to conceive a new mode, a new notion of meaning And it is from a certain ethical relationship that one may start out on this search"<sup>11</sup> For Levinas, overcoming ontotheology and resolving the issue whether God has been identified with Being or Being with God is not as significant as ethics He thinks that Heidegger's attempt to recover and understand the true meaning of Being through a "step back", a moving away from ontotheological thinking by deconstructing traditional metaphysics, is not "the ultimate source of meaning."<sup>12</sup> He rejects Heidegger's claim that meaning springs from Being and that thinking is impossible beyond it.<sup>13</sup> For Levinas, the Good, not Being, is the true test and basis of signification

The more important issue for Levinas is not the naming of God as Being or Being as God but the implication of the meaning of divinity to human relationships What Levinas proposes is an approach to God that transcends ontotheological language He thinks that ontotheology obscures one's responsibility to another person because it tends to assimilate the Other into the Same Levinas is convinced that to know God is to act

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<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 124-125

<sup>12</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 124 Levinas explains further "What is meaningful does not necessarily have *to be* [researcher's emphasis] Being can confirm thought, but thought thinks meaning—the meaning that is exhibited by being This thought enlarges disinterestedness" *God, Death, and Time*, 125

<sup>13</sup> Levinas says "Heidegger's thesis consists in positing that being is at the origin of all meaning This immediately implies that one cannot think beyond being" *God, Death and Time*, 126

ethically in the presence of another person. Further, he thinks that the search for God coincides with our experience of being affected by the Other. As Levinas says

I think that God has no meaning outside the search for God. It is not a question of method, nor is it a romantic idea. The "In" of the In-finite is at once the negation and the being affected of the Finite—the non- and the *m-*—human thought as a search for God, Descartes' idea of the Infinite in us.<sup>14</sup>

But the Other, in awakening the self to responsibility, exceeds thought. The Other transcends thought in the sense that it surpasses itself as an idea in the mind and is prior to its thinking. This implies that the Other cannot be contained and is therefore infinite. God, however, is not the infinite. The infinite is the human Other that points to the direction of God. For Levinas, God is revealed in the face of the Other. The "face of the other manifests and is manifest in a moral height which is the dimension of [G-d], the revelation of [G-d]"<sup>15</sup>. Thus, for Levinas, the search for God corresponds to the self's assumption of an obligation that is commanded by the Other.

It is discernible that Levinas employs the language of the Jewish religion to articulate and lend support to his philosophical musings about God. That God is a transcendent being is central to the Jewish faith. God is beyond human reach and understanding. For man to know God, he must first direct his gaze to his neighbor and to the stranger in ethical deference and service. As one commentator puts it: "There can be no experience or knowledge of Infinity, but only the testimony of answering to the

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 183.

Infinite's prophetic call within"<sup>16</sup> Levinas himself makes a distinction between the Christian and Jewish notion of divinity. He writes,

The direct encounter with God, *this* is a Christian concept. As Jews, we are always a threesome: I and you and the Third who is in our midst. And only as a Third does He reveal Himself.<sup>17</sup>

Levinas has already expressed his opposition to and deep dissatisfaction with the dominance of ontology in philosophical thinking. He rejects ontology because he thinks that it has overlooked the ethical, the face-to-face relation between the self and the Other. Ontology has so far neglected alterity and has proclaimed the hitherto uncontested precedence of the self-same. This sort of critique of ontology somehow finds resonance in Nietzsche's apparently scandalous proclamation of the 'death of God' and Heidegger's denunciation of the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics.

In *Being and Time*, the book that Levinas considers as "one of finest among four or five" books in the history of philosophy,<sup>18</sup> Heidegger calls attention to the forgetfulness of Being since it has been obscured by traditional metaphysics. For him, Being has become an ontotheology. God and Being have become synonymous in the history of Western philosophy.<sup>19</sup> And because this is so, Heidegger wants to recover the question of Being from its oblivion. He proceeds from an analytic of Dasein which he

<sup>16</sup> Glenn Morrison, "Levinas, Von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis" (Ph.D. dissertation, Australian Catholic University, 2004), 53. Here Morrison makes a reference to Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 149.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 247.

<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Calvin O. Schrag in *God as Otherwise Than Being: Towards a Semantic of the Gift* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2002), calls this identification of God and Being "metaphysics of theism." He traces the development of this link between God and Being in the history of Western thought. See particularly Part 1 of his book entitled "God and Being."

calls fundamental ontology that will revive the question of Being<sup>20</sup> For Heidegger, Dasein is the only being where Being is an issue.<sup>21</sup> By securing Dasein's authenticity, the meaning of Being can be discerned. But Levinas seems to think that Heidegger's attempt at this recovery (of Being) is bound to fail since the oblivion of Being forms part of Being itself. According to Levinas,

This forgetting is in no way the result of some psychological deficiency of man: it is founded in being, it is an event of being itself. Being itself has made itself, or let itself forgotten, it has veiled itself—and it is that veiling that gives rise to the (human) forgetting of being. Forgetting is an epoch of being.<sup>22</sup>

Levinas also thinks that overcoming ontotheology by rethinking the real meaning of Being will not succeed because man's life, both his thoughts and actions, is naturally ontological.<sup>23</sup> As Levinas explains

Understanding of being implies not just a theoretical attitude, but the whole of human behavior. The whole man is ontology. His scientific work, his affective life, the satisfaction of his needs and his work, his social life and his death articulate, with a rigor that assigns a determined function for each of these aspects, the understanding of being, or truth. Our entire civilization emanates from this understanding of being—be it in the form of the forgetting of being.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 122.

<sup>23</sup> It must be recalled that for Levinas, the ego is naturally egoistic. This natural egoism is not only manifested in the ego's behavior but also in his thinking. Egoistic thinking is what Levinas calls philosophy of the Same or ontological thinking.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

Moreover, he says that “all misunderstanding is simply a deficient mode of understanding”<sup>25</sup> Being is responsible for its own concealment and unconcealment. It “encompasses everything there is, even the forgetting or misunderstanding of Being turn out to be modes (albeit deficient) of its understanding.”<sup>26</sup> Dasein, who is the site of this play of concealment and unconcealment, seems helpless when confronted with the question of the meaning of Being. Dasein is somehow being claimed by Being, leaving him under the weight and influence of some power unbeknown to himself. For this reason, Levinas thinks that Heidegger’s thought still cannot escape the comprehensive and suffocating presence of Being. So what he proposes is to leave the “climate of Being” in order to recognize that which Being cannot encompass—the Good beyond Being. In this way one can really talk about real transcendence which is absolute, one which absolves itself from ontological thinking. Levinas thinks that it is responsibility to the infinite Other which is more important than the thinking of and the listening to Being.

According to Heidegger, God’s entry into philosophy, particularly in metaphysics, is mainly due to reason’s unrelenting demand to find a solid ground or explanation for the whole of reality or Being. This ground that explains reality is considered as the highest being and it is understood as the totality and unity of all beings.<sup>27</sup> Being as understood in metaphysics is therefore universal because it accounts for the totality of all beings. It is also considered the highest being because it is the ultimate foundation of all beings and it

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<sup>25</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 4

<sup>26</sup> See Davis, *Levinas*, 22

<sup>27</sup> “Metaphysics thinks of beings as such, as a whole. Metaphysics thinks of the Being of beings both in the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valid everywhere, and also in the unity of all that accounts for the ground, that is, of the All-highest.” Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, translated with an introduction by Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 58

is itself ungrounded. In the history of metaphysics, the concept of God has fulfilled this role not only because He is the highest and most perfect being but also because He encompasses all beings as their source. God as the ultimate ground, as *causa sui*, has now become a function of reason. God is reduced into a mere principle of reason that accounts for the Being of beings. As Merold Westphal aptly describes it, God has been turned into an “epistemological value, the highest principle of explanation and justification, the key to rendering everything intelligible to human understanding. God is part of the labor pool and can remain gainfully employed only by being epistemological employed.”<sup>28</sup> This explains why for Heidegger the god of reason or the god of philosophy is not the real God whom one can relate to personally. As he says, “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor play music and dance before this God.”<sup>29</sup> Because the god of philosophy is not the real divinity, Heidegger proposes to abandon this god through what he calls “god-less thinking.” For him this kind of thinking is “perhaps closer to the divine God” because it “is more open to Him than onto-theo-logic would like to admit.”<sup>30</sup>

Levinas, however, disagrees to a possible Heideggerian notion of God because God is somehow understood within the horizon of Being. Heidegger seems to suggest that the question of God is to be secondary only to the question of Being. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger writes “Only from the truth of being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought.

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<sup>28</sup> Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 36.

<sup>29</sup> Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72.

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 72.



Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word 'God' is to signify<sup>31</sup> Levinas, however, maintains that the thinking of divinity "from the truth of being" would seem to undermine God's infinity and transcendence. "The gods (*die Gotter*) and 'the God' (*der Gott*), of whom Heidegger sometimes speaks, cannot be infinite since they appear within the horizon of a more radical, though still finite, horizon Being"<sup>32</sup> Levinas explains:

One may certainly wonder whether being, in Heidegger's sense of the word as that which transcends a being but gives itself to all beings, remains beyond the world that it makes possible, and whether it permits us to think of a transcendent God from beyond being One may wonder whether the neutrality, which offers itself to the *thinking of the being transcending beings*, can be suitable for, and sufficient to, divine transcendence The fact remains that the *ontological difference* serves philosophers as the model of transcendence and that, even when repudiated in research related to religious thought, it is frequently invoked<sup>33</sup>

Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, as is already well-known, stems from his analysis of metaphysics as the search for an ideal world<sup>34</sup> This aspiration for the ideal world eventually becomes the desire for God. God now becomes a name for this supreme metaphysical goal But this quest for a metaphysical world in the history of Western philosophy is actually motivated by a certain morality, which Nietzsche calls herd or slave morality that detests this world because of its tragedies and sufferings But

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in *Martin Heidegger Basic Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 230

<sup>32</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 10

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 125

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey L Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 133 It must be noted here that the following discussions on Nietzsche's death of God, Kant's and Hegel's thoughts on God and religion are mainly based on Kosky's work, particularly chapter 7 "The Death of God and Emergence of the Philosophy of Religion, 131-147"

this search for a metaphysical world turns into hopelessness because the search becomes long, wearisome and the desired expectation is not realized. This sense of frustration and exhaustion causes the rejection of metaphysics. Nietzsche calls this nihilism the dissolution of all values founded by and grounded in metaphysics. Traditional Christianity, which has somehow found theoretical support in metaphysics, also suffers from this frustration and exhaustion. This fatigue and helplessness Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*.<sup>35</sup> It is resentment which causes the belief and reliance on a benevolent deity and it is this same feeling which causes its demise.<sup>36</sup> The creation of the metaphysical god as well as his death is motivated by the spirit of revenge or resentment. Because the slave or feeble-minded man cannot accept and resents this ugly world, he creates an imagined or fictional beautiful world. But this is a utopia which remains unrealizable. Man has already sacrificed a lot, including his own life, by practicing moral cleanliness to the point of asceticism. This only aggravates his suffering and frustration for in trying to purge all ugliness within himself, he only finds himself uglier all the more. His God becomes more demanding of his cleanliness which is actually a projection of an equally intense demand which he takes upon himself. As a consequence, he could no longer bear this and so takes revenge in this created God. His god must die if

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<sup>35</sup> Ressentiment, according to Nietzsche, is the defining feature of slave morality which, "in order to exist always first needs a hostile external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 37. So for Nietzsche, those who exhibit slave morality are those who react to this hostile world filled with tragedies and sufferings. They seek refuge in a metaphysical world only to realize that this world is unreal. As a result, they will reject this unreal world. This rejection is their reaction to this unreal world which also becomes hostile to them.

<sup>36</sup> Kosky, *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion*, 134

he is to live To summarize, it is resentment which for Nietzsche is the cause of the birth and demise of god

But all these musings of the death of God can already be traced in the enlightenment philosophies of Kant and Hegel. Levinas says that "it is with Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* that the 'beginning of the end' of the onto-theo-logical conception of God is marked"<sup>37</sup> Further, he says. "Since Kant, philosophy has been finitude without infinity"<sup>38</sup> Kant already anticipated Heidegger's claim regarding the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics in the sense that he rejected the proofs of God's existence and assigned the notion of God to man's pure practical reason In Kant, reason's reach is confined to sensible experience, making the question of God not an issue that can be resolved by pure reason but an ideal object which pure reason posits to represent the totality of reality Kant writes:

Hence the object of the ideal of reason, which exists only in reason, is called the **original being** (*ens originarium*), and insofar as it has no being above it, the **highest being** (*ens summum*), and insofar as everything as conditioned is subject to it, the **being of all beings** (*ens entium*) All this, however, does not signify the objective relation of the **idea to concepts**, and leaves us in perfect ignorance as to the existence of a being of such superlative excellence . If we follow up this idea of ours and hypostatize it, we shall be able to determine the original being by means of the mere concept of the highest reality, as a being that is one, simple, all-sufficient, eternal, etc , in a word, determine it in its unconditioned completeness through all predicaments. The concept of such a being is the concept of **God** in its transcendental sense. <sup>39</sup>

It appears that in Kant's thought God is relegated to the realm of the unknowable and consigned to the silence of faith Here is the inception of the death of God which

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<sup>37</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 153

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 36

<sup>39</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 492-493

gradually makes its way up to the end of modern philosophy. However, Levinas still thinks that insofar as “God is posited as the totality of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)” “there is a return to onto-theo-logy in Kantian thought”<sup>40</sup>

Both Kant and Levinas do not conceive God as the basis of morality. Religion for both is not derived from morality. Instead, they propose and posit religion after morality. However, in Kant, religion is somehow understood as a perfection of morality. God represents the realization of the hope that virtue will eventually become congruent with happiness which seems to be impossible in the world.<sup>41</sup> “The idea of God as a supreme moral being is not at the foundation of ethics, but is rather deduced from it, as the rational hope linked to the imperative of the highest good”<sup>42</sup> Though it is hope that postulates the existence of God, this same hope must not be the motivation of a human being in doing good otherwise it will spell the end of ethics. One must act as if there is no God, as if one is left alone to fulfill his moral duty “and consult only the voice of reason in oneself”<sup>43</sup>

If in Kant’s thought, religion, to a certain extent, completes morality, in Levinas, it is ethics which somehow perfects religion. Ethics is the condition of possibility for the revelation of God. For Levinas, God is disclosed to man at the moment the person responds to the call of the Other. This responsibility for the Other attests to the presence of God. While for Kant morality is obedience to law or the categorical imperative as

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<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 154-155

<sup>41</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated by Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 132-143

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Chalier, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, translated from the French by Jane Marie Todd (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 154

<sup>43</sup> Chalier, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, 156

discovered by reason imposed upon itself, for Levinas morality is the command brought forth by the moral appeal of the Other. In other words, morality for Kant comes from autonomous reason while for Levinas morality emanates from the heteronomy of the Other

Hegel's understanding of religion can be construed as a deviation from Kant's strategy that conceives God as a postulate of ethics. Though Kant's critical philosophy made a significant contribution to the understanding of religion which purified it of anthropomorphisms and dogmatism, Hegel renounces Kant's view because a God unknowable by reason is tantamount to a dead God. What Hegel does is to reintroduce God to reason making his death (in the Protestant Christianity of Kant), which he conceives as a form of alienation, a moment of the Spirit's coming to consciousness of itself. The infinite is made accessible again to human consciousness in order to allay the feeling of God's gradual demise in Protestant Christianity which propounds the belief that there is an infinite distance between man and God and that this distance is caused by sin which only faith can overcome. Through sin, man's finite reason cannot apprehend the Infinite. By making God appear in consciousness, Hegel thinks that he was able to reconcile man and God again, which nonetheless appears to have benefited man more than God. This being the case, knowledge of God can now be possessed by man. But this reintroduction of God back to reason, which is in a way commendable because it makes God present and active in history, is done at the expense of God's transcendence. In Hegel's philosophy, God's immanence is highlighted and yet his transcendence is diminished, if not, utterly denied. This now becomes problematic since God becomes

familiar and reducible to concepts thereby threatening his sense of mystery, absoluteness, otherness and independence from man's subtle machinations

From the preceding discussions, there now arises the perception that the death of God in the thoughts of Heidegger, Nietzsche, Hegel and Kant is something positive. For Kant, it cleanses religion from the impurities of dogmatism. For Hegel, it rids man of the feeling of alienation from God. For Nietzsche, it overcomes resentment and reinvigorates life. For Heidegger, it preserves the holiness and mystery of divinity and enables man to courageously confront anxiety and nothingness which is an indication of his authentic existence. But it appears that all of them still view God and religion under the aegis of reason that still prioritizes the self-same. And this is where Levinas enters the picture. What Heidegger calls ontotheology cannot be overcome since it is still construed as part of Being's disclosure to Dasein. Viewed from the philosophy of Hegel, the death of God completes the Spirit's self-realization. In Nietzsche, overcoming metaphysics is a struggle which must be sustained through will to power. In Kant, the death of God makes room for faith and God becomes an ideal of pure reason or a heuristic principle and a postulate of practical reason. In a way, Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger follow Kant's lead in trying to dispel the pretension of reason but they were unable to complete the process of overcoming because their thinking still retain the traces of ontotheology which they seek to overcome. If ontotheology appears to be insurmountable, the question remains: Is there still a meaningful discussion of God outside the realm of ontology or beyond ontotheology?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 137

Levinas does not seek to overcome traditional metaphysics. His philosophical efforts are meant to reawaken Western philosophy to its real desire which is transcendence—the Good beyond Being. So ontotheology and the death of God viewed through the lenses of Heidegger, though highly critical of metaphysics to the point of refuting it, cannot really be overcome because it is the condition for a possible God-talk.<sup>45</sup> To rid it is in fact to affirm it. Levinas accepts Heidegger's analysis of the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics but considers his teacher's effort to overcome this as still ontotheological. Heidegger's thinking is "still dominated by the traditional tendency to totalization" which Levinas considers as an expression of the philosophy of the Same.<sup>46</sup> Levinas recasts the meaning of Heidegger's notion of ontotheology into one where it is now understood as "a manifestation of the natural egoism which constitutes the elementary form of life."<sup>47</sup>

The effort to overcome ontotheology and the death of God is still ontological and so God-talk cannot progress if they are to be rejected absolutely. "For the endeavor at overcoming remains trapped within ontotheology, and what is worse, it confuses this trap as the problem when in fact it is the very clue needed for thinking otherwise."<sup>48</sup> Meaningful God-talk can only occur if they are understood as conditions and not as obstacles. When viewed from within Levinas's phenomenology of ethical responsibility, the death of God, which was already implicit in the thoughts of Kant and Hegel and later on

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<sup>45</sup> See Jeffrey Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

<sup>46</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 10

<sup>47</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 10

<sup>48</sup> Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought*, 3

taken up by Nietzsche, serves as a context from which the self emerges out of the *there is* consequently finding enjoyment in the world and responding to the moral call of the Other. The self's existence in the *there is* prior to the acquisition of its own identity can be described, according to Levinas, as the absence of God. This atheism, as will be shown later in this chapter, is a condition in order for the self to respond to the moral appeal of the Other. From this absence of God, the self is awakened to its obligation to the Other by reason of its unavoidable presence. This in turn leads the self to the realization that the Other to whom he is responsible resembles God. Indeed, Levinas says at the end of *Otherwise than Being*, that this work was written "after the death of a certain god inhabiting the world behind the scenes"<sup>49</sup>. This implies that Levinas accepts Nietzsche's proclamation. He however rejects Nietzsche's answer to the problem for Nietzsche this still upholds the philosophy of the Same, the will to power. For Levinas, the response to the problem is not the philosophy of the will to power but a philosophy of responsibility where God leaves a trace in the face of the Other.

#### On Idolatry and Religion

Levinas, owing to his Jewish affiliation, rejects the notion of religion as the 'sacred'. The sacred or the numinous meaning of religion is for him "the essence of idolatry"<sup>50</sup>. Levinas finds the sacred idolatrous because, it

envelops and transports man beyond his powers and wishes . . . annuls the links between persons by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them . . . offend[s] human freedom and to be contrary to the education of man, which remains *action on a free being*. Not that liberty is an end in

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<sup>49</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 185

<sup>50</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 14



itself, but it does remain the condition for any value man may attain  
The Sacred that envelops and transports man is a form of violence.<sup>51</sup>

The reason why Levinas rejects the notion of religion as sacred is the same reason why he abhors mysticism. Both the concept of the sacred and mysticism support immanence and ignore the separation of God and man.

Note however that for Levinas, man's elementary existence is fundamentally uninhibited enjoyment, and as such he is atheistic, enclosed and absorbed in his own worldly and egoistic engagement. Such an innocent atheism conditions ethics, which for Levinas is responsibility for the Other. One cannot be touched by the Other if in the first place he does not enjoy life in the world. But the presence of the Other poses a challenge to the ego's self-indulgence, thus making it realize that it is not the only one which has monopoly of the world.

The natural self-centeredness of the ego is a manifestation of its independence and separation from the world. Levinas finds the ego's independence significant because it serves as a fissure or gap that maintains the ego's autonomy from any form of relationship, religious, moral or otherwise, that dissolves the ego's identity. In *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas highlights the importance of breaking away from the concept of the sacred because it preserves the integrity of the ego and conditions the ego's openness to the Transcendent.

The rigorous affirmation of human independence, of its intelligent presence to an intelligible reality, the destruction of the concept of the Sacred, entail risk of atheism. That risk must be run. Only through it can man be raised to the spiritual notion of the Transcendent. It is a great glory for the Creator to have set up a being who affirms Him after having contested and denied Him in the glamorous areas of myth and enthusiasm, it is a great glory for God to have created a being capable

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<sup>51</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 14

of seeking Him or hearing Him from afar, having experienced separation and atheism<sup>52</sup>

Though Levinas claims that the Divine is revealed in the face to face relation, this does not mean that God is personified in the human face or He is reducible to the ethical relation. God remains absolutely Other, other than the otherness of the Other. As was seen in the previous chapter, Levinas refers to God as *illey*. God reveals and “speaks to the self through the other person and it does so from the anonymous realm of *illey*.”<sup>53</sup> To personify God in the human face or to identify him in the ethical relation is to undermine his holiness and transcendence and at the same time promote the notion of religion as the ‘sacred’. The incarnation of God in something not only destroys God’s transcendence but it also puts man under the influence of a spell, incantation or some magical power that completely controls him. This, for Levinas, is a form of idolatry because God is replaced with a sacred object. As Wyschogrod explains.

It would be a radical misunderstanding of the transcendence of the face to construe it as a visible instantiation of the sacred. Such an interpretation confers upon the face the status of an idol so that the gaze of the Other becomes not simply a vacant stare (as would be the case if transcendence were altogether denied) but a dangerous and alluring invitation to idolatry.<sup>54</sup>

The sacred is not the only form that idolatry takes shape. Idolatry could also be conceptual idolatry. By conceptual idolatry, Levinas refers to natural theology that makes use of ontological language. As Levinas explains, “Theology imprudently treats the idea

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<sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 15-16

<sup>53</sup> B C Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 115

<sup>54</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics*, second edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), x11

of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology. It presupposes the logical privilege of totality, as a concept adequate to being.”<sup>55</sup>

Ontological language is essentially idolatrous. This is so because when one employs it, one is seeking a principle through which one can explain a phenomenon. When this language is applied to God, the understanding of God is fixed into and enclosed in a concept or system. This is what Heidegger means by ontotheology explained in the previous section. As a consequence of this kind of idolatry, the image or concept of God gradually becomes more important than God himself, which may lead to efforts where all possible measures are undertaken just to preserve this concept of God. If this happens, idolatry becomes a dogmatism that may spawn violence. When a thought is taken as absolute, it becomes an idol that entices and commands people to place their trust in it, making them captives of a belief that will eventually destroy their subjectivity. This is what Nietzsche means by nihilism. In the history of Western philosophy, this idol has been variously conceived and identified as Form, Substance, One, First Cause, Necessary Being, Supremely Perfect Being, Infinite Substance, Transcendental Subject, Absolute Spirit, Being, etc.

Paying homage to a god which is merely a projection of human ideals and aspirations is also a form of idolatry. “Idolatry,” Catherine Chalier writes, “means to think god in terms of the fears and expectations of human beings.”<sup>56</sup> A notion of God based on human fear and expectation is one which is made in the image of man. This

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<sup>55</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 293

<sup>56</sup> Catherine Chalier, “Levinas and the Talmud” in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, editors, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 104-105

notion becomes an idol which “consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze”<sup>57</sup> It is an anthropomorphism which could be viewed as a manifestation of a life concern only with itself In the idol, God is modeled after man

For Levinas, knowledge is a kind of retrieval or recuperation Plato’s theory of *anamnesis* is taken by Levinas as the model of this view of knowledge Since what has happened has already passed by, the intellect tries to recover it through thematization What is absent is now made present by a thematizing consciousness—the knowing subject Now God, who leaves a trace in the human Other, is refractory to thought Any attempt to trace and retrieve God through a theme or concept results to a desperate effort to comprehend what is veritably incomprehensible Or worse, this theme about God would be taken as an unquestionable dogma that any challenge pose against it is deemed heretic and blasphemous Thematizing God leads to what Levinas calls “an idolatry of facts, that is, an invocation of what does not speak”<sup>58</sup> This kind of God therefore does not reveal himself in the face of the Other

Jean-Luc Marion’s distinction between an icon and an idol becomes significant here The icon, according to Marion, “summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on the visible,” whereas the idol fixes one’s gaze to the visible<sup>59</sup> An icon directs man’s gaze to a God while an idol dulls and numbs one’s sensitivity to the Other and shuts one’s receptivity to God The former acknowledges and is open to transcendence and infinity while the latter signifies enclosure, immanence and totality

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<sup>57</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, translated by Thomas A Carlson with a foreword by David Tracy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14

<sup>58</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65

<sup>59</sup> Marion, *God Without Being*, 18

An icon inspires service to God through love of others while an idol bolsters egoism and therefore may emboldened its adherents to violence and war.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant exposed the limits of reason in order to make room for faith<sup>60</sup> He suggested a denial of a metaphysical knowledge of God because there is no intuition of such a being If Kant rejected rational theology, Hegel restored its dignity. Hegel explicated the progress of reason in history which coincides with God's self-development in terms of absolute consciousness Thus, for him, God becomes Absolute Reason or Spirit, the totality of reality Heidegger, however, analyzed the ontotheological constitution of metaphysics (forgetfulness of Being) in order to renew the question of Being He considered Kant's and Hegel's notion of God as ontotheological and preserved the mystery of God These thinkers still prioritize the self-same Levinas, however, de-positions and passivizes the subject in order to be affected and disturbed by an alterity that reveals the Divine

One might raise the question whether it is possible to talk of philosophy of religion in Levinas when by philosophy of religion one is already approaching it from a kind of thinking that emerges from the philosophy of the Same Is it even possible to talk about a phenomenology of God when such a method is still ontological? For Levinas, God is not a phenomenon that can be constituted and recuperated by thought because He is enigmatic a trace who can only be faintly glimpsed in the face of the Other Levinas's philosophy of religion proceeds from a phenomenological description of egoistic existence which culminates in an ethics of face to face that testifies to the presence of God

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<sup>60</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 23

Levinas calls religion as the (ethical) bond that is established between the Same and the Other without constituting a totality.<sup>61</sup> Religion, and not Being, is the ultimate structure “where relationship subsists between the same and the Other despite the impossibility of the Whole”<sup>62</sup>

It can be said that the kind of religion Levinas articulates is what is known as prophetic religion. In an interview where he was asked whether his notion of the self bearing testimony to the Infinite through its responsibility for the Other implies prophetism, Levinas answered in the positive. He said:

For every man, assuming responsibility for the Other is a way of testifying to the glory of the Infinite, and of being inspired. There is prophetism and inspiration in the man who answers for the Other, paradoxically, even before knowing what is concretely required of himself. This responsibility prior to the Law is God’s revelation.<sup>63</sup>

The prophetic function of religion that Levinas appears to endorse can be contrasted to the priestly function of religion. The former gives emphasis to ethics and social justice by actively seeking reforms, the latter accentuates ceremonies and sacraments and obedience to authority and tradition. While prophetic religion “tends to be radical with respect to the status quo, often iconoclastic in nature, geared to initiatives of social reform,” priestly religion “is conservative by disposition, holding on to that which is deemed to be good by the tradition, with a heavy investment in the economy of the icons”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40

<sup>62</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80

<sup>63</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infimty*, 113

<sup>64</sup> Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being*, 83-84

### Atheism

In Levinas's thought, atheism means two things. First, atheism is the natural condition of the solitary ego who is at home with itself and who finds enjoyment in *living from* the world. For Levinas, the self-interested and self-immersed ego is naturally atheist. He maintains that atheism and the self-enjoyment of the solitary ego are synonymous.<sup>65</sup> As the ego assimilates and seizes things, it gradually separates itself from the *there is*, and as a result, becomes independent and egoistic. Its egoism and separation from the *there is* makes it atheistic. As Levinas explains

One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated—eventually capable of adhering to it by belief. The break with participation is implied in this capability. One lives outside of God, at home with oneself, one is an I, an egoism. The soul, the dimension of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist.<sup>66</sup>

This kind of atheism, according to B.C. Hutchens, portrays the ego's "condition of separation from the world and society, a self-imposed isolation in which one is alone with one's thought, joys, labour, possessions and so on. The atheist is closed to what is outside the self."<sup>67</sup> As a natural condition of the ego, atheism is "prior to both the negation and affirmation of the divine."<sup>68</sup> This means that the ego is already atheistic even before it consciously and deliberately accepts or rejects God. Atheism "is neither the successor to theistic belief as a revolt from it, nor a process of enlightenment, nor an ontologically

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<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 148

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 58

<sup>67</sup> Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 121

<sup>68</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 58

secondary phenomenon” and it is not a state of “decline from a better state antecedent to it” but instead a stage in the ego’s self-development<sup>69</sup> This natural atheism does not consign the ego to the “fires of hell” since it does not yet know God and it is “inherently innocent”<sup>70</sup> The affirmation or negation of God is only possible once the ego becomes conscious of and is disturbed by the presence of the Other Atheism of this kind, according to Edith Wyschodor, “is a state *prior* to revelation, that is, prior to the break with totality” or the epiphany of the Other<sup>71</sup> In other words, atheism precedes the birth of ethics and religion

Levinas considers Western philosophy as an expression of the ego’s autonomy or sovereignty<sup>72</sup> It is a philosophy which privileges the Same and is therefore egoistic and atheistic. As Levinas writes. “Philosophy is atheism, or rather unreligion, negation of a God that reveals himself and puts truths into us”<sup>73</sup> By Western philosophy, Levinas, according to Hutchens, refers to “any thought that thematizes, reduces, violates, etc the specificity of things and insists on the intelligibility of the Other, including the other person”<sup>74</sup> As long as philosophy is mired in a thinking that does not transcend its economy and narcissism, it remains atheistic and closed to the Other, including the God who passed by through the moral height that is manifested by the face of the Other Thus,

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<sup>69</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 87

<sup>70</sup> Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 87

<sup>71</sup> Wyschodor, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 87

<sup>72</sup> Levinas says “Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every Other in the Same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy” In “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 93

<sup>73</sup> Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” 96

<sup>74</sup> Hutchens, *Levinas A Guide for the Perplexed*, 122



the development of atheism in Western thought which is called the 'death of God' by Nietzsche and ontotheology by Heidegger, could be seen as the realization of an egocentric philosophy which is inherently and naturally atheistic

The second meaning of atheism for Levinas follows from the first. Here atheism is now understood as "necessary for the idea of Infinity."<sup>75</sup> It is, according to Jeffrey Bloechl, "an inner feature of the ethical and religious relations"<sup>76</sup> It is a necessary condition for the ego's moral and spiritual self-development. Purcell explains it nicely when he said:

Separation—the effort and process of self-affirmation—is the very condition of transcendence, the very possibility of a movement towards God and neighbour. Atheism, as the natural condition of the self, becomes the very possibility of response and responsibility towards the other than the self. Such an atheism, then, is essential *a-theism*. It is not so much the denial of the divine, but rather the refusal of a theism in which god is reduced to theory and abstraction, a god who could be approached other than by way of the detour of the other person.<sup>77</sup>

It was explicated in the previous chapter that for Levinas, the self in its enjoyment is happy. Only after this initial state can it possibly experience suffering and misery. Since the self is capable of happiness and suffering, it is thus sensitive and vulnerable to the misery of the destitute Other. Hence, for Levinas, the self that does not experience enjoyment cannot be affected by and is impervious to the needs of the Other. This self is immune to the cries and sufferings of the poor, the widow and the orphan. But in answering to their appeals, the self bears witness to the presence of the Divine. Egoism as atheism is then "a pre-condition for the epiphany of the other and in turn the possibility

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<sup>75</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 148

<sup>76</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, "The Intrigue of the Other: Ethics and Religion in the Wake of Levinas," *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* Arg 79 (2003) 173

<sup>77</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 62

of the self-emptying that bears witness to God”<sup>78</sup> It is “a significant aspect of spiritual growth and a necessary condition of the development of morality”<sup>79</sup>

“The presence of the Other abolishes the atheism of the will’s monopoly”<sup>80</sup> It weakens the ego’s untrammelled authority The Other’s moral appeal disrupts and interrupts the self-enclosure of the self For Levinas, atheism serves as the context in which the Other approaches the self, and the relation that this context creates bears witness to the passage of God

“Atheism,” Levinas writes, “conditions a veritable relationship with a true God *kath’auto* [*kath auto*]”<sup>81</sup> This means that, for Levinas, man cannot enter into a real relationship with God if he is not, to begin with, separated from Him Man has the capacity to refuse God<sup>82</sup> This refusal or separation is necessary so that man is “not obliterated, annihilated, extinguished, or erased by that relationship”<sup>83</sup> Levinas claims that “to relate to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred”<sup>84</sup> The absolute “is not numinous” in the sense that the self or “the I who approaches him is neither annihilated on contact nor transported outside of itself,

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<sup>78</sup> Bloechl, “The Intrigue of the Other Ethics and Religion in the Wake of Levinas,” 173

<sup>79</sup> Hutchens, *Levinas A Guide for the Perplexed*, 122

<sup>80</sup> Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana Purdue University Press, 1993), 146

<sup>81</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77

<sup>82</sup> Levinas asserts “Only an atheist being can relate himself to the other and already *absolve himself* from this relation” *Totality and Infinity*, 77

<sup>83</sup> Cohen, *Elevations*, 180

<sup>84</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77

but remains separated and keeps its as-for-me”<sup>85</sup> The relation with the absolute is therefore not “a union with the transcendent by participation” but metaphysical. Levinas uses the term ‘metaphysical atheism’ to refer to this second meaning of atheism. It is metaphysical because the atheist self, as already noted above, is one who can be affected by the Other, whom Levinas regards as ‘metaphysical’.<sup>86</sup> The atheistic self, although it is a resemblance of a windowless monad which is intrinsically oblivious to his surroundings, has the capacity to be sensitive and to respond to the moral pleadings of the Other, thereby overcoming and transcending its own egoism or self-centeredness. For Levinas, the transcendent Other “is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God.”<sup>87</sup> Thus for him, metaphysical atheism implies

that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God. God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. The direct comprehension of God is impossible for a look directed upon him, not because our intelligence is limited, but because the relation with infinity respects the total Transcendence of the other without being bewitched by it. And because our possibility of welcoming him in man goes further than the comprehension that thematizes and encompasses its object.<sup>88</sup>

Atheism as separation and isolation also manifests and preserves God’s transcendence in the sense that it helps maintain His distance from the assimilative tendency of thought which reduces Him to a concept and an idol. God’s transcendence is maintained through man’s ethical relation to the Other. Man cannot directly relate to God but always through the Other. Hence, “the divine-human relationship cannot collapse from either two sides,

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<sup>85</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77

<sup>86</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 87

<sup>87</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78

<sup>88</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78

from the side of man or the side of G-d. If man reduces G-d to the human level, then G-d is not G-d but a human invention, projection, idea, or myth."<sup>89</sup> This explains why Levinas is highly critical of "the concept of God possessed by the believers of positive religions" because their notion of God as sacred or numinous attaches them to "the bonds of participation" and immerses them "in a myth unbeknown to themselves."<sup>90</sup>

### On God and Transcendence

Levinas "is especially careful with language when describing a god, primarily because language conveys ontological categories that cannot rationalize what is not even thematizable."<sup>91</sup> While it is true that God cannot be a theme or an object of consciousness, Levinas refers to God as *a-Dieu* (to-God) to protect God "from the clutches of thematic rationality and the ontology of power."<sup>92</sup> Levinas thinks that "God cannot be a noun because a noun, a name, would thematize God, and to thematize is to place within the realm of being."<sup>93</sup> The word *a-Dieu* has a double meaning in relation to Levinas's idea of God. *A-Dieu* implies *not-God*, a negation of the concept of God. It also implies *to-God*, which means that God must be approached. The first is that traditional concepts of God as in ontotheology does not do justice to God's transcendence and therefore must be rejected. This results to the death of God. The second is that God cannot be conceptualized but can only be approached through the neighbor. The neighbor

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<sup>89</sup> Cohen, *Elevations*, 180

<sup>90</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78

<sup>91</sup> Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 117

<sup>92</sup> Hutchens, *Levinas: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 118

<sup>93</sup> Smith, *Toward the Outside*, 88

resembles God and is closer to God than the self<sup>94</sup> The neighbor's face reveals God without being embodied or incarnated in the face. God leaves only a trace that cannot be marked out His presence in the face is one which cannot be re-presented because he has already withdrawn himself from the totalizing gaze of human thought God therefore is and will remain transcendent

In asserting that God is *to-God*, Levinas is not really speaking about God This is rational theology which conceptualizes God and is therefore a manifestation of the philosophy of the Same For Levinas God is revealed in the moral life of the subject who continually bears responsibility for the Other This explains "why the *to-God* is not a postulate" as in Kant or a proof of reason "but the very life of the moral subject"<sup>95</sup> Hence, for Levinas, God is present and kept alive not in the effort to demonstrate His existence but in the good deeds one does to the destitute Other.

But God's name is not really a name as a designation For Levinas, God cannot be grasped or possessed by human understanding because God is transcendent God comes to mind, enters and explodes the thought of man As God, He can only be approached and not conceptualized Levinas writes.

God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being He is neither object nor interlocutor His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility—the non-erotic *par excellence*—for the other And it is from the analysis just carried out that God is not simply the "first other," or the "other *par excellence*," or the "absolutely other," but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation of the other and different from every neighbor,

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<sup>94</sup> Levinas, in "Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite," 111-112, writes "The Other (*Autrui*) must be closer to God than I"

<sup>95</sup> Chaher, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas*, 163

transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is [il ya]*<sup>96</sup>

It is true that it is difficult to determine God for He is indeterminable. The quest for cognitive certainty fails. But on the pragmatic level, the quest for God should not be separated from ethical responsibility for the Other. "The attributes of God are not given in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of God comes to us like a commandment, like a *Mitzvah*. To know God is to know what must be done"<sup>97</sup> Otherwise this would lead to atheism which is the eventual fate of Western philosophy. Western philosophy inevitably leads to atheism because it cannot get out of the circle of immanence and Being. In this sense, the distinction between atheism and theism is obscured. No matter how one vigorously argues for God's existence (theistic arguments), it will ultimately end up futile for one still employs ontological discourse. This is what Heidegger calls, as already noted, ontotheology. God is thus reduced into a Being.

Levinas discards rational and mystical theology because they draw man's attention away from his responsibility to the neighbor. Rational theology reduces God to a mere idea or thought whose worth is precisely its function as the highest being that justifies the existence of the world. Mystical theology encourages the union of God and man thereby exonerating their separation and independence. Purcell says it best when he explained the reason why for Levinas rational and mystical theology are distorted ways of understanding God.

Levinas mistrusts both theoretical and mystical approaches to god, since they attempt to gain access to divine presence other than the

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<sup>96</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 69

<sup>97</sup> Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 17

detour of the human . . . God is forever inscrutable and inaccessible, not simply because of the finitude and incapacity of human thought, but because, positively, God is one who is utterly transcendent. But further, God purposively withdraws in order that the human creation can attain its purpose, which is the coming to maturity of an ethical humanity, and the emergence of an adult religion. An ethical humanity, working to realize justice, is the fulfillment of the original creation, and opens the way for the return of a God who arises as the counterpart of the justice rendered to others. God withdraws in order to create a space wherein ethics might be possible and so the creation reaches the fulfillment of its original purpose. God's self-distancing, then, is the possibility of an ethical humanity.<sup>98</sup>

Western philosophy so far has failed to defend God's transcendence. God is always construed as first cause and the ground and beginning of everything that exists. But this notion of causality, as Kant has shown, originates in mind of the subject as one of the apriori concepts. The human mind, according to Kant, necessarily posits a regulative principle in order to confer unity to all its (the mind) knowledge. When this notion of causality is applied to God, he becomes a principle that originates in the mind, thus obliterating his transcendence. Levinas notion of subjectivity as responsibility opens a way of understanding God who does not come *from* the mind but who comes *to* mind. Here, the subject is not the origin of the idea of God but which is already there before consciousness as intentionality begins to work. Descartes' notion of a God which exceeds finite thought but which thought is conscious of provides a model for Levinas in order to illustrate his point. Levinas however did not follow through Descartes' ontological proof of God's existence since this is still based on causality. A proof of God based on causality is still within the domain of ontotheology.

Phenomenology cannot establish the idea of God because God does not fit in the noema-noesis correlation. God is not an object intended by consciousness. If God is not

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<sup>98</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 63-64

adequate to an intending consciousness, how then does Levinas talk about God? According to him, desire succeeds consciousness in its failure. This desire does not originate in consciousness but in the infinite which puts it in the finite. The negation of In-finite means that God cannot be approached by consciousness and yet he is in consciousness and awakens the desire for it. For Levinas,

The transcendence toward God is neither linear like the focus of intentionality nor teleological so as to end at the punctuality of a pole and thus stop at beings and substantives. Neither is it even initially dialogical, naming a "you" [*tu*]. Is this transcendence toward God not already produced by ethical transcendence, so that desire and love might be more perfect than satisfaction? It would be advisable nevertheless to ask here whether it is a question of a transcendence out of which a word such as "God" alone reveals its meaning. That this transcendence be produced from the (horizontal?) relationship with the other means neither that man is God, nor that God is great Other.<sup>99</sup>

Phenomenology may have failed in the knowledge of God but it is this failure that frees Him from the violence of conceptual language and affirms His transcendence.

### Conclusion

The importance of Levinas religious philosophy in the postmodern context is that he introduces God into the scene without making so much 'ontological' noise. "What makes Levinas's philosophy so fascinating" Andrius Valevičius writes, is that he reintroduces the question of God into philosophical debate, but without talking very much about God.<sup>100</sup> He talks less about God and yet, his entire philosophical oeuvre is replete with many religious concepts that disclose the divine dimension devoid of

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<sup>99</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 108

<sup>100</sup> Andrius Valevičius, *From the Other to the Totally Other: The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 5



ontological language His ethical philosophy charts a path towards a religion that exalts and extol transcendence According to Jacques Derrida, Levinas once revealed to him that although ethics was Levinas's philosophical preoccupation, it was really the "holy, the holiness of the holy" that Levinas was interested in <sup>101</sup> In reading Levinas, one is guided to an understanding of a self that starts out as a natural atheist which eventually becomes religious through the responsibility it bears upon itself in order to care for the Other The very life of a moral subject manifests and testifies to the presence of God Ethics and justice is correlative to the supreme presence and glory of God

Invoking God's name may seem outlandish in Levinas's time especially in a Western setting afflicted by secularization and religious indifference, but the French thinker still maintains that it is possible to talk about God meaningfully not within the framework of ontological thinking but in an ethical context that emphasizes responsibility for the Other and acknowledges transcendence God-talk is possible in a discourse which does not contain or reduce the Infinite to the economy of a monadic ego For Levinas, the God that can be encompassed by thought is no longer the transcendent God whose "supreme and ultimate presence is correlative to the justice rendered unto men."<sup>102</sup> Nowadays, especially in this ominous time of suffering and escalating violence, the best way to talk about God is to bear testimony to his goodness by serving and caring for one's neighbor, the stranger, the orphan and the poor What is remarkable in Levinas's

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<sup>101</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4

<sup>102</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 78

thought, especially his religious philosophy, is that it offers a religion of peace, justice and service to fellowmen

Levinas proposes and advocates a religion that respects otherness and promotes ethical responsibility towards the Other. Religion of this type respects God's transcendence and man's independence. It is also a religion that stresses justice over freedom, love over knowledge, responsibility over self-centeredness, tolerance over uniformity, plurality over homogeneity, pluralism over fundamentalism, dialogue over monologue, openness over dogmatism and infinity over totality

## Chapter 4

### LEVINAS AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

#### Interfaith Dialogue as a Moral Imperative

In today's highly globalizing world, religious diversity is a pressing issue not only in the academic disciplines of philosophy of religion, religious studies, theology and sociology but also in the life of many ordinary religious persons who are uneasy by the presence of other religions in their midst. Nowadays, more than before, interfaith encounter is unavoidable, and interfaith dialogue has become more of an imperative. Michael Amaladoss superbly captures this moral necessity for interfaith dialogue in the following words:

Once we have recognized in other religions some action of God, dialogue with them becomes not only an option, but a duty and a necessity. The other religions become allies to collaborate with and not enemies to overcome. Dialogue with other religions is no longer an end in itself, nor a step towards proclamation, but an integral element in the promotion of the Reign of God.<sup>1</sup>

This urgent need for interfaith dialogue nowadays is largely spurred by the phenomenon of globalization that has swept the world.<sup>2</sup> Globalization is not only an economic and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Amaladoss, S.J. *Walking Together: The Practice of Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Anand, Gujarat, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1992), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Although it appears that globalization makes the encounter of different religions unavoidable, some scholars claim that this contact between and among religions is not really a recent event and that the study of a certain religion could not be made in isolation from another religion or religions. Michael Peterson, et al., writes: "Diversity and plurality are bywords of the new society. Yet contact among believers in diverse religions is not a new phenomenon. None of the major religions ever existed in complete isolation from other religions, their origins and development intertwine. Judaism developed its unique particularism amid numerous Semitic religions, Christianity grew out of Judaism, Islam developed later in contact with both Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism was an amalgam of the thoughts and practices of Aryan invaders and of adherents of the Dravidic religion indigenous to India. Buddhism arose in reaction to Hindu ascetic culture and developed in China through interaction with both Confucianism and Taoism. And what is true of the major religions applies even more to the sects or religions that grew out of them: Bahai out of Islam, Mormonism, Christian Science and Unitarianism from Christianity, Unificationism out of Korean

political process that leads to increasing linkages and interconnectedness between and among states and their institutions and citizens, but it is also a process that involves intercultural awareness, exchanges and influences that includes the religious realm. As Anthony Giddens writes: "In a globalizing world, where information and images are routinely transmitted across the globe, we are all regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently, from ourselves."<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he says that because this contact is inevitable in today's world, there are two possible responses to this cross-cultural encounter, namely: cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism. Proponents of cosmopolitanism "welcome and embrace this cultural complexity" while those of fundamentalism "find it disturbing and dangerous" and "whether in the areas of religion, ethnic identity or nationalism, they take refuge in a renewed and purified tradition – and, quite often, violence."<sup>4</sup> Hence, while cosmopolitanism takes globalization as an opportunity that promotes diversity and enhances freedom, fundamentalism sees it as a threat to identity and therefore withdraws to and vigorously defends its cherished tradition.

It may seem that globalization standardizes all aspects and dimensions of human life but Giddens notes that such "cultural standardisation" is not its greatest influence. Such uniformity is "relatively superficial cultural veneer" because the "more profound

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Protestantism, Neo-Confucianism, and Buddhism, Sikhism out of Hinduism and Islam. Michael Peterson, et al. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 260.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping our Lives*, new edition (London: Profile Books, 2002), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Giddens, *Runaway World*, 5.

effect of globalization is to produce greater local cultural diversity, not homogeneity”<sup>5</sup> In short, globalization brings greater awareness of the cultural differences not only within but also across geographical boundaries. If this be the case, then the need for a more open discussion and dialogue is of paramount consequence and importance, especially if fundamentalism, as Giddens described it, is to be avoided.<sup>6</sup>

In today’s highly globalized world, transnational migration and immigration, whether for economic or political reasons, bring people from different religions together. Through fast and easy access to communication and travel, the encounter of religions becomes more regular and even an everyday occurrence.<sup>7</sup> Many people have become more aware of the existence of other religions for a variety of reasons. There is the internet that makes readily available information about religions. The study of religions is gaining recognition because it has become a regular course offering in many universities and colleges worldwide. Likewise, translations of Asian religious literature like the *Dhamapada*, *Dao De Jing*, *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad Gita*, together with the sacred writings of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, namely

<sup>5</sup> Giddens, *Runaway World*, xxiv

<sup>6</sup> Giddens, in the same book, explains further what fundamentalism is. The term fundamentalism, he says, “dates from the turn of the century, when it was used to refer to the beliefs of some Protestant sects in the US, particularly those who rejected Darwin. Yet even in the late 1950’s there was no entry for the word ‘fundamentalism’ in the large Oxford English dictionary. It has come into common coinage only since the 1960s. Fundamentalism is not the same as either fanaticism or authoritarianism. Fundamentalists call for a return to basic scriptures or texts, supposed to be read in a literal manner, and they propose that the doctrines derived from such reading be applied to social, economic or political life. Fundamentalism is beleaguered tradition. It is tradition defended in a traditional way – by reference to ritual truth – in a globalising world that asks for reasons. Fundamentalism, therefore, has nothing to do with the contexts of beliefs, religious or otherwise. What matters is how the truth of beliefs is defended or asserted. Fundamentalism isn’t about what people believe, but like tradition more generally, about why they believe it and how they justify it. It has no time for ambiguity, multiple interpretation or multiple identity – it is the refusal of dialogue in a world whose peace and continuity depend on it.” *Runaway World*, 48-49

<sup>7</sup> Francis Cardinal Arnze, “The Church and Interreligious Dialogue,” *Logos* 4 (Winter 2001) 160. See also Leonardo N. Mercado, SVD, *Inter-religious Explorations: The Challenge and Rewards of Inter-religious Dialogue* (Manila: Logos Publications, Inc., 2004), 55.

the *Torah*, *Bible* and *Koran*, abound in the bookshelves of almost all bookshops in the world. This remarkable trend conveys the need for a conscious effort to discuss the true meaning of interfaith dialogue and how it is to be carried out in order to avoid the clash of religions that may engender intolerance and even more so, violence in the form of proselytization, ethnic cleansing, pogroms and religious wars.

For philosophy to gain relevance in this world, part of its urgent task in these ominous times is to help articulate and clarify the true nature of dialogue. "It is thus not out of the question, in our time," Emmanuel Levinas remarks, "to speak of a philosophy of dialogue and oppose it to the philosophical tradition of the unity of the I or the system, and self-sufficiency, and immanence"<sup>8</sup> Here, Levinas recognizes the enormous need to think about the meaning and practice of dialogue as a "result of the trials of the twentieth century after First World War."<sup>9</sup>

The clash of religions could be one reason for the sowing of violence. In fact, these clashes become too frequent and are so prevalent in some parts of the world that there is no need for them to be mentioned and enumerated here. However, though religions are "the cause of so much strife, war, and rivalry", they could also serve as gateways and venues whereby peace, mutual understanding, and justice could be achieved.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 137

<sup>9</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 137

<sup>10</sup> Gavin D' Costa, "Postmodernity and Religious Plurality: Is a Common global Ethic Possible or Desirable?" in Graham Ward, editor, *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 132

This chapter will discuss how Levinas's ethical and religious philosophy can contribute to interfaith dialogue. It does not offer alternative principles and a systematic approach to inter-faith relations nor provide specific guidelines on how this dialogue can be achieved. Instead, it will show how Levinas's thought can provide 'conditions of possibility' for such a faith encounter.<sup>11</sup> Levinas's ethics of responsibility could provide a starting point and a schema where this kind of dialogue can take place. It affords the conditions for interfaith dialogue to be possible.

### The Meaning and Purpose of Interfaith Dialogue

The meaning of interfaith dialogue must first be delineated to serve as a backdrop in elaborating the significance of Levinas's ethical philosophy to interfaith dialogue. To do this, the term dialogue must first be clarified. According to Paul F. Knitter, dialogue is the "the exchange of experience and understanding between two or more partners with the intention that all partners grow in experience."<sup>12</sup> This definition implies that dialogue is not a mere assembly or gathering of persons. Dialogue is more of a meeting of two or more participants who intend to communicate and share their respective experiences. The purpose and goal of dialogue, according to Catherine Cornille, "range from simply

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<sup>11</sup>Michael Barnes' work *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002) has applied the thoughts of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur and Michel de Certeau to the theology of religions, particularly to Christianity's encounter of otherness in other religions. This part of the dissertation, however, differs from Barnes because it seeks a Levinasian paradigm to interfaith dialogue. Kant's notion 'conditions of possibility' which refers to his a priori categories as necessary formal requirements for the appearance of phenomena, will be analogously employed as an approach to interfaith dialogue. Barnes' aim is different because, as he says, he is "less concerned with explaining the 'problem' of religious pluralism than with understanding the meaning of the providential mystery of otherness for the life of the Church and for its practice of faith. My aim is not to continue a debate which has long since ceased to be creative, but—more radically—to learn how to read the engagement of Christian faith and the all-pervading context of otherness as revealing possible 'seeds of the Word' " (p. 15)

<sup>12</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 207

fostering mutual understanding and tolerance, to promoting collaboration and friendship, to serving the purpose of mutual transformation and growth”<sup>13</sup>

The dialogue between various people who have different religious faiths is generally known as interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogue, as Aasulv Lande describes it, is “a conscious process, in which deliberate efforts toward understanding the religiously ‘other’ or ‘strange’ are implied.” Land differentiates it from an ‘interreligious encounter’ because the latter connotes a meeting of “people from various religious traditions . . . without a deliberate intention of interacting or learning from the other party.” Moreover, Land considers “reflections on religious encounters as part of interreligious dialogue” because “the encounter has attained a conscious level with deliberate efforts at understanding and relating to a counterpart”<sup>14</sup>

The heart of interreligious dialogue, according to Francis Cardinal Arinze, is that it

is a meeting of heart and mind between followers of various religions. It is communication between two believers at the religious level. It is a walking together towards truth and a working together in projects of common concern. It is a religious partnership without hidden agendas or motives.<sup>15</sup>

Cardinal Arinze contends that interreligious dialogue should not be merely understood as “mutual information” or “an academic study of religions,” “mutual tolerance or peaceful co-existence between the followers of different religions,” and it

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Comille, “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God” in Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande, editors, *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 4.

<sup>14</sup> Aasulv Lande, “Recent Developments in Interreligious Dialogue” in Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande, editors, *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>15</sup> Arinze, “The Church and Interreligious Dialogue,” 157-158.



should not seek to fuse many religions by into one common religion For him, participants of interreligious dialogue must possess “such mental attitudes such as respect, listening, sincerity, openness, and willing to receive and work with one another”<sup>16</sup>

Michael Barnes, makes a distinction between ‘interfaith’ and ‘interreligious’ dialogue, “the former,” he says, “has inter-personal, the latter more inter-systemic, connotations.”<sup>17</sup> However, in this chapter, “interfaith dialogue” will be used interchangeably with interreligious dialogue Both forms of dialogue are not totally different because they presuppose a face to face meeting The face to face meeting best exemplifies Levinas’s philosophy of the ethical encounter and it is significant in interfaith or interreligious relations

### Three Main Approaches to the Diversity of Religions

To provide a background on the issue of religious diversity, the three main approaches to the issue will be discussed These approaches are the different ways of evaluating the claims of other religions Specifically, they deal with the epistemological issue on how an advocate of one religion confronts the truth-claims of another religion since, in spite of their commonalities in certain aspects, different religions have incompatible and conflicting truth-claims Also, the approaches may also deal with the moral issue on how to behave in relation to believers of another religion. These three different approaches to religious diversity are the following exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism

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<sup>16</sup> Arinze, “The Church and Interreligious Dialogue,” 157-158

<sup>17</sup> Michael Barnes, SJ in *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions*, footnote 1, p 3,

*Exclusivism* is the view that there is only one true religion and that others are pseudo-religions. Salvation, deliverance from suffering and evil, contentment and other religious goals are to be found only in this one true religion.<sup>18</sup> Proponents of exclusivism contend that believers in other religions, if they are to be saved, must realize that truth and salvation can only be attained through this one true religion. This accounts for their aggressive missionary efforts to evangelize those who have not yet “seen” the truth.

One strong objection to the exclusivist view is that there are people who are faithful to their religion and whose lives are lived according to the moral precepts of their own faith. If they are not saved just because they do not know the God of a purportedly true religion, it would be unjust for that God “to condemn a person who has never heard or is unable to understand what is necessary for salvation.”<sup>19</sup> And “if God truly desired that all persons come to know, love, and worship him,” then he would not limit his revelation “to a particular time, way, person, community, or culture.”<sup>20</sup> A loving and infinite God would find ways to send his message effectively to different people according to their cultural patterns and modes of perception. Another critique is, since there are many exclusivist religions, there is difficulty as to which religion one should adhere to. One’s choice could not be based according to “the moral lives prescribed or

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 262

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 263

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 264

lived, for the virtues and acts encouraged often do not greatly differ among the respective religions, and adherents of all faiths seem capable of living morally praiseworthy lives”<sup>21</sup>

*Inclusivism*, like exclusivism, is the view that there is one true religion. But unlike, exclusivism, other religions are viewed not as false ones but as lesser paths towards salvation. The adherents of this view claim that “salvation is at work throughout the world, whether others know it or not.”<sup>22</sup> The path to salvation is accessible to other believers “only because they meet certain criteria revealed in one true religion or are accounted righteous on account of a specific salvific act”<sup>23</sup>

The inclusivist approach is criticized because if adherents of other religions could be saved on the basis that their respective religion and their life meets certain requirements of the one true religion, then mission, proclamation and even conversion become unnecessary.<sup>24</sup> Believers of other religion could just be allowed to continue living their own faith. Anyway, they can still be saved even if they do not know or recognize the true religion.

*Pluralism* is the view that all religions, in spite of the various ways they respond to the divine reality, are various legitimate ways of attaining salvation. One popular proponent of this view is John Hick.<sup>25</sup> Hick employs Immanuel Kant’s notion of noumenon and phenomenon to explain what he calls his “pluralistic hypothesis.” The

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<sup>21</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 264. See also Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon press, 2003), 19.

<sup>22</sup> Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 270.

<sup>24</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 272.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 233-251.

divine reality is the noumenon and as such, it is unknowable. It is perceived and experienced by believers in their respective cultural ways. For Hick the different religions represent the various ways of interpreting divine reality. For him the authenticity of a religion can be evaluated on the basis of its transformative power to change the life of its adherent from being self-centered to other-centered. Hence, for Hick there is no single religion which can truly claim that it alone is the true path towards salvation.

The pluralistic approach is problematic because it veers towards relativism and skepticism. It is threatened by relativism because if the divine reality is unknowable, then all interpretations and perceptions of it are equally valid and "there is no criterion for judging either truth or ethical conduct."<sup>26</sup> Apparently, Hick's criterion for a genuine religion will not work for there is no way of knowing what the divine reality requires.

Pluralism also leads to skepticism because the impenetrability of divine reality to human knowledge only frustrates the desire and conviction of the followers of a certain religion.<sup>27</sup>

This chapter will not engage in a debate with these different approaches to religious diversity. It will not join the fray of these different claims. Instead, it will show that these three approaches look at religions as asserting epistemological truth claims which overlooks the ethical dimension (in the Levinasian sense) of interfaith encounter. Interfaith dialogue cannot progress unless there is a way to make the participants in the dialogue to trust each other. First and foremost, religion is not just a set of dogmas, creeds and rituals. Religion is primarily the relationship that is established resulting from encounter between God and man. For Levinas, this encounter is ethically mediated by the

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<sup>26</sup> Suchocki, *Divinity and Diversity*, 20

<sup>27</sup> Peterson, et al, *Reason and Religious Belief*, 269

relation of one person to another. To pit one religion with another in terms of epistemological truth claims is to invite animosity, bigotry and worse, violence. And this is what this chapter will attempt to show by proposing a Levinasian approach to religious diversity. In the next section, this approach will be elaborated.

#### Conditions of Possibility for an Interfaith Dialogue

In her insightful article “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God”, Catherine Cornille listed the following important features in order for such a dialogue on God to take place: 1) the possibility of knowing the other, 2) openness and commitment, 3) recognition of the historical and cultural relativity of all religious forms, 4) belief in the propositional force and the dynamic nature of truth, 5) belief in the common ground or goal of all religions, and 5) recognition of the other religion as a source of truth.<sup>28</sup> However, Cornille thinks that the other conditions may be fulfilled “but unless the other religion is regarded as a possible source of truth or revelation which might add to the existing understanding of ultimate reality, there will be little incentive for a properly theological dialogue.”<sup>29</sup> And since dialogue is not static but dynamic in the sense that it is an on-going activity, then “the conditions for dialogue need not be fulfilled a priori but may come to realization in the process of dialogue itself.”<sup>30</sup>

Knitter, in his widely acclaimed book *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Towards the World Religions*, summarizes the conditions for

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<sup>28</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God” in Werner G. Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande, editors, *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 3-18.

<sup>29</sup> Cornille, “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God”, 17.

<sup>30</sup> Cornille, “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God”, 11.

interreligious dialogue into three important points. The following points are 1) Dialogue must be based on personal religious experience and firm truth claims, 2) Dialogue must be based on the recognition of the possible truth in all religions, the ability to recognize this truth must be grounded in the hypothesis of a common ground and goal for all religions, 3) Dialogue must be based on openness to the possibility of genuine change/conversion<sup>31</sup>

These conditions, no doubt, are worth-pursuing and must even be observed with commitment. But the conditions Cornille and Knitter respectively enumerated are conditions which presuppose knowledge and understanding not only of the other person who has a different religious conviction, but also knowledge and understanding of one's own religious tradition and background. The aim of this chapter is to show that the above-mentioned conditions proposed respectively by Cornille and Knitter, although they are necessary, are not sufficient enough for an interfaith dialogue to occur. An ethical dimension in the Levinasian sense is needed in order for an interfaith dialogue to be possible. As Levinas says, 'Only a being who is responsible for another being can enter into dialogue with it. Responsibility, in the etymological sense of the term, not the mere exchange of words, is what is meant by *dialogue*, and it is only in the former case that there is meeting.'<sup>32</sup>

Ethics for Levinas is inseparable from religion so that unless the latter works within the matrix of ethical relationships, it fails to be authentic. A religion grounded solely in abstruse dogmas and excessive rituals have no meaning whatsoever in Levinas's

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<sup>31</sup> Knitter, *No Other Name?*, 207-213

<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," in *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell, 1989), 67

perception because this disregards the moral concern and love due to the Other. This kind of religion turns the self's attention away from the Other. Creeds and rituals for Levinas seem to divert the care and responsibility that the self has for the Other. Without ethics, religion becomes an empty discourse and a meaningless ritual. Ethics is the very core and substance of religion.

"Levinas's analysis," Michael Purcell writes, "offers a prolegomena or point of entry to any proper understanding of religion on the basis of phenomenological analysis."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, according to Jeffrey Kosky, "Levinas's analysis of responsibility can be seen as a discourse on religion that, at least in its intentions, holds forth without recourse to the authority of any faith or religious tradition. . . [The] religiosity met in Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility is not an actual religion but the possibility or nonnoematic meaning of religion."<sup>34</sup> In other words, Levinas's ethical philosophy opens up the religious dimension without making this dimension an object of systematic and discursive thinking, a privilege area, so it seems, of any religious tradition. Once religion becomes an object of discursive thought, religion becomes secularized and its transcendental character is lost.<sup>35</sup>

By religion, Levinas means the transcendental nature of the ethical relation. The Other is transcendence. No real religion can purely be founded on immanence or the Same for this is but a masked atheism. The religion of immanence or the same, if such a description be allowed, is also a form of idolatry, a kind of fetishism of the ego that is

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Purcell, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 58.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Kosky, *Levinas and The Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), xxi.

<sup>35</sup> Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*, 58.

absorbed in the expansion of its freedom and sphere of influence. If religion is a religion of immanence of the ego, then it reduces other religions to itself which is a form of intolerance and violence. This is an inclusivist type of religion where other religions are absorbed and assimilated in its egoism or immanence. This religion is also inclined to reject other religions if it cannot incorporate them into its own identity. In this sense, religion becomes exclusivist. Exclusivist religion may also engender a form of violence that will proselytize and persecute others who hold other religious beliefs.

Levinas considers any form of religion that destroys the ethical relation primitive. He says, "Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion."<sup>36</sup> Though it is not clear what this primitive form of religion exactly means, it can be surmised that it is a religion that allows for human sacrifices. In the contemporary times, this could take the form of a religion where religious rules, dogmas and rituals are upheld even if it means suppressing the rights and freedom of its members. It is therefore a kind of religious fundamentalism that seeks to convert others at all costs.

But if the mark of a true religion is its ethical component, then any religion founded on an infinite responsibility for the Other excludes no other religion. Instead it embraces them and recognizes them as fellow believers and co-pilgrims in the path towards God in spite of their cultural affiliations and loyalties. After all, all genuine religions are not devoid of morality.<sup>37</sup> What all these religions have in common is that

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<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 79.

<sup>37</sup> This is the aim of some thinkers like the German theologian Hans Küng. Küng thinks that in global efforts to resolve conflicts, poverty and other serious problems that plagued the world, the role of the world's religions has often been overlooked. He claims that if the world religions could come together and are able to see that they share a common global ethic, then global problems could be effectively addressed.



they all presuppose an ethical relationship that promotes the welfare not only of their own members but also the members of other religions. In cultivating this ethical dimension, any religion will not look at *an-other* religion as an enemy and as a threat to its own existence. This will in a way allay any fear or suspicion that the one is out to crush the other. Instead, these religions will look at each other as brothers, as fellow pilgrims, who are called and elected to be responsible and to respect each other's differences. Aloysius Pieris writes: "Phenomenologically, therefore, religions are so many alternative configurations of basic human values. And as such, it is in their nature to provoke comparison and mutual criticism, confrontation and reciprocal correction, these being the intermediary stages between tolerance, with which dialogue begins, and positive participation, in which dialogue should culminate."<sup>38</sup>

It cannot be denied that although Levinas develops a philosophy of the Other, his thoughts are informed by his Jewish religion. Many of the ideas and concepts he employed to articulate his philosophy are reminiscent of his Jewish background. This however does not diminish the validity and the truth of his philosophy. His abhorrence of anti-Semitism can be viewed as his attack against any philosophy, religion, ideology, and worldview which is anti-humanism. For him to be a Jew is to be authentically human. He was not promoting his religion at the expense and exclusion of another. His second major book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* was dedicated not only 'to the memory of those are closest among six million murdered by the National Socialists' but also to "the

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See, for example, his *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Aloysius Pieris, S.J. *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 17.

millions and millions of human beings of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other humans, of the same anti-Semitism” As Richard Cohen remarks “Levinas always links the moral dimension, the height of the other person, to religion, in a broad nondenominational sense”<sup>39</sup>

Every religion must be considered an Other, a face This is so because the adherents are persons. Levinas says that “the notion of the face opens other perspectives”<sup>40</sup> If religion is considered in this way, that is, it is seen from the perspective of a believer who is a person, a human Other, then the tendency towards fundamentalism, dogmatism and violence is thwarted This is so because this way of understanding religion promotes an attitude of openness and sympathetic understanding This attitude helps man see other possibilities and alternatives not only in the religion of others but also in his own religion In being open to other religions, one understands deeply the cultural world where the Other resides It makes him see in a broader perspective why the other person behaves differently from others And through this, he will learn to respect the Other and even help promote the Other’s freedom and dignity

Interfaith dialogue is less successful or may even fail if it is construed as a cognitive encounter where one makes only an effort to know and understand the other’s religion Knowledge, as Levinas says, tends to assimilate and dominate the Other It “would thus be the relation of man to exteriority, the relation of the Same to the other, in which the Other, finally finds itself stripped of its alterity, in which it becomes interior to

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<sup>39</sup> Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 187

<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51

my knowledge, in which transcendence makes itself immanence”<sup>41</sup> One cannot help but understand the other person’s religion through one’s cultural and religious categories “All understanding, even the most noble attempt at understanding the other through categories belonging to his or her own tradition, is determined by the particular religious and cultural framework from which one starts out”<sup>42</sup> Though this is inevitable, its influence on one’s thinking and adverse impact on the Other can be minimized if at the sensitive level of encounter or meeting, one takes up the responsibility that the Other has placed on one’s shoulder For Levinas, before the person encounters the Other in knowledge, he is already burdened by the responsibility to respect and uphold the Other’s welfare Responsibility for the Other precedes understanding the Other The ethical encounter comes first before understanding occurs The more primordial encounter occurs at the level of sensibility Understanding others who have a different religion comes later It is in the primordial encounter then that genuine dialogue can occur and proceed

At this point, it is relevant to elaborate on Levinas’s notion of dialogue For him, “the philosophy of dialogue is oriented toward a concept of the ethical (Begriff des Ethischen) that is separated from the tradition that derives the ethical (Das Ethische) from knowledge and from Reason as the faculty of the universal, and sees in the ethical a layer superposed upon being”<sup>43</sup> Dialogue for Levinas is an asymmetrical interpersonal relation It means that the relation is one of inequality because the self is a servant to the other

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<sup>41</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans Michael B Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York Columbia University Press, 1998), 180

<sup>42</sup> Cornille, “Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God”, 6

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 149

person who is considered a master. Being a servant means that the self is indebted to his master in terms of responsibility. Moreover, this responsibility is infinite and so the debt cannot be fully repaid. To give a limitation to this responsibility is to put the self over the Other and this breaks the asymmetry of the ethical relation. For Levinas, this responsibility is what constitutes the very subjectivity of the self. Levinas gives credit to a fellow Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, for introducing the notion of dialogue in intersubjective relations. He says: "It is certainly the irreducibility of the 'I-Thou' relation of the Meeting, the irreducibility of the Meeting to any relation with the determinable and the objective, that remains Buber's principle contribution to Western thought."<sup>44</sup> Levinas thinks that it is in Buber's thought that Being acquires a new meaning. "The problems of knowledge and truth must thus be put in relation to the event of meeting and dialogue."<sup>45</sup> In other words, Being and truth are now construed as intersubjective and dialogical.

Buber asserts that authentic dialogue is an I-Thou relation. According to Levinas's reading, Buber construes this relation as one where

the presence of an interlocutor to me cannot be reduced to the presence of an object that my gaze determines and upon which it makes predicative judgments. Not that the interlocutor cannot be envisaged thematically and become the support of my judgment, but then he or she is precisely no longer the one I approach in dialogue, but the one I consider as a number within an aggregate whole, useful for some technically realizable plan.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 14-15.

This is a relation where the I treats the other person as person, a You, and not as an object "It is precisely because the You is absolutely other than the I that there is, between the one and the other, dialogue"<sup>47</sup> As Levinas further explains:

The statement that others do not appear to me as objects does not just mean that I do not take the other person as a thing under my power, a 'something' It also asserts that the very relation originally established between myself and others, between myself and someone, cannot properly be said to reside in an act of knowledge that, as such, is seizure and comprehension, the besiegement of objects<sup>48</sup>

The I-Thou relation is therefore a relation of equality, of presence, where the self acknowledges the presentation of the other as a self just like itself. Treating the other individual not as a person but as an object is what Buber calls I-it relation

In spite of the important place Levinas gives to Buber in terms of the latter's contribution to dialogue, Levinas however disagrees with Buber's notion of real dialogue as a relation of equality and reciprocity His reason is that Buber's I-Thou relation, although it recognizes the Other as a subject and not an object (in contrast to I-it relation), is still a relation of equality which puts the self and the other person on the same level. And this kind of relation is still mediated by Being which still emphasizes the Same and obscures the otherness or difference of the other person. As Steven G Smith explains, Levinas "rejects the subordination of relations with beings to a relation with Being, seeing in this 'ontologism' the expression of a tyrannical theoretical attitude of ideal self-

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<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 146

<sup>48</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 40

confirmation that has dominated Western philosophy”<sup>49</sup> The following passage is the basis of Levinas’s reasoning.

To Buber, the *Thou* that the *I* solicits is already, in that appeal, heard as an *I* who says *thou* to me The appeal to the *Thou* by the *I* would thus be, for the *I*, the institution of reciprocity, an equality or equity from the start Whence the understanding of the *I* as *I*, and the possibility of an adequate thematization of the *I*. The idea of the *I* or of a Myself in general is immediately derived from the relation a total reflection on myself would be possible and thus the elevation of the Myself to the level of the concept, to Subjectivity above the lived centrality of the *I* <sup>50</sup>

What Levinas is trying to say is that in Buber’s I-Thou relation, being a reciprocal relationship, determines the identity and meaning of both the I and Thou, thereby raising this relationship to the level of a concept It must be noted that for Levinas, a concept is produced by a subject thinking of an object So Buber’s I-Thou relation betrays the subjectivity of both the I and the Thou since the relation is still mediated by a concept “The I *and* the You are not embraceable objectively, there is no *and* possible between them, they form no totality”<sup>51</sup> That is why for Levinas, when the I approach the Thou, the I approach the Thou as a responsible subject prior to the former’s speaking to the latter “In my own analyses,” Levinas remarks, “the approach to others is not originally in my speaking out to the other, but in my responsibility for him or her That is the original ethical relation”<sup>52</sup>

Levinas further criticizes Buber by saying that Buber’s notion of real dialogue is reminiscent of Husserl’s notion of the intentionality of consciousness Levinas explains:

<sup>49</sup> Steven G Smith, *Appeal and Attitude: Prospects for Ultimate Meaning* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 211

<sup>50</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 43

<sup>51</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 145

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 43-44

“Does not the thought to which dialogue organically and primordially belongs, in Buber, remain within the *element* of consciousness? It has seemed to me essential to stress the irreducibility of responsibility towards others to the intentionality of consciousness, to a thought that knows, to a thought closed to the transcendence of the *Other*, and ensuring, as knowledge, equality between the idea and *ideatum* whether it be in a strict noetic-noematic parallel, or the adequation of its truth, or the fullness of the intuition ‘fulfilling’ the goal of the *Meinen* [to mean], satisfying it as one satisfies a need. The ethical relation to the Other person, the proximity, the responsibility for others is not a simple modulation of intentionality; it is the concrete modality in which there is produced a non-indifference of one to the other or of the same to the *Other*, that is, a relation from the Same to what is *out of all proportion* with the Same, and is, in a sense, not of the ‘same kind.’<sup>53</sup>

In Buber’s dialogical thought, the self is now viewed as a relation and no longer a substance. “It can only exist as an ‘I’ addressing itself to a ‘Thou’, or grasping and ‘It’.”<sup>54</sup> But in claiming this, Buber reduces and incorporates the self into this relation even though he tried to maintain the distance between the I and the Thou. As Levinas says, “Man is not merely identifiable with the category of distance and meeting, he is a being *sui generis*”<sup>55</sup>

As already noted above, Levinas does not understand dialogue as a reciprocal relation. The I cannot demand from the Other the same responsibility. The greater responsibility is placed on the shoulder of the I. This responsibility is exclusive and non-transferable “as if my neighbor called me urgently and called none other than myself, as if I were the only one concerned”<sup>56</sup> Levinas further describes this responsibility as.

<sup>53</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 45-46

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge” in *The Levinas Reader*, edited by Sean Hand (Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell, 1989), 63

<sup>55</sup> Levinas, “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” 74

<sup>56</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 44

Gratuitous responsibility resembling that of hostage, and going as far as taking the other's place, without requiring reciprocity. Foundation of the ideas of fraternity and expiation for the other man. Here, then, contrary to Buber's I-Thou, there is no initial equality.<sup>57</sup>

Equality and reciprocity as a condition of and rule in dialogue reduces dialogue to a mere objective discourse. When rigid rules and conditions for dialogue are set and laid, such dialogue often fails. These rules and conditions often reflect the bias of one of the partners in the dialogue. Even if the rules are set by a party other than the ones involved in the dialogue, this already determines, in one way or another, the expected outcome or purpose to be achieved. If genuine dialogue is to happen, it must be as spontaneous as it could possibly be. The encounter cannot be forced and predetermined. It should be the ethical encounter itself that animates the parties involved in such a dialogue. In other words, responsibility for the Other should dictate the direction and outcome of the dialogue.

To engage in an interfaith dialogue is to welcome the Other, and to receive the Other as a partner in dialogue is to put into question one's freedom.<sup>58</sup> By extension, it is also to put into question one's expression of faith.<sup>59</sup> The self examines itself whether its stance and comportment deprives the Other of the justice he or she deserves. Just as the self's responsibility for the Other constitutes its subjectivity, so is dialogue. Dialogue with the Other makes the self become more aware of its subjectivity. It constitutes as well as enriches its subjectivity. But the consequences of the dialogue are not as important as

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<sup>57</sup> Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 44

<sup>58</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 85

<sup>59</sup> "In the case of ultimate reality, it is not faith itself that needs to be put into question but the rendering of this faith in thought and expression." Cornille, "Conditions for the Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue on God," 9



the dialogue itself Michael Barnes says that "the *results* of dialogue are less significant than the continuing and fundamentally *ethical* encounter which the practice of dialogue promotes"<sup>60</sup> The "ethical precedes doctrine, and does not worry about the dogmatic upsets it presages."<sup>61</sup> To be worried about the possibility of one's doctrinal creed to be overturned by the Other in dialogue already forfeits one's ethical responsibility for the Other This worry is already the work of the Same and not the ethical subject who is subjected to responsibility by the presence of the Other and whose restlessness is caused not by his concern for his own welfare but the concern that his responsibility for the Other may not be enough

Religious institutions together with their cherished dogmas and beliefs are founded on a kind of rationality which Levinas calls totality If Levinas would have to assess these institutions, he would certainly have nothing against them He is only wary of the possibility of violence these institutions may engender if their dogmas and beliefs are not grounded on an ethical relation In interfaith dialogue, these dogmas and beliefs should have to be assessed and examined in the presence of other religions. The religious encounter, to apply Levinas's thought, is first and foremost, an ethical encounter The original ethical relationship, according to Levinas, is peace, "the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other"<sup>62</sup> Proximity or the ethical encounter with the Other, according to Levinas, "is communication, agreement, understanding, or peace Peace is

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<sup>60</sup> Barnes, *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions*, 71

<sup>61</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 80

<sup>62</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199

incumbent on me in proximity, the neighbor cannot relieve me of it. Peace then is under my responsibility”<sup>63</sup>

It is through this peace encounter that real dialogue can begin. In other words, the key idea in this dialogue is that one must be open to and be receptive of the Other as a partner in dialogue with the hope that the dialogue will enrich the faith of the participants. “Faith,” Barnes writes, “is always ‘inter-faith’, formed and practiced in relationship with others”<sup>64</sup>. Passivity or one’s vulnerability to the ethical appeal of the Other, is Levinas’s term for this receptiveness to the Other. The goal is not to convince, convert or even to impose on the other what one believes. Rather, the aim is to respect the radical alterity of the Other. Only then can there be mutual understanding, mutual enrichment of each other’s faith, and collaboration for noble causes such as the promotion of world peace and justice, poverty eradication, environmental sustainability and protection, human rights advocacy and women empowerment. Respecting the otherness of the Other, according to Barnes, is “very persuasive and promising for the future of inter-faith relations, especially where history and culture conspire to prevent rather than enable communication across the divide”<sup>65</sup>. This explains why Levinas strongly suggests that one’s cherished principles, beliefs and cultural presuppositions or prejudices must give way in favor of responsibility for the Other. Levinas writes:

One must deliberately abstain from the convenience of ‘historical rights,’ ‘rights of enrootedness,’ ‘undeniable principles’ and ‘the inalienable human condition.’ One must refuse to be caught up in the

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<sup>63</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 166-167

<sup>64</sup> Barnes, *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions*, 4

<sup>65</sup> Barnes, *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions*, 97

tangle of abstractions, whose principles are often evident, but whose dialectic, be it ever so rigorous, is murderous and criminal<sup>66</sup>

For Levinas, all these must be given up in order to truly meet and encounter the Other. These principles and beliefs are egoistic and totalizing expressions that increase the freedom and power of the Same which are impediments to genuine dialogue.

Mediation in interfaith dialogue is successful only if no single religion dominates and if it maintains respect for the difference and alterity of other religions. The mediation should not result into a totality that encompasses and fuses both partners in the dialogue into a homogeneity. Levinas says that "mediation characteristic of Western philosophy is meaningful only if it is not limited to reducing distances"<sup>67</sup>. In an interfaith dialogue, the proximity of the participants must not be condensed in a kind of universalism that eliminates the particular and unique identity of the participants. Otherwise, fundamentalism and violence set in. Could it also be that these violence and fundamentalism are motivated by resentment because the other's identity is not respected? Fundamentalism then can be viewed as a reaction to an oppressive condition caused by totalizing systems of modernity. Or, it is a way of coping with and a defiance of the climate of relativism or uncertainty (skepticism) engendered by the postmodern condition that seems to erode and undermine authority and absolute truth. As William Raeper and Linda Smith explain:

Believers in an old-style world-view with its absolutes of right and wrong, God and the created order, find themselves in danger of being overwhelmed by uncertainty in the postmodern world.

In a hurry to re-establish order out of the postmodern chaos, new converts to the fundamentalist way of being are inadvertently

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<sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 88

<sup>67</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44

encouraging the further fragmentation of society by their very defiance of it. For the embracing of the fundamentalist spirit entails the taking of fragmentation to its logical conclusion. One particular and specific fragment within a tradition is made the primary focus. It is then expanded into an all-encompassing ideology and world-view through which life maybe ordered afresh.<sup>68</sup>

Fundamentalism as an ideology precludes dialogue. This is so because “with certainty given a new and unshakeable foundation, the need to listen to and be in dialogue with the beliefs of others is removed. In consequence, opportunities to understand and to develop the ability to empathize with others are diminished.”<sup>69</sup>

Levinas cautions that although dialogue aims at overcoming violence whenever there are differences or disagreements, such differences or disagreements however cannot at all times be settled and so this should not be pursued unilaterally and vigorously to the point of leading to violence. The abolition of violence, which is the very aim at which the dialogue is pursued, could turn and also become violent. As Levinas says.

There are oppositions between men that, at first blush, like so many others, to do no more than give rise to reflection and discussions, call for committees, conferences and institutions, to dispel violence. One soon perceives that all the difficulties they contain can, in fact be overcome. All but one. And the last difficulty remains insoluble and annoying because, without realizing it and out of patience, the minds dealing with it turn toward violence and guile, speak of conversion and expulsion, of using force and driving into the sea – of too bad about this or that or the other thing. After violent thoughts, pity is no more.<sup>70</sup>

For Levinas, Ethics is “the search for a proximity beyond ideas exchanged, a proximity that lasts even after dialogue has become impossible.”<sup>71</sup> Ethics persists even beyond

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<sup>68</sup> William Raeper and Linda Smith, *A Brief Guide to Ideas: Turning Points in the History of Human Thought*, revised edition (Oxford, England: Lion Publishing, 1997), 345

<sup>69</sup> Raeper and Smith, *A Brief Guide to Ideas*, 345

<sup>70</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 86

<sup>71</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87

dialogue because it is “*maturity and patience for insoluble problems*”<sup>72</sup> The objective of dialogue is not so much in the attainment of mutual agreement but more on doing away with “proselytism and propaganda, not in order to find some most-common-denominator platform, but because they have understood that in certain conflicts persuasion itself is violence and repression”<sup>73</sup> It is for this reason that vigilance and caution must be borne in mind so that dialogue may not lapse into violence It is important “to recognize and name those insoluble substances and keep them from exploding in violence, guile or politics, to keep watch where conflicts tend to break out, a new religiosity and solidarity”<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

Totality will always tend to generate war and other forms of violence because it obviates plurality and infinity Any religion that implicitly or explicitly fosters totality betrays the real meaning of religion which is relating to God concretely expressed in responsibility for the Other. What this chapter has shown is the importance of Levinas’s ethical philosophy to interfaith dialogue as a condition of possibility of such a crucial endeavor Levinas neither provides what the content of dialogue should be nor does he explicitly articulate its purpose and goal What can be gleaned and inferred from his philosophy of intersubjectivity or dialogue is the way dialogue is to be made possible and the manner it is to be conducted What he is indeed proposing is an ethics of dialogue

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<sup>72</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87

<sup>73</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87

<sup>74</sup> Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 87-88

It appears that for Levinas, purpose and outcome of dialogue is largely determined by how it has been initiated and carried out. In the absence of ethical proximity, dialogue cannot begin. And respect for the radical alterity of the Other must be maintained and sustained lest the dialogue fails and the outcome becomes violent. Without this respect dialogue becomes adversarial and antagonistic thereby giving way to animosity, antagonism, enmity and hatred. As Levinas says: "Dialogue is the non-indifference of the *you* to the I, a dis-interested sentiment certainly capable of degenerating into hatred, but a chance for what we must—perhaps with prudence—call love and resemblance in love."<sup>75</sup>

For Levinas, genuine dialogue is an ethical encounter rather than an objective discourse. The former preserves proximity without reducing the latter to totality mediated by knowledge. Levinas's "insistence on ethical responsibility," Barnes writes, "is a direct challenge both to the grosser forms of exclusivism and to the more subtle forms of patronising violence which seeks to encompass the other within a self-fulfilling totality."<sup>76</sup> Ethics goes beyond dialogue and keeps one alert and vigilant to the tendency of dialogue to lapse into violence due to persuasion and propaganda.

Levinas thinking offers a way towards infinity and transcendence that are hallmarks of a true religion. What is strikingly interesting in his thought, especially his religious philosophy, is that he offers a conception of religion that promotes dialogue, peace, tolerance, brotherhood and service to fellowmen. His is a dialogical philosophy that respects the absolute otherness of the Other.

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<sup>75</sup> Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 147

<sup>76</sup> Barnes, *Theology and The Dialogue of Religions*, 95

## Chapter 5

### SUMMARY

This study is an exposition of Levinas's ethical and religious philosophy. It has explored Levinas's ideas on God, religion, atheism and idolatry, and has endeavored to highlight the relevance of these concepts to postmodern religious discourses. This study has also ventured to explicate how Levinas's thoughts on religion can help address the problem of religious pluralism, fundamentalism and dialogue in the postmodern age.

Levinas's ethical philosophy is deeply rooted in the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. Though he is indebted to this phenomenological tradition, Levinas also tried to show its limits. For him phenomenology is still an expression of the philosophy of the Same that totalizes the Other. Levinas criticizes Husserl's phenomenology because it privileges the transcendental ego. The object that the ego confronts is already constituted by consciousness, thereby excluding the alterity which lies beyond consciousness.

Heidegger contextualizes Husserlian phenomenology. He has placed the ego back into its spatio-temporal existence. Here the ego is now understood as Dasein who is being-in-the-world. But in Heidegger, Being is still the dominant theme where everything is dependent on its historical manifestation. For Levinas, this notion of Being still prioritizes the Same at the expense of the Other. Alterity is subsumed in Being and the Other is deprived of its radical difference.

Levinas's philosophical project seeks to transcend phenomenology in order to show that the Other is not a phenomenon that can be constituted by the ego or

encompassed by the overpowering presence of Being. In showing that the Other cannot be absorbed by the Same, Levinas re-conceives philosophy's main task by emphasizing the ethics of responsibility for the Other over ontology's search for and investigation of Being.

To accomplish his project, Levinas makes use of Descartes' idea of the infinite that overflows consciousness. In Levinas's philosophy, this infinite is the human Other. Phenomenology fails to take into full account the presence of the human Other because this Other resists the objectifying vision of consciousness. The Other refuses to be regarded as an instance or moment of the ego's all-embracing gaze. For Levinas, the Other is not a phenomenon that can be constituted by a totalizing consciousness. Instead, it is an enigma instilled into consciousness from an irrecoverable past. The self could not produce and contain the infinite by virtue of its finite nature. The presence of the infinite in thought is the awakening of a desire already present in the passivity of the self.

This idea of the Other plays a significant role in Levinas's notion of ethical relationship. The Other as exceeding thought signifies its irreducibility into a concept and its separation from the ego. The *a priori* presence of the infinite in the ego's consciousness indicates that the Other's moral claim is a constant and unrelenting appeal addressed to the ego. It also implies that the ego is not pure interiority shut in its own world but is also open to the infinite or transcendence.

Levinas regards Western philosophy as an egology. The comprehending gaze of the ego eliminates the distance that separates the ego from the Other. In this comprehension, both the ego and the Other have now become components of a synthesizing thought. Hence, in Western philosophy, transcendence is reduced into



immanence, infinity is absorbed into and by totality. This way of reading Western philosophy coincides with Levinas's phenomenological description of the ego as initially the Same. The ego, whose natural essence is to persist in its own being, emerges from what Levinas calls the *there is* – the state of anonymous existence where there is only pure undifferentiated Being. For Levinas, the ego yearns for independence in order to flee from the horror of the *there is*. The ego strives to acquire identity so as to breakaway from its anonymous existence. This is the reason why every ego is fundamentally attached to and lives only for itself. Each is innately egoistic and inclines towards narcissism.

Levinas regards life in its elementary form as happiness and enjoyment. Suffering is possible because life is happiness in the first place. As enjoyment, the self is at home in the world. It enjoys its economic life. The world, which the self inhabits, is not merely a place where it derives its sustenance but is also the site where it finds enjoyment. Enjoyment is spontaneous and it has no other goal except enjoyment itself. For the ego to escape the horror of the *there is*, it must assimilate and possess things in the world.

The ego's self-absorption, its being at home and solitary in the world, is interrupted by the approach of the Other. The presence of the Other arouses the feeling of guilt and shame in the self. It challenges the ego to question its own happy existence because its egoism deprives and expels the Other from his own rightful place in the world.

Levinas argues that the Other discloses himself as a face. The Other, which reveals himself as face, affects the self to the very core of its being. The look of the Other pierces through the very heart of the self in such a manner that the Other's call for help,

generosity and sacrifice can hardly be evaded. This look is the look of the poor, the orphan and the widow that begs for mercy and compassion. For Levinas, the face of the Other is not exposed to the thematizing gaze of the self because the Other approaches from outside the self's horizon. The Other appears not according to the self's initiative or illumination but according to its own light. The face is the living expression of the Other who continually unmakes and eludes the thematization of the Same.

Levinas contends that the self's responsibility to and for the Other is already established prior to the self's existence. The responsibility is already assigned before the self is born. The responsibility for the Other does not only precede one's birth but also one's freedom and commitment. For Levinas, responsibility is placed on one's shoulder from an immemorial and anarchical past. This responsibility is already assigned to the self in creation. The subjectivity of the subject is precisely this responsibility for the Other. The subject was not created and then was invested with freedom in order to decide whether it should assume responsibility for the Other or not. Rather, the self's freedom comes only after its encounter with the Other. Only then can the self accept or refuse the Other's ethical claim.

The subjectivity of the subject, according to Levinas, is its subjection to the Other. The self is built and structured to respond to another human being. This is the radical passivity that exposes the self to the Other's incessant moral demand. Furthermore, this subjectivity is a condition of being hostage to the Other. The self as hostage does not only mean that self can hardly resist the call of the Other but it also implies that the self is responsible for the behavior and misdeeds of the Other. To be hostage to the Other is a deposition that draws the self out of its happy home in order to

meet and welcome the Other even if this means sacrificing his comfort and life. Hence, for Levinas subjectivity is synonymous to responsibility.

The form that the subject's subjection to the Other assumes is that of sensibility or sentience. This sensibility is a vulnerability and passivity towards the Other. Sensibility is proximity to the Other and it is the foundation of intentionality. Hence, for Levinas the self is an embodied subject capable of being affected and vulnerable to the needs and sufferings of the Other. For Levinas, responsibility is concrete. The self is incarnated so that it can support the material needs of the Other.

For Levinas, the relation between the self and the Other is not reciprocal but asymmetrical. To conceive their relation as reciprocal would place them in the same category or genus which implies a totality. Their asymmetrical relation is due to the self's irreplaceable moral obligation to the Other. The self cannot demand from the Other to accord him with the same moral responsibility. The self alone bears this burden of responsibility and cannot pass this on to others. Thus, the self's responsibility is unique and non-transferable.

The Other approaches the self through language. It is through language that the Other opens and offers himself to the self. The face of the Other expresses indigence and weakness that appeals to the moral sensibility of the self. The face of the Other is a signification that signifies an ethical command. The Other beseeches the self to recognize and respect him. Through language, the self discovers that it is not the only one who inhabits the world and that there are others with whom it shares this world.

For Levinas, the ethical or face to face relation is not merely a private or exclusive affair between the self and the Other. The face as language also discloses the

rest of humanity which Levinas calls the third party. The third party is the Other of the self's Other and represents every person. He is the neighbor of every Other. The presence of the third party disturbs the intimacy and asymmetrical relationship between the self and the Other. This is so because the third party also demands for attention and justice from the self. The Other and the third party simultaneously appeal to the self so that their petitions divide the self's attention. It is the third party which prompts the self to weigh and compare which it thinks needs most its moral consideration. It is also the third party which limits the self's unbounded care for the Other as this renders problematic the issue of ethical priority. This now necessitates the rational organization of society and the creation of laws in order to carry out justice. The entry of the third legitimates the state, politics and philosophy. It corrects the asymmetry in the relation of the self and the Other because through the third party, the self now becomes an Other to another person.

Levinas maintains that God is revealed in the human face. But the human face is not God's embodiment. Instead, God leaves a trace in the face of the Other whose look summons the self to responsibility. What Levinas is saying is that ethics provides an opening towards the divine dimension because the Other resembles God. God is only accessible through one's responsibility for the Other. In other words, one's responsibility for the Other is the living testimony of God's presence.

Levinas employs the word *illeyty* or he-ness to name the incomprehensible God. God's *illeyty* signifies His transcendence and distance from the conceptualizing gaze of the human intellect. This resistance and withdrawal from the clutches of man's intellectual grasp is God's way of redirecting man's vision to the Other. Thus, ethics for Levinas points to man's fundamental relation to God as evidenced by his desire that is

inflamed by the Other. The intentionality of man's desire signifies man's movement towards transcendence which takes the form of responsibility for the infinite Other. This is the ultimate structure of human subjectivity indicating the religious orientation of human existence.

The self's openness to God through ethics can be construed as Levinas's way of transcending ontotheology. Ontotheology is Heidegger's critique of traditional metaphysics which identified Being with God, and so the latter is reduced into a mere entity and obscuring their ontological difference. Levinas thinks that the problem of ontotheology cannot be evaded if one still thinks about Being. Any attempt to think outside of Being is bound to fail because thinking is fundamentally ontotheological. Thought constantly seeks for an encompassing and foundational explanation that makes intelligible what is strange and unfamiliar. For Levinas, the way out of ontotheology is ethics.

The effort to overcome ontotheology and the death of God is still ontological and so God-talk cannot progress if they are to be rejected absolutely. Meaningful God-talk can only occur if ontotheology and the death of God are understood as conditions and not as obstacles. When viewed from within Levinas's phenomenology of ethical responsibility, the death of God, which was already implicit in the thoughts of Kant and Hegel and later on taken up by Nietzsche, serves as a context from which the self emerges out of the *there is*, consequently finding enjoyment in the world and responding to the moral call of the Other. The self's existence in the *there is* is prior to the acquisition of its own identity, which can be described as the absence of God. This atheism is a condition that enables the self to respond to the moral appeal of the Other. From this

absence of God, the self is awakened to its obligation to the Other by reason of its unavoidable presence. This in turn leads the self to the realization that the Other to whom he is responsible resembles God

Levinas accepts Nietzsche's proclamation of the demise of God. He however rejects Nietzsche's answer to the problem for Nietzsche this still upholds the philosophy of the Same, the will to power. For Levinas, the response to the problem is not the philosophy of the will to power but a philosophy of responsibility where God leaves a trace in the face of the Other

For Levinas, man's elementary existence is fundamentally uninhibited enjoyment, and as such he is atheistic, enclosed and absorbed in his own worldly and egoistic engagement. Such an innocent atheism conditions ethics, which for Levinas is responsibility for the Other. One cannot be touched by the Other if in the first place he does not enjoy life in the world. But the presence of the Other poses a challenge to the ego's self-indulgence, thus making it realize that it is not the only one which has monopoly of the world

The natural self-centeredness of the ego is a manifestation of its independence and separation from the world. Levinas finds the ego's independence significant because it serves as a fissure or gap that maintains the ego's autonomy from any form of relationship, religious, moral or otherwise, that dissolves the ego's identity

Though Levinas claims that the Divine is revealed in the face to face relation, this does not mean that God is personified in the human face or He is reducible to the ethical relation. God remains absolutely Other, other than the otherness of the Other. Levinas refers to God as *illey*. God reveals and speaks to the self through the other person and it

does so from the anonymous realm of *illety*. To personify God in the human face or to identify him in the ethical relation is to undermine his holiness and transcendence and at the same time promote the notion of religion as the 'sacred'. The notion that God is incarnated in something does not only destroy God's transcendence but it also puts man under the influence of a spell, incantation or some magical power that completely controls him. The reason why Levinas rejects the notion of religion as sacred is the same reason why he abhors mysticism. Both the concept of the sacred and mysticism support immanence and ignore the separation of God and man. Thus, Levinas considers religion that promotes the sacred a form of idolatry because God is replaced with a sacred object.

The sacred is not the only form that idolatry takes shape. Idolatry could also be conceptual idolatry. By conceptual idolatry, Levinas refers to natural theology that makes use of ontological language. Ontological language is essentially idolatrous. This is so because when one employs it, one is seeking a principle through which one can explain a phenomenon. When this language is applied to God, the understanding of God is fixed into and enclosed in a concept or system. As a consequence, the image or concept of God gradually becomes more important than God himself, which may lead to efforts where all possible measures are undertaken just to preserve this concept of God. If this happens, idolatry becomes a dogmatism that may spawn violence. When a thought is taken as absolute, it becomes an idol that entices and commands people to place their trust in it, making them captives of a belief that will eventually destroy their subjectivity. In the history of Western philosophy, this idol has been variously conceived and identified as Form, Substance, One, First Cause, Necessary Being, Supremely Perfect Being, Infinite Substance, Transcendental Subject, Absolute Spirit, Being, etc.

Paying homage to a God which is merely a projection of human ideals and aspirations is also a form of idolatry. A notion of God based on human fear and expectation is one which is made in the image of man. It is an anthropomorphism which could be viewed as a manifestation of a life concern only with itself. In the idol, God is modeled after man.

For Levinas, knowledge is an act of retrieval or recuperation of what has occurred. The intellect attempts to recover what has passed by through thematization. What is absent is now being recovered by a thematizing consciousness. But God, who leaves a trace in the human Other, is refractory to thought. Any attempt to trace and retrieve God through a theme or concept results to a desperate effort to comprehend what is veritably incomprehensible. Or worse, this theme about God would be taken as an unquestionable dogma that any challenge pose against it is deemed heretic and blasphemous. Thus, God cannot be considered a phenomenon that can be constituted and recuperated by thought because He is an enigmatic trace who can only be faintly glimpsed in the face of the Other.

Levinas's philosophy of religion proceeds from a phenomenological description of egoistic existence which culminates in an ethics of face to face that testifies to the presence of God. Levinas calls religion as the (ethical) bond that is established between the Same and the Other without constituting a totality. The kind of religion Levinas articulates is what is known as prophetic religion. Prophetic religion can be contrasted to the priestly religion. The former emphasizes ethics and social justice by actively working for reforms, the former accentuates ceremonies and sacraments and obedience to authority and tradition.



Atheism, according to Levinas, is the natural condition of the solitary ego who is at home with itself and who finds enjoyment in living from the world. For him, the self-interested and self-immersed ego is naturally atheist. He maintains that atheism and the self-enjoyment of the solitary ego are synonymous. As the ego assimilates and seizes things, it gradually separates itself from the *there is*, and as a result, becomes independent and egoistic. Its egoism and separation from the *there is* makes it atheistic.

As a natural condition of the ego, atheism is prior to both the negation and affirmation of God. This means that the ego is already atheistic even before it consciously and deliberately accepts or rejects God. This natural atheism cannot be understood as a spiritual deprivation due to the ego's fault because it does not yet know God. The ego in its biological life is inherently innocent. The affirmation or negation of God is only possible once the ego becomes conscious of and is disturbed by the presence of the Other.

Since the self is capable of happiness and suffering, it is thus sensitive and vulnerable to the misery of the destitute Other. In answering to the appeal of the Other, the self bears witness to the presence of the Divine. The presence of the Other weakens the ego's untrammelled authority. The Other's moral appeal disrupts and interrupts the self-enclosure of the self. Hence, atheism for Levinas serves as the context in which the Other approaches the self, and the relation that this context creates bears witness to the passage of God.

For Levinas, the self cannot enter into a real relationship with God if it is not initially atheistic. This atheism means that the self has the capacity to refuse God which prevents it from being absorbed and annihilated in its relationship with the divine being. Atheism as separation and isolation also manifests and preserves divine transcendence in

the sense that it helps maintain God's distance from the assimilative tendency of thought which reduces Him to a concept and an idol. God's transcendence is maintained through the self's ethical relation to the Other. Man cannot directly relate to God but always through the Other. This explains why Levinas is highly critical of the concept of God in positive religions because their notion of God is that of the sacred or numinous which put their adherents under the influence or control of some irresistible power.

Levinas notion of subjectivity as responsibility opens a way of understanding God who does not come *from* the mind but who comes *to* mind. The self is not the origin of the idea of God. Instead, God is disclosed and comes *to* mind in ethical relationships. Levinas refers to God as *a-Dieu* (to-God) because he wants to protect God from being reduced into a mere theme or concept inside consciousness. He thinks that God is not a name or noun because a name signifies an object which can be known or experienced. The word *a-Dieu* has a double meaning. First, the word *a-Dieu* implies 'not-God', a negation of the concept of God. Second, the word stands for 'to-God', which means that God must be approached. Thus, according to Levinas, traditional concepts of God as in ontotheology do not do justice to God's transcendence and therefore must be rejected. God cannot be conceptualized but can only be approached through the neighbor. The neighbor resembles God and is closer to God than the self. The neighbor's face reveals God without being embodied or incarnated in the face. God leaves only a trace that cannot be marked out. His presence in the face is one which cannot be re-presented because he has already withdrawn himself from the totalizing gaze of human thought. God therefore is and will remain transcendent.

In asserting that God is *to-God*, Levinas is not really 'speaking about God' as in rational theology. Such a theology conceptualizes God. It is a manifestation of the philosophy of the Same. For Levinas, God cannot be thought of in the mind because He is revealed in the moral life of the subject who continually bears responsibility for the Other. God is present and kept alive not in the effort to postulate and demonstrate His existence but in the good deeds the self does to the destitute Other.

The reason why Levinas discards rational and mystical theology is that such theologies draw the self's attention away from its responsibility to the neighbor. Rational theology reduces God to a mere idea or thought whose worth is precisely its function as the highest being that justifies the existence of the world. Mystical theology encourages the union of God and man thereby exonerating their separation and independence.

In the end, phenomenology cannot really establish the idea of God because God does not fit in the noema-noesis correlation. God is not an object intended by consciousness. Phenomenology may have failed in the knowledge of God but it is this failure that frees Him from the violence of conceptual language and affirms His transcendence.

Levinas ethical and religious philosophy is relevant to the understanding of interfaith dialogue. Interfaith encounter is unavoidable in the contemporary time, and interfaith dialogue has now become more of a moral imperative. The increasing awareness of the plurality of religions is a remarkable trend which conveys the need for a conscious effort to discuss the true meaning of interfaith dialogue and how it is to be carried out in order to avoid the clash of religions that may result to intolerance and violence. For philosophy to gain relevance in this world, part of its urgent task in these

ominous times is to help articulate and clarify the true nature of dialogue. Levinas recognizes the enormous need to think about the meaning and practice of dialogue as a consequence of his experience of the trials of the present time.

Religion, according to Levinas, is indicated by the transcendental nature of the ethical relation. He thinks that no real religion can purely be founded on immanence or the Same. Religion based on immanence is not open to dialogue with other religions. This type of religion is an inclusivism where other religions are absorbed and assimilated in its egoism. This type of religion is also inclined to reject other religions if it cannot incorporate them into its own identity. In this sense, religion becomes exclusivist. Exclusivist religion may engender a form of violence that will proselytize and persecute others who hold other religious beliefs.

For Levinas, the mark of a true religion is an ethics founded on an infinite responsibility for the Other. Adherents of this kind of religion will not regard the followers of another religion as a threat to their own faith. Instead, they will consider them as fellow pilgrims who are also called to responsibility for the Other.

Interfaith dialogue may not succeed if it is merely construed as a cognitive encounter where one makes only an effort to know and understand the other's religion. Knowledge tends to assimilate and dominate the Other. Though this is inevitable, its influence on one's thinking and adverse impact on the Other can be minimized if at the sensitive level of encounter, one takes up the responsibility that the Other has placed on one's shoulder. Prior to one's cognitive encounter with the Other, one is already burdened by the responsibility to respect and uphold the Other's welfare. Responsibility for the Other precedes understanding the Other. The ethical encounter comes first before

knowledge of the Other. The more primordial encounter occurs at the level of sensibility. Understanding others who have a different religion comes later. It is in the primordial encounter that genuine dialogue can occur and proceed.

Dialogue for Levinas is an asymmetrical interpersonal relation. It means that the relation is one of inequality because the self does not expect the Other to reciprocate its goodness. To promote equality and reciprocity as a condition of and rule in dialogue reduces dialogue to a mere objective discourse. When equality and reciprocity becomes the basis of dialogue, such dialogue fails. Hence, it must be responsibility for the Other which should dictate the direction and outcome of the dialogue.

To engage in an interfaith dialogue is to welcome the Other as partner in the dialogue. To receive the Other is to put into question one's freedom. By extension, it is also to put into question one's expression of faith. The self examines itself whether its stance and comportment deprives the Other of the justice he or she deserves. Just as the self's responsibility for the Other constitutes its subjectivity, so is dialogue. Dialogue with the Other enhances the self's awareness of its own subjectivity. It constitutes as well as enriches the subject. But the consequences of the dialogue are not as important as the dialogue itself. To be worried about the possibility of one's doctrinal creed to be overturned by the Other in dialogue is already to forfeit one's ethical responsibility for the Other. This worry is already the work of the Same and not the ethical subject who is subjected to responsibility by the presence of the Other and whose restlessness is caused not by his concern for his own welfare but by the concern that his responsibility for the Other may not be enough.

For Levinas, the ethical encounter is a peaceful meeting. In this peaceful meeting, one is open to and receptive of the Other. This receptivity to the Other implies that in interfaith dialogue, the purpose is not to convince, convert or even impose on the Other what one believes. Rather, the aim is to respect the otherness of the Other. Only then can there be mutual understanding, mutual enrichment of each other's faith, and mutual collaboration for noble causes such as the promotion of world peace and justice, poverty eradication, environmental sustainability and protection, human rights advocacy and women empowerment.

Mediation in interfaith dialogue is successful only if no single religion dominates and if it maintains respect for the difference and alterity of other religions. The mediation should not result into a totality that encompasses and fuses both partners in the dialogue into a homogeneous whole. In interfaith dialogue, the proximity of the participants must not be condensed in a kind of universalism that eliminates the particular and unique identity of the participants. Otherwise fundamentalism and violence sets in. Fundamentalism then can be viewed as a reaction to an oppressive condition caused by universalism and totalizing systems of thought. It precludes dialogue because openness to the Other is no longer possible. As a result, understanding the Other will not be realized.

Levinas cautions that although dialogue thwarts violence, dialogue should not be pursued unilaterally and vigorously because this could lead to the same violence. The abolition of violence, which is the very aim at which the dialogue is pursued, could turn and also become violent if persuasive discourse is not held in check. It is for this reason that vigilance and caution must be borne in mind so that dialogue may not lapse into hostility and aggression. Thus, it is important to respect differences and acknowledge insoluble

problems so that dialogue may not irrupt into violence Without this respect and recognition, dialogue becomes adversarial and antagonistic thereby giving way to animosity, antagonism, enmity and hatred

For Levinas, genuine dialogue is an ethical encounter rather than an objective discourse The former preserves proximity without reducing the latter to totality mediated by knowledge.

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