

The Intrigue of the Other

Ethics and Religion in the Wake of Levinas

JEFFREY BLOECHL

*Jeffrey Bloechl är Assistant Professor och Edward Bennett Williams Fellow vid Filosofiska fakulteten, the College of Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts. Bloechl har tidigare diskuterat Lévinas i boken *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (2000). Han har dessutom givit ut ett flertal antologier och översättningar om och av centrala franska filosofer.*

I

«The dimension of the divine,» says Levinas, «opens forth from the human face.»¹

This is of course an elevation of the ethical relation beyond all other relations in this world, but it is also a defense of the transcendence of God, who is too great to enter into experience and comprehension—too great to reveal itself directly, as if person to person. According to Levinas, it is in the face of the other person, and not in the face of God itself, that God «solicits and appeals to us.» The ethical relation *is* our relation with God. It is in the ethical relation, in the appeal of the other person and the response of the one who hears the appeal, that the Transcendent pours into an existence otherwise unable to accommodate it. The face of one's neighbor is thus also the promise of salvation, and to respond to her in mercy and compassion is to embrace that promise. To seek justice for the other person is also to assist in the redemption of the world.

It is understandable that among Christian thinkers some liberation theologians² have welcomed this call to associate the face of the other person with the revelation of God, and all the

more so when Levinas contrasts the wealth and comfort of a subject at home in his own world with the poverty of the neighbor who—precisely as other, alien from everything the subject may call its own—appears to have none of that same wealth. Yet before this ethics of the other person may be considered a philosophical analogue to the more biblical preferential option to the poor, it must be recognized as an attempt to reinstate religion after and beyond modern claims of onto-theology as well as its theological correlate, idolatry. To start from an assertion that God commands us to responsibility for one another is to risk pretending that God's will is comprehensible, and thus accessible to human understanding. It is to give the impression of grasping God as the deeper principle or even cause of ethical life, and thus of submitting God to some version of the principle of sufficient reason such as Heidegger, for one, has grasped as the essence of onto-theology,³ and Marion, for another, has identified as the source of conceptual idols.⁴ Avoiding these difficulties, Levinas describes the ethical relation in terms that seem to testify to a God that has always already withdrawn from any ontology and its concepts. The fact that I am always already susceptible to my neighbor's cry in need, before and beyond any resistance in me, indicates an ordering and a relation deeper, or prior to—anterior to—the plane of our existence. What Levinas calls «God» is that by which each of us is bound to his neighbor,

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini* (La Haye: Nijhoff, 1961), p. 50; *Totality and Infinity* trans. Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 78.

² I am thinking especially of Enrique Dussel, but also to a lesser degree Juan-Carlos Scannone. Beyond their interest in Levinas's apparent philosophy of preferential option for the poor, the liberation theologians also appreciate his attempt to get beneath concepts to praxis—thus underlining an unexpected affinity with Marx.

³ Martin Heidegger, «On the Essence of Ground», in *Pathmarks*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, pp. 133f.

⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1991, pp. 33 and 64.

before and beyond any act of either accepting that fact or refusing it. More concisely, what he calls «God» is before and beyond the entire sphere of activity, which is to say, at least in his view, before and beyond being.⁵

God as God is therefore «invisible» and «unimaginable,» and each of us acting as if alone is acting in ignorance or neglect of our relation to God. The solitary subject would thus incline to what Levinas does not hesitate to characterize as «atheism.» One's natural mode is absorption in one's own affairs; one puts oneself first, as one often must. When I eat, I generally feed myself. For Levinas, this way of acting on one's own initiative is already closure from God, and indeed from the other person whose needs should come before my own. Such is a basic or perhaps even natural tendency in all of us, so that the plurality of individuals acting each on from his freedom is a plurality of atheist subjects each of whom takes himself as the center and focal point of those actions. It must be in this state, where each subject is separated from the others by his or her self-interest, that the human face becomes an epiphany of the divine. It is no longer difficult to recognize the argument for this: the face of the other, as an appeal for help with her concerns, strikes me from beyond the range of my own concerns, and it awakens me from any pretense of closure into myself to the deeper truth of an openness that, according to an association that must be held in question, is both ethical and religious. The way the ethical other is thus uniquely capable of recalling me to the religious Other, and the congruence between the two that that seems to imply, permits Levinas to claim that the other person stands closer to God than I do.⁶

This also explains more of the notion that to seek justice for the other person is at the same time to assist in the redemption of the world.

When the other person approaches me with her own needs and desires, she comes from beyond the range of everything defined by my own needs, which is to say from beyond the world that nourishes me. Our meeting is such that I in my atheist closure into myself am shocked by a face that reveals a dimension wholly beyond it. Her face exposes any inclination toward solitary dominion over things as fantasy and delusion, generated by my spontaneous tendency to move to the origin and center of my world, and thus to attend first to my own concerns. But if the tendency is spontaneous how could I have done otherwise? *How could I do otherwise even now, after having seen the face of the other person?* After all, in order for me to respond in any way to the call of the other person, it is first necessary to form some understanding of what she wants and then necessary to take some initiative—that is, to embark on actions originating from me. Would this not amount to drawing the other person into the world centered again on me, thus returning me to the atheism of self-enclosure, though now in some slightly more sophisticated form? For Levinas, the only way to work against all of this would be to strive to welcome each new human face and to respect the otherness revealed there—to ceaselessly renew this effort, and indeed to remain vigilant against new and subtler forms of the understanding that places me first, as if solitary master of all else. This work of welcoming and respect would therefore be a work of self-emptying—«kenosis of the subject.» Levinas has sometimes said—a reversal of the spontaneous tendency to care first for myself into a movement to instead care first for the other, to respond to her before attending to myself. In this way, ethical responsibility appears as the opening of atheist subjectivity to an otherness that transcends it. For the moment, let us leave aside the question of whether or how this otherness revealed in the human face differs from the otherness said properly of God, and instead recognize the conclusion: for Levinas, to commit oneself to one's neighbor is at the same time to open oneself to God. On this earth, responsibility is the very life and spirit of the divine. It is the elevation of human existence from animal life and its immersion in the elements, to an attunement beyond.

⁵ Levinas's reduction of being to its «verbal sense» is well known. Accepted on the authority of early readings of Heidegger, it persists into the later works, which employ «effort» and «conatus» as synonyms.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, «La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini», in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1988), p. 174; trans. Alphonso Lingis, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Nijhoff, The Hague 1986, p. 106.

II

Before asking how the otherness of the other person differs from the otherness of God, it is necessary to think more about what that ethical otherness may be. I have already suggested that Levinas embeds his definition in descriptions of subjective life and the encounter with a human face, said to be the self-expression of the other. I have also repeated some of the main lines of those descriptions, which always depict an encounter between the wealth and self-absorption of the subject with the poverty and outcry of the other, visible on her face. In religious terminology, this is the confrontation of atheism with transcendence; in ethical terminology it is the confrontation of egocentrism with exteriority. The event itself is called «revelation» and «epiphany,» but also «shock» and «trauma.» Whichever the terminology, Levinas's first intention is evidently to identify an experience—if that word may still be used here, where it is a matter of transcending being and appearing—or perhaps encounter, that cannot be reduced to any form of phenomenality, since phenomenality always refers to a meaning-giving subject. Ethics and religion involve a dimension that withdraws from us even as it reaches us, a dimension that does not accompany its presence to us. Like Marion and Jean-Louis Chrétien after him, Levinas considers the modern scientific language of representation and cognition inadequate for to discuss these things, and instead uses the older language of «appeal» and «response.»

This willingness to concede that all of phenomenality and presence fall within the grasp of egocentricity and atheism insures that on Levinas's conception the gap between the subject and the other person is both sharp and deep. My very recognition of the other, insofar as it grasps her in a present image exposed to my gaze, is already a form of possessing her. The claim that subjective life tends to suppress the otherness of the other extends all the way to include one's capacity to recognize and understand her. The relation of subject and other is a relation of separation, without convergence. Each subject is sealed into itself without possibility of opening its own way outside. It thus identifies itself from within itself, rather than as one who is like

another.⁷ The subject is what Levinas therefore calls «the same,» and its neighbor is wholly other. Their separation is crossed only at the initiative of the other, when she approaches or turns her face toward the same.

Returning now from ethics to religion, it seems possible that this concept of separation may shed some light on Levinas's claim that the bond between the subject and the other testifies to the passage of God. If the closure of the subject from God is in fact a correlate of the glory of God, and if this closure, as atheism and egocentrism, defines the subject who is separated from the other, then it is due to the glory of God, such as Levinas understand it, that the subject is the same and the other is wholly other. The impact of an extreme definition of transcendence is unmistakable, for it is only the idea that God is too great to enter into a direct relation with me that requires us to suppose that I am therefore inclined to closure into myself. And it is only this thought about what I am, as subject of the same, that supports the notion of separation and, in turn, the otherness of the other person. To repeat, we are a plurality of separated subjects, the same and the other, ordered to another in this fashion by the withdrawal of God from direct relation with any of us. God speaks to me only by thus binding me to the other person, and though her appeal for help is also a call to God, there can be no question of equating them.

Still, the appearance of dualism between same and other can not go unquestioned, especially where it subordinates every form of otherness *within* the life of the subject to the one form that strikes from wholly *outside*. There is no longer any uncertainty about Levinas's reasons for defining the subject as «the same,» but one may entertain some doubt about the adequacy of that word to account for the complexity of inner life where, as we all know, one may sometimes feel alienated from oneself or influenced by an other within oneself. Merleau-Ponty was powerfully aware of these experiences, and sometimes resisted the morality of unlimited responsibility by observing that one can not give one's full self to a cause or friend simply because there are re-

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 265; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 289.

gions of oneself that are not one's own to give. Similar insights seem to inform Ricoeur's account of selfhood, which includes explicit resistance to Levinas's reduction of subjective life to self-possession and, in that sense, the sameness of the same. Against Levinas's re-course to the fixed and enduring identity of an *idem*, Ricoeur upholds a more fluid conception of identity as *ipse*.⁸

It is equally inevitable that reservations should be expressed at Levinas's view that the only otherness that truly disrupts the sameness of the same is that of the other person.⁹ Christian thinkers should be among the first to do so, in the name of sacrament, ritual, worship, and devotion. Is it so evident, as Levinas would have us think, that communion with God may be reduced to «participation» in God's sacred life, and that this is in fact a «denial of the divine»?¹⁰ To be sure, there is in such practices and attitudes every risk of decline into narcissism and worse, but one can certainly think so without immediately accepting Levinas's conception of a subject inclined to egocentrism and atheism. One can even concede that some religious practices are always dangerous in this way—prayer is constantly exposed to personal desire, as the mystics tell us—so that an ethical critique certainly is frequently necessary. But what sort of critique will serve the contrary task of insuring that ethical practices do not distort or falsify our relation with God? A robust religious worldview needs both an ethical critique of prayer and worship and something like what Jean-Yves Lacoste

calls a liturgical critique of ethics,¹¹ but the latter of these will always be lacking so long as one accepts, with Levinas, that anything short of a foundation solely in interhuman relations is «forever the primitive form of religion.»¹²

III

Leaving these difficulties aside, it may still be worthwhile to reflect on the strategy Levinas seems to pursue in response to the modern widespread emergence of forms of life, or at least elements of life, seeming to know nothing of a relation with the Transcendent (this is, at any rate, close to the strategies also adopted by Marion and Lacoste). Of course, from a strictly pastoral level, the need to recognize these developments is virtually self-evident: efforts to convey a worldview still attuned to God or the Absolute are greatly enhanced by a capacity to understand and respect the situation of the people to whom they are conveyed. For Levinas, this involves somewhat more than learning to speak the language of popular culture and consciousness, or anticipating popular sensibility and likely reactions. When he describes the atheist subject as a necessary implication of the glory of God, he seems to take the somewhat stronger view that the possibility of godlessness, as a way of life, is in fact an essential component of religion itself—that is, of course, such as he understands it. In the philosophy of Levinas, atheism is first a natural and inevitable tendency of our being, second an inner feature of the ethical and religious relations, and only thus, finally, a limited or corrupt form of our full humanity. However, we should not forget that this priority for atheism—the fact that it comes «first»—lies only in the order of experience, where it is a pre-condition for the epiphany of the other and in turn the possibility of the self-emptying that Levinas has said bears witness to God. What that experience brings to light is the anteriority of the religious relation suppressed or forgotten by atheism, so that the shock is in the

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, pp. 335–341.

⁹ This claim should not be mistaken for the somewhat different one, frequently imputed to Levinas in casual conversation, that only the human face reveals the otherness of the other person. Levinas has sometimes conceded that other parts of the body—a «twisted back,» for instance—can do so, and on at least one occasion has even supposed that a hand sculpted by Rodin may be revelatory. Cf., respectively, the interviews with Francois Poirié, in *Emmanuel Levinas. Qui êtes-vous?* La Manufacture, Lyon 1987, p. 134, and Hans-Joachim Lenger, in *Spuren in Kunst und Gesellschaft* (1987), no. 20: 32.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 51; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 78.

¹¹ Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Expérience et Absolu*. P.U.F., Paris 1994, § 29, pp. 92–93.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, p. 52; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79.

end also an awakening. Recognizing that this will necessarily link a turn to God with the pain of being torn from previous comforts, Levinas has spoken of a «mysticism of disenchantment.»¹³

In the terms of some recent Christian theology, this seems to locate Levinas on the side of those who think that religion, or a religious dimension—openness to God—is intrinsic rather than extrinsic to our humanity. Thus, however great his concession to secularity, Levinas is intent on absorbing it into a wider horizon that is anything but secular. This is no easy task, after having argued that consciousness and phenomenality serve the movement of subjective of life, of *being*, toward atheistic closure. The religious relation which encloses that movement—the relation which encloses our secularity—can not be made visible in a theme, because it is prior, or anterior, to the very possibility of themes. Again, according to Levinas, each of us is bound to the other before and outside of the time of this world, outside of the time of our being-in-the-world-toward-death. And again, this bond, this order of each one of us to the other, testifies to the passage of God. Levinas calls this bond anterior to being, a «plot,» *une intrigue*. If the notion of a beginning supposes the action and initiative of a subject who begins, then this is a plot without a beginning, a plot that is «anarchic.» Each of us is always already bound to the other, and in that bond, also in relation with what alone transcends anything that could be held in a relation. «This plot,» writes Levinas, «connects to what detaches itself absolutely, [it connects] to the Absolute.»¹⁴ In our very concern for ourselves, our egocentric involution and its atheistic closure, our being nonetheless confirms and expresses a relation fixed before and outside being, in the withdrawal of the Absolute whereby each one of us is bound and susceptible to the other.

There is more. This notion of «plot,» of a relation and an ordering before and outside being, does not only permit Levinas to recognize and contain the movement of being toward atheism. It also represents the basis from which he may argue against every attempt to defend or entrench atheism as the final word in defining our humanity. When Levinas underwrites his account of ethics and religion with the notion of a plot relating us to the Absolute (and this comes only late in his philosophy), he also claims a depth in his conception of our humanity that must be lacking in any full-fledged atheist humanism. Sartre, above all, will have constructed a theory that mirrors or reifies only one dimension of who and what we are (and of course hardly the deepest one). To say, as he does in *Being and Nothingness*, that human being is animated by a desire for perfect autonomy is to grasp the essential tendency of what Levinas has led us to understand as atheist subjectivity, but to end the discussion, as Sartre does, there is to neglect the more profound bond with the other person and openness to God that that atheist subjectivity presupposes.

One implication of this notion of «plot,» of being bound to the other person before and outside being in the world, would be the idea that Sartre—or Sartre as spokesman for atheist humanism—has not understood the full nature of the modern freedom that he himself describes. For Sartre, freedom is a name for an endless movement of self-determination toward self-justification that he considers to define our human situation. It is the unbearable truth of that situation that our freedom is without ground—unbearable, and so always masked by one or another fantasy of grounds. In our freedom we are forever, as it were, pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, forever thrusting out from ourselves, in our present situation, in pursuit of the basis for a stable identity which, however, we can never have, since every candidate for such a basis would have to appear first as a choice or option to the freedom that tries to embrace it. In short, for Sartre there can be no true ground for a stable identity and a restful freedom because any commitment to such a ground would have to be freely reasserted at each new moment.

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, «Amour et revelation,» in P. Huot-Pleuroux, et al., *La charité aujourd'hui*. Editions S.O.S., Paris 1981, p. 139.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Nijhoff, The Hague 1973, p. 188; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis. Kluwer, Boston 1981, p. 147.

Levinas's response to this dark vision is both *phenomenological*, in the sense of proposing deeper conditions, and *existential*, in the sense of contesting the account of human action and its consequences. The phenomenological argument proposes that we recognize the «plot» of being bound to the other and open to God before being free to act if agent and author of everything we do. On this line of reasoning, Sartre will have failed to see all the way to the ground for our freedom in a relation with the other person, who reveals herself to stand before and beyond any exercise of our freedom. Thus, when the face of the other awakens me from atheism to a deeper religious relation, she also teaches me that my freedom does in fact have essential limits. And when I, for my part, respond to her face with attempts to welcome her, as other, I am also engaged in a questioning, or limiting of my own freedom. Levinas calls this realization of essential limits, and the possibility to then live within those limits, the investiture of freedom.¹⁵ The exteriority of the other person makes my relation with her the one occasion in which to anchor my identity—to give rest to a freedom and a willing otherwise destined to constant movement. Sartre will have overlooked this, as would any way of life that assumes freedom to consist in unqualified self-determination.

The existential argument against Sartre takes up this thesis of investiture—of a first law for freedom, a ground beyond its reach—and asks about the respective destinies of the ways of life that recognize it and do not recognize it. To what will Sartre's ungrounded freedom come, in the absence of any ground for it? For Levinas, the endless process of self-justification, of futile pursuit of complete security—vain pursuit of perfect autonomy—is most elementally a movement of restlessness (the theologian can not help thinking of Augustine's *inquietudo*). What Sartre calls the existential «project,» and what many among us today take as our human condition, moves according to a freedom drawing solely under its own energies. What he calls the authentic life, the life of «good faith,» is a life that knows and accepts this about itself. Can this be

sustained indefinitely? According to Levinas, it cannot. Our energy, the force of our being, has a limit, even if our will is blind to that fact. To embark on the path prescribed by Sartre, to set out as if one's freedom is all that one may live from, is to depart from the deeper relations with one's neighbor and God, but since those relations alone can ground our freedom and give it rest, the path leading away from them is also a path bound for exhaustion. Some of Levinas's finest descriptions try to illustrate this claim. Beyond depletion, he says, is the paralysis of an experience like insomnia, in which one can neither quite get to sleep nor find the resolve to rise from bed and busy oneself with other things. There is no need to go into Levinas's account of the «horror» befalling the insomniac, nor for that matter his assertion that it, and not Heidegger's account of «anxiety,» takes us to the primordial condition of being-in-the-world, in order to recognize the final word in his existential argument against Sartre. Modern freedom, as ungrounded freedom, or freedom giving itself the right to seek self-justification, is freedom that flirts with the disintegration of the subject. It is therefore not only mistaken in its premises, but dangerous in its aims.

Combined, these phenomenological and existential arguments against Sartre form what theologians may recognize as an exercise in apologetics. The philosopher of religion tries, as it were, to embarrass the fully secular thinker with phenomena only religion can properly account for. To the degree that Sartre may indeed speak for an entire mode of being in the world, real though often unrecognized, then this would again be a feature of Levinas's work that is instructive even to those who hesitate before other some of its other features. In the final account, on this matter of secular atheism, both as a mode of thought and as a mode of existence, there is general sympathy between Levinas and the more well known apologetics of someone like Henri de Lubac. Human flourishing, they would certainly agree, can come only when the aim of our being is truly transcendent, and of anything else there can come no lasting good.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, pp. 57–62; *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 84–90.

¹⁶ For this view from Henri de Lubac, see his *Catholicism*. Burns and Oates, London 1950, pp. 197–200.

IV

Reflection on contemporary French philosophy as a resource for philosophy of religion and theology must in part become reflection on a certain form of thinking that takes shape after Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx. It must also become—at least among so many of the recent French-reflection on the contours and direction of religious thinking marked by the encounter with phenomenology. In the philosophy of Levinas, with its overriding concern to reinstate the religious relation after and outside any reference to a meaning-giving subject, this mark is especially discernible where it is a matter of vision, or the gaze. In simplest terms, at precisely the moment where Husserl always encouraged research to demand verification in concrete results, Levinas is compelled by the full weight of his argument to deny that verification of certain central concepts is either possible or desirable. When, for instance, he argues that the otherness of the other person transcends even the possibility of recognition and comprehension, or that the «plot» of religion cannot be made into a theme for inspection, he rules out in advance the usual demand that their reality be made evident in examples. This as much as anything else explains the difficulty of reading Levinas: some of the assertions that count most are often evoked, rather than indicated and justified in straightforward manner (the argument moves dialectically, by negation, as Derrida has pointed out). The gaze that opens to the Transcendent, to what withdraws and absolves itself from its own appearance—thus from any possible verification of the relation with it—is a gaze open without qualification to Infinity. In theological language, this gaze is *eschatological*. In phenomenological language, it is *unencoded* or uninscribed; it is a gaze unencumbered by being and time because it emerges from anterior to being and time, and it aims already beyond being and time. By definition, such a gaze does not come to rest on a determined end; it does not settle on or grasp something that would thus become available for understanding. Eschatological seeing is not comprehension, and it does not contribute to objectification. It is welcoming and receptivity *par excellence*—which, as Levinas has already

told us, is precisely what the truly religious relation requires.

It goes almost without saying, then, that this represents the heart of what Levinas might offer contemporary philosophy of religion and theology. It is this, or at least some version of it, that must be preserved—that is, if God is truly beyond any representation whatsoever (another version may be found in Marion's concept of the «iconic gaze»). But perhaps this does more than distinguish contemporary religious thinking from the modern secular thinking that Levinas seems content to hear best expressed in certain phenomenologies. As a concept, the eschatological gaze occupies the point where it becomes possible to think that the failure of our modern rationality to understand the relation with God is in fact a reminder of just how difficult it is to do so. *Difficult*, but not therefore impossible. Should we not then simply reconsider the conception of reason we have hitherto accepted? This has evidently been Levinas's intention, and no religious thinker will fail to recognize its importance, even if, again, many will nonetheless insist on a different approach. In the end, this ambivalence may well identify the moment where Levinas might be read again, in agreement with his worries and discomforts but also with some hesitation before joining him at each step in his response to them. Christian thinkers should be far from immune to this ambivalence, since of course theology has assigned positive meaning to an entire array of concepts and practices that Levinas would have us do without. I have already mentioned some of them: would liturgy and devotion signify nothing more than primitive religion, as Levinas has told us? And would believing in the notion of sacrament, of a promise spoken directly by God, in and through Jesus Christ, necessarily lead to idolatry? Could one not reject those claims, and nonetheless join Levinas in seeking a way to admit the secular and even atheist dimension of existence, and yet hold it open to the advent of the divine? All of this is to propose, finally, that while an essential question has become clear enough, an answer has not yet come fully into view: what sort of theology might find a place between onto-theology and the ethics of the other?