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The Non-Existent God: Transcendence, Humanity, and Ethics in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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Abstract This paper considers three essential gestures in Levinas's theology, highlighting in each case how Levinas's thinking allows him to either incorporate or sidestep some of the fiercest modern criticisms of traditional theism. First, we present Levinas's vision of divine transcendence, outlining his ontological atheism and explaining how this obviates proving the existence of God and avoids the tangles of traditional theodicy. Second, we describe Levinas's idea of the trace, showing how a non-existent God still leaves its mark in the face of the other person and explaining how this vision of divine immanence accords with the agendas of thinkers such as Feuerbach and Nietzsche, who criticized theology that elevated God while debasing humanity. Third, we present Levinas's insistence on the philosophical primacy of ethics, showing how he infuses his ethical philosophy with religious themes, elevating moral philosophy to the level of ultimate concern in a way that even atheist social theorists such as Marx or Freud could appreciate. We close by briefly considering limitations of Levinas's model, discussing problems with its practical applicability and suggesting that its scope might be too narrow: both for its failure to acknowledge potential ethical demands manifest by non-human animals and the natural world and for its inability to recognize solitary or aesthetic experiences as religiously significant. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Levinas · God · Ethics · Religion · Phenomenology · Transcendence · Hermeneutics of suspicion · Theology

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Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's God is wholly human, is always good, and does not exist. Explaining this startling combination of themes, this paper will present this French philosopher's novel model of God: a divinity whose transcendence allows Levinas's model to either incorporate or sidestep some of traditional theology's fiercest critiques, whose connection to humanity inspires a deeply satisfying view of human and divine nature, and whose exclusively ethical significance promotes peace in a violent world.

God's Transcendence

One of our initial claims is that Levinas's God does not exist. For a thinker who persistently invokes God, Levinas's assertion may seem surprising, but examining his vision of God's transcendence should help clarify this enigma.

Throughout his many philosophical works, Levinas repeatedly describes that which exceeds the powers of cognition and representation.[1] He maintains that the Infinite is a "depth of undergoing that no capacity comprehends, and where no foundation supports it any longer...a placing without recollection" (Levinas 1998, 66–67). Here Levinas shares some common ground with Descartes, who also described a dynamic whereby the idea of infinity was placed, by that which is infinite, within a finite being.[2] Furthermore, Levinas elucidates how this epistemological transcendence can be sustained – as God remains separated from and resists being absorbed into immanence, and this separation persists as the subjective self is redirected from God to the Other, or, as Levinas states, "away from the Good and...only thus toward the Good" (Levinas 1998, 69). In Levinas's dynamic phenomenology of desire, "God is pulled out of objectivity," and the subject is continually faced with its deficit and lured toward that which withdraws. This perpetual redirection continually places God beyond the range of the grasping subject, preventing the subject's static fixation and heightening God's epistemological transcendence. At the same time, this desire for knowing God encourages the subject to pursue responsibility for the Other, since it is only through responding to the Other that one can recognize God at all.

While these aspects of God's transcendence might be philosophically appealing for readers with existentialist sympathies, if this were the entirety of God's transcendence signified by Levinas's philosophy, we would have only an updated version of the basic picture presented previously by a tradition of thinkers from Descartes and Pascal to Kierkegaard. Levinas's vision is more radical than that of these thinkers, however, and his God is more radically transcendent, exceeding not only human cognitive grasp but also metaphysical existence itself. Levinas does not consider God to be an infinite being, as do his predecessors; instead, Levinas repeatedly insists that God is "beyond being." In other words, for Levinas, God's transcendence means not that God exists in a "world behind the world," but that, strictly speaking, God as a being does not exist – in

[1] See, e.g., *Totality and Infinity*, 80–1 and *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 66–8.

[2] For a more detailed discussion of Levinas's link with Descartes, see *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 62–64, and the note on Descartes's idea of the Infinite, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 198.

either a "worldly" or an "otherworldly" realm. God is, as Levinas puts it, "transcendent to the point of absence" (Levinas 1998, 69).

Much traditional theism, in Levinas's estimation, involves "thinking God as a being and in thinking being on the basis of this superior or supreme being" (Levinas 2000, 160). Such a conception characterizes divinity in the classic "proofs," e.g., Anselm's ontological "greatest conceivable being," Aquinas's cosmological "first cause," or the teleological watchmaker. The important matter is not to prove the existence of God in this way – indeed, Levinas disavows such a "positivistic" approach, citing Simone Weil, for whom God "does not exist" because "existence...is not enough for God" (Levinas 2000, 143). Levinas eschews a pervasive Western theological conceptualization in which God is described as a being, baldly stating that his view is "diametrically opposed to the traditional idea of God" (Levinas 2000, 207). For Levinas, such traditional conceptualizations – and the language used to formalize or convey them – rob divinity of its holiness. As he puts it, traditional theology "thematizes the transcending in the logos, assigns a term to the passing of transcendence, congeals it into a world behind the scenes" (Levinas 1981, 5). This locating of God in a "world behind the scenes" is the natural result of theological language that "destroys the religious situation of transcendence"; hence, "language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is, can never be taken literally" (Levinas 1981, 197).

Levinas's is a God that one can believe in, even if it does not exist – especially if it does not exist – *because* it does not exist. As John Llewelyn puts it, paraphrasing Levinas's discussion in *Totality and Infinity*, "God is not numinous, and...is 'in-himself'...only on the assumption of ontological atheism" (Bernasconi and Critchley 1991, 239). For divinity to be truly holy, it cannot exist ontologically. Instead of representing being *par excellence*, Levinas asks, "Does not God signify the other than being...the bursting and subversion of being?" (Levinas 2000, 124–5).

This is one of the most philosophically satisfying aspects of Levinas's theology. By refusing to think of God as a being, insisting that God does *not* exist in this way, Levinas sidesteps the problem of establishing the existence of God as traditionally understood. Levinas's vision helps him avoid the tangles of traditional theodicy, for a theology that disavows thinking of God as a being obviates the conceptual acrobatics required to reconcile belief in such a being with the reality of radical evil. Thus, because Levinas rejects the idea of God as a being, his thinking frees us from some of the most serious problems with which traditional theism must deal.

Divinity and Humanity

Levinas's refusal to believe in a certain conception of divinity and his auditing of the bankruptcy of certain theological formulations justifies characterizing him as part of the "Death of God" movement,[3] and he faces the significant question of whether his insistence on God's radical transcendence forecloses meaningful discourse about God's relationship with the world. For Levinas, the answer is certainly "No," because

[3] Levinas explicitly states that his discourse can accommodate the idea of "the death of a certain God" as "tenant of the world-behind-the-world" (Levinas 2000, 274–5).

his marking of transcendence is followed by a creative reconceptualization of divinity. While God is not containable within history, and thus a certain conception of divinity has been rendered obsolete, we can still ascribe meaning to the term "God."

Though God proper does not exist, in Levinas's view, we do find *traces* of God within the world, and the trace provides the linchpin for his reformulation of the familiar transcendence – immanence dichotomy and the divine – human relation. While the traditional idea of God as a supreme being may be "dead," a different concept of God lives in Levinas's philosophical texts, and though it is not a being, it is strangely human.

As Levinas elegantly puts it, "A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there" (Levinas 1986, 358). Levinas reserves the designation "trace" for that which transcends history such that it has never been fully realized therein, nor could it ever be. Instead, the divinity that transcends leaves traces, and it does so exclusively in the face of the other human being whom one encounters in the ethical relationship. Levinas employs the image of a stone scratching another stone and contends, "[W]ithout the man who held the stone this scratch is but an effect" (Levinas 1986, 358). That which distinguishes a "trace" from a mere "effect" (or a mere "sign," as he sometimes says) is the reference to the human being, the considering of his relevance to the scene. This, then, is the bridge from Levinas's view of God's transcendence to his utterly humanistic ethics.

Levinas is clear: without humanity, the trace of God has no significance. He locates divinity within humanity, explicitly humanizing "God" and divinizing humanity. He writes, "There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men," because God "is not approached outside of all human presence" and "rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men" (Levinas 1969, 78). He asserts that, indeed, "God...reveals, in the face of the other man, the secret of his semantics" (Levinas 1999, 96). Interhuman relations "give to theological concepts the sole signification they admit of," or, more poetically: "The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face" (Levinas 1969, 78–79).

Levinas thus provides a theological conceptualization that avoids the powerful objections of thinkers such as Nietzsche or Feuerbach, who criticized any theology which elevates God while debasing humanity.[4] By humanizing divinity, or divinizing humanity, Levinas provides a theological model that recognizes human value and importance in a way that Feuerbach and Nietzsche might have approved, given their desire to affirm the true nature of humanity by negating the otherworldly pretenses of bad theology.

Ethics

Finally, we claimed above that Levinas's God is always good. By this we mean that for Levinas, religion is inseparable from ethics – indeed, the two fields are one and the same, and Levinas intentionally conflates them. He unapologetically admits, "The terminology I use sounds religious," but this is an understatement (Bloechl 2000, 204).

[4] As Feuerbach famously put it: "To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing" (Feuerbach 1989, 26).

Levinas's philosophy can defensibly be called a religious philosophy or religious ethics – given a particular understanding of religion. For Levinas, the ultimate meaning of religion lies in the ethical encounter with the other person. In a sense, "religion" and "ethics" are synonymous, since both words describe the scene of the same interpersonal dynamic.

The secret to Levinas's assimilation of religion and ethics lies in his description of the type of being in whom the self encounters the trace of God. As noted, these beings are human, but Nietzsche took philosophy here already when his Zarathustra claimed that the death of God as an external source of moral truths required individual human beings to become Gods *themselves*: to generate their own values. Like Nietzsche, Levinas locates divinity within humanity, by conceiving of the human soul "in the biblical tradition, as being in the image of God" (Levinas 1999, 64). However, Levinas aims to recognize divinity in the *other* human being to whom one is ethically bound, rather than in the isolated, autonomous self. The foundational existential event is not a free, self-affirming act, it is recognition of a fundamental ethical demand – a demand that pre-exists one's recognition of it or the systems of concepts and moral rules with which one attempts to understand or do "justice" to it. Levinas's frequent discussion of the self as "hostage" to the Other illustrates this situation well, and this would provide Levinas a coherent arena for a concept of God's omnipotence, for, as Levinas puts it, the Other subjects one to an appeal to which it is impossible to be deaf.[5]

Paradoxically, the Other's power in this regard is grounded in her worldly powerlessness. No trope in Levinas's work better illustrates this aspect of the structural asymmetry between self and Other than his frequent characterizations of the Other as "stranger, orphan, widow." These figures, repeatedly described in the Bible as right recipients of generosity, figure prominently in Levinas's writings for the first time in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas claims, "The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated" (Levinas 1969, 215).[6] Each of these marginal figures is defined by a particular "deprivation" – of friendly fellows, parents, spouse. The power of the appeal that these figures issue exists in inverse proportion to their "empowerment" in the traditional sense of the word: the strength of their ethical appeal is a function of their lack of physical power.[7] Paradoxically, while Levinas believes that it is in one sense inappropriate to consider "God" as another being, it is precisely in the encounter with other human beings that Levinas locates the trace of divinity. His dual commitments to "God" and to "the Other" as elemental concepts lead him to equate the two, intentionally and strategically, thus recognizing the divine in human alterity and vice versa. The title of a recent work of commentary on Levinas's religious

[5] Though it surfaces in other works as well, the "hostage" symbol is most pervasive in *Otherwise than Being*, showing up as early as the fifth page, as late as the penultimate paragraph, and in many other places in between. For the "deafness" formulation, see *Totality and Infinity*, 200.

[6] For Biblical references to generosity toward strangers, orphans, and/or widows, see Deuteronomy 24: 17–22 and 26:13–15. For other places where Levinas invokes this imagery, see, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 78, 213; *Otherwise than Being*, p. 123; *Difficult Freedom*, p. 26; *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 166.

[7] Here we see connections between Levinas and Kierkegaard, both of whom ground theological discourse in paradox.

philosophy contains the essential idea: *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*. For Levinas, the latter is to be found in the former: the trace of divinity is manifest in the encounter with the face of the other human being.

Providing a necessary ethical supplement to Nietzsche, whose philosophy can all too easily serve egoistic projects, Levinas capitalizes on Nietzsche's Promethean delivery of God-talk to its rightful place in the human realm. But he reorients it from the self to the Other, pointing it in the direction appropriate for a philosophically satisfying religious ethics. Like Feuerbach, Levinas would "transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man," for he believes that "God" has meaning only with regard to interhuman relations. Thus Levinas infuses ethical situations with a religious significance that raises them to the level of ultimate concerns. For philosophers who seek a vision of God that has earthly significance and ethical import, Levinas's conceptualization of divinity offers a compelling, though non-traditional, combination of transcendence and immanence.

Like Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche, who condemn religious frameworks that divert attention from the human sphere to some supernatural realm, Levinas refuses to conceptualize God as a being existing in a "world beyond the world." Instead, by recognizing the trace of God in the face of the Other, Levinas's theological discourse does not divert us from human problems, but directs us toward them. As Levinas puts it: "To go toward Him [God] is to go toward the others" (Levinas 1986, 359). Among the great philosophical strengths of Levinas's theology are his incorporation of the critiques issued by the hermeneutics of suspicion and his insistence that ethics demands our ultimate concern. These gestures give his vision relevance and urgency in a violent world, where the Other is all too often wrongly deemed the enemy.

Closing

Admittedly, Levinas's model has limitations. For example, one might ask whether the ethical imperative Levinas describes is even achievable or whether it is *too* altruistic. Can one truly cede all being-for-oneself to a complete being-for-the-other? Furthermore, given the quantity and complexity of human relationships in our lives, how can Levinas's model not have problematic social repercussions? Will not the ethical responsibility one has to numerous Others require focusing attention on certain relationships at the expense of others? Will not one's response to the demand of some entail the suffering of others?

Levinas recognizes this complexity, and he acknowledges that these effects are inevitable, given the limitations of individual human activity. Indeed, he describes the obligation owed to the Other as unable to be fulfilled – as always comprising a surplus – insisting that the debit of responsibility only increases with every attempt by an individual to satisfy her obligation, thereby leaving the enduring ethical effort without a finish line. There will always be needful others, so there will always be more to do, and a perfect state is an ideal, never a reality. The imperative without promise of completion only adds to the existential strain that accompanies committing to and pursuing such a project, but with Levinas, as with Kant, ethics is difficult.

The best that one can do in such difficult situations is to attempt to recognize and do justice to the rights and needs of others as they arise. This is what Levinas means when

he says that necessarily flawed and incomplete institutions of justice should be inspired by an ethical orientation, even if they cannot perfectly embody or fulfill it. Levinas writes, "The word justice is in effect much more in its place, there, where equity is necessary and not my subordination to the other" (Levinas 1998, 82). In other words, equity might be a just goal to pursue when trying to weigh the interests of different Others, and such a principle has a place in institutions of justice through which we attempt to achieve ethical ends. Such institutions are themselves necessary because there are more than two people in the world to be affected by our actions. Such an institutional demand for equity is a necessary compromise of the self's subordination to the Other that the fundamental ethical encounter involves, and this link between ethics and justice is a subtext underlying the supremely difficult and unattainable task of being wholly for the Other. Rather than a weakness within Levinas's system, this ability to accommodate the reality of human suffering is a strength of his philosophy. Here Levinas's vision might appeal to those with affinities for Process Theology, which values a concept of God that can encompass the broadest range of possibilities, including those that involve suffering and novel possibilities that are continually emerging. Levinas too promotes a philosophy that looks to transcend limitations and enlarge the scope of divinity.

One might also recognize other limitations to Levinas's model of God. By locating the trace of divinity solely in the face of the other human, Levinas neglects the possibility of religiously significant relationships with non-human animals or with the earth itself. Furthermore, whereas William James's landmark *Varieties of Religious Experience* was criticized for over-emphasizing individual experience and giving short shrift to the communal aspects of religion, it might be argued that Levinas pays insufficient attention to certain individual experiences. Restricting religious language to the encounter between self and Other, Levinas seems to allow no room for describing with religious language the sense of awe inspired by the beauty of the natural world or the moving power of works of art. Whether this limit detracts from Levinas's religious philosophy depends largely on the degree of one's inclination to describe aesthetic experiences as "religious" – a topic too large for this paper.

Such possible limitations notwithstanding, Levinas offers a uniquely ethical vision of a God that transcends existence while leaving divine traces in the human face. Among the many strengths of his model are the ways it escapes the necessity of "proving" God's existence, incorporates some of the most strident critiques of traditional theism with regard to the value of human beings and earthly life, and deploys religious language, including the idea of "God," in the realm of interhuman ethical relations. This may not be the most philosophically satisfying model of God for everyone, but it is among the most compelling and meaningful visions of divinity to have emerged in the twentieth century.

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