

EXPLORING THE HERMENEUTIC POSSIBILITIES OF THE LEVINASIAN TEXTS

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The philosophic thought of Emmanuel Levinas spawned from a good mix of cultural and philosophic perspectives. Since Levinas had a lifetime chance to witness the diverse lifestyles and mindsets (or world views) pervading the contemporary European society, his ideas were deeply influenced by the culture and ideals of the Jews and Christians, Russians, French and Germans.

Levinas was first oriented, of course, with the Jewish and Russian tradition. In France, his studies acquainted him more to the ancient and modern philosophic texts as well as French psychology and idealism. His philosophic passion was initially honed through the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus, Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Fichte, Comte, and other proponents.¹ Lévinas also studies French thinkers like Felix Revaissou, Octave Hamelin, and Leon Brunschvicg. He was best known for his efforts in discussing the thoughts of his masters Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

Philosophic Influences

The foregoing portion shall provide an ample discussion of the thoughts and philosophers who have helped form the philosopher in Levinas: Judaism, Husserl and Heidegger.

a. Judaism

Lévinas, particularly in the earliest parts of his life, breathed Jewish air. Despite the orthodoxy of the Lévinas' clan towards religious practices, the Judaism inculcated to the young Emmanuel was more scholarly than mystical. Lévinas described Lithuanian Judaism as sober and intellectual as opposed to the intoxication of

spirit.² He was initiated to the study of the Biblical Hebrew directly in Hebrew: *Ivrit beIvrit* (Hebrew in Hebrew). For his primary education, he did not enter a *yeshiva*, but a Russian gymnasium.³ In 1920, he entered a Hebrew *lycee* for a higher level of instruction.⁴

Much later, Lévinas studied the Talmud, which seemed to prepare him for future philosophic career. He was then introduced to *Midrash*, by Monsieur Shoshani, a Jewish teacher.⁵ This mentor, as Lévinas described, "looked like a beggar," was very strict, and possessed "an intellectual penetration, a sense of the question of the polyvocal character of ideas."⁶ Shoshani knew the Talmud by heart and taught it without reading. Lévinas attributed to this Jewish teacher his deeper learning, which he thinks as more fundamental than piety.⁷ Further, through his teacher, Lévinas learned "not to speculate in the abstract, but in the imagination," that is, to think of the worlds called upon the images in the text.⁸

Lévinas, however, deliberately proclaimed that in thought he is more of a Greek than a Jew. He noted:

I am Greek, it is Greek thought. The thought of comparison, of judgment, the attributes of the subject, in short, the entire terminology of Greek logic and Greek politics appear. Consequently, it is not true that my thought isn't Greek. On the contrary, everything that I say about justice comes from Greek thought, and Greek politics as well. But, what I say, quite simply, is that it is, ultimately, based on the relationship to the other, on the ethics without which I would not have sought justice.⁹

His affirmation was probably due to his Western philosophic formation. Albeit the aforementioned statement, there would always be a Jew in Lévinas. He particularly admitted the universal character of Jewish ethics, not as a compelling system but as an ethical prescription that would benevolently earn the assent even of the non-Jews.¹⁰ Lévinas noted that even if he spoke so often about the Bible, he was not preaching the Bible or Judaism because he upheld that the Bible reveals unassailable human, factual, orderly and universal thoughts, even if the reader disregards Biblical eschatology.¹¹

Another undeniable Jewish imprint in the Lévinasian thought is very *erlebniisse* in the Second World War, particularly the persecution of the Jews at Auschwitz. "If there is an explicitly Jewish moment in my thought, it is the reference to the Auschwitz, where God let the Nazis do what they wanted."¹² The immoral exploits of the Nazis, which led to the persecution of his immediate family and his separation from his wife and children, made him concoct a mechanism that shall dispel egoism and the immoral propaganda of the Nazis and Socialists.

b. Edmund Husserl

Part of the development of the Lévinasian ethics was attributed to our philosopher's inclination to the philosophic thought of his mentor, Edmund Husserl. Husserl was best known for developing the phenomenological method of inquiry which preoccupied Levinas in the initial stage of his philosophic development as evident in his works.

Phenomenology, during Levinas' youth, was a new philosophic method that proposes to see things as they appear in the human consciousness. Taken from Husserl, this can be literally taken as "science of appearances." This method examines a thing by involving intentions called as intuition. The intuition then puts aside the subject's notion of the object's independent existence. Phenomenology tends the conscious being to intuit "essences," which are meant as somehow lying halfway between abstract being and being-of-a-certain-kind, which leads to obscurity.¹³

In his dissertation "The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology," Levinas explained that intuitions are as varied as conscious beings and are grounded on human affairs, "the origin of existence" and the fundamental principle underlying transcendence and being.¹⁴ Levinas explained that the Husserlian intuitions are particular structures oriented towards a central and an all encompassing transcendental. As for Husserl, consciousness is "never so universal as to embrace also the whole of its own being and beginning."¹⁵ Alongside this, Levinas noted that the transcendental is formed through the interweaving of consciousness (in plural form), whose own intentions inevitably welcome an

irreducibly surprising element.¹⁶ In other words, self-realization of consciousness is also geared towards its irreducible relation to an irreducible other.

Aside from the phenomenological method, Husserl's contribution to the formation of the Levinasian mind is his animated description of human consciousness. With this notion, Lévinas even surpassed his mentor in applying the phenomenological method. However, unlike Husserl, Lévinas used the method by locating being in concrete life not by establishing a rigorous science. This means that the Husserlian primacy of the human intentions and consciousness must also give way to the phenomenological scrutiny of fields closest to the human affairs—aesthetics and ethics.¹⁷ Lévinas, in his study of Husserl, went further not only in his use of the phenomenological method but also in the substance of the Husserlian thought, as he addressed the following queries:

Is intentionality the only mode of the gift of being?
 Is the meaningful always correlative to a thematization and a representation? Does it always result from the assembling of a multiplicity and temporal dispersion? Is thought devoted from the start to adequation and truth? Is it only grasping of the given in its ideal identity? Is thought essentially a relation to what is equal to it, that is to say, essentially atheistic?¹⁸

Lévinas questioned the innermost principles of Husserlian intentionality. In one of his essays, he confessed that his departure from Husserl's thoughts was due to their inability to be emancipated from the modernist attitude of thematizing and idealizing the thing known. With the human consciousness and intentions as its core, the way of knowing involves perception which for him amounted to grasping and seizing.

Colin Davis suggested another two avenues of Lévinas' critique of Husserl. First was Lévinas' reproach of Husserl's intellectualism. The way Husserl posited the transcendental ego seemingly made the notion lose its touch from historicity and temporality, which Lévinas deemed essential. Davis wrote: "Philosophy seems, in this conception, as independent of the

historical situation of man as theory which seeks to consider everything *sub specie aeternitatis*.”¹⁹ Second was the problem of intersubjectivity in Husserl’s thought. According to Lévinas, the transcendental ego, despite its all-encompassing trait, could not confirm the existence of other egos.²⁰

Lévinas’ quest for the transcendental ego’s historicity and temporality led him to another intellectual venture, through the guidance of another Freiburg master, Martin Heidegger.

c. Martin Heidegger

Lévinas’ discovery of Heidegger was brought by the urge to go along the popular doting over the Freiburg master’s magnum opus *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*). Despite being vocal against Heidegger for the latter’s apparent links with the Socialists, Lévinas’ reverence over the early-Heideggerian notions was unassailable. He commended *Sein und Zeit* for its magnificence and its effort to re-educate mankind about the notion of being. Lévinas spoke of Heidegger’s thought as the definition of being unearthed through contemporary ontology. And that is to comprehend being through the verb “to be”.²¹

Heidegger was best known for his being *qua* being. His notion means that being is authentically rooted in existence prior to its essence. The meaning of Being is only, or if not primarily, derived through the *thing-in-being* (particularly the human being—the *Dasein*).²² This *thing-in-being* is not entirely the being but a way towards the discovery of being. Through this notion, being as fully rooted in human existence occurs in varied form and constitutes existence (*Existenz*), moods (*Stimmungen*), concern (*Sorge*), or being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*). As Lévinas spoke of this Heideggerian notion, this intellection of being does not entirely dwell in the theoretical level but goes deeper into the core of authentic human behavior.²³

The Heideggerian fundamental ontology describes being as accompanied by time—Being and time. This means that being can only be explored within the bounds of time, making the futural and eventual subject to history. Therefore, being in its essence possesses a history—“a history which is actually its own doing as well as its undergoing.”²⁴



It is from this Heidegger where Lévinas derived the notion that man in his entirety is ontology. To quote:

. . . 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 as determined function for each of these aspects, the understanding of being, or truth.²⁵

Heidegger thinks of an anthropocentric being—being in flesh and blood, bound in time and space. Albeit fallenness, its subjugation to “wear and tear” and eventual decay Heidegger posed and elevated in great heights a more feasible and authentic being.

The limit of Heidegger’s influence over Lévinas came when the latter discovered the overly egoistic tendencies of the Heideggerian ontology. Lévinas noted that, for Heidegger, being was animated by the effort of being. It was simply a matter of being above all and at all costs.²⁶ This resolve often led to an entry to struggles that betide among men, nations and races.²⁷ For Lévinas, this beheld an extreme and perilous sense of humanism. Also, Lévinas refuted Heidegger’s understanding of modernity as a form of decadence. Instead of looking at the detrimental effects of science and technology (which are the products of modernity), Lévinas considered their worth in fulfilling the Self’s responsibility towards the Other. For Lévinas, science and technology can be used to alleviate the poor contemporary human condition.²⁸

Yet perhaps, the most blatant reason of Lévinas’ departure from Heidegger is the latter’s involvement in the Socialist Movement during the Second World War. In an interview with Francois Poirié, Lévinas was asked what to say about Heidegger’s Socialist inclinations. He replied:

I don’t know, it’s the blackest of my thoughts about Heidegger and no forgetting is possible. Maybe Heidegger had a feeling of a world that was decomposing, but he believed Hitler for a moment in any case. How is this possible? To read Löwith’s memoirs, it was a long moment. His firm and categorical voice came back to me when I used to hear Hitler on the radio. Maybe there was a

familial determinism also; Mrs. Heidegger was very early Hitlerian.²⁹

It was always important to consider Lévinas' thoughts were foremost harnessed by war experiences. After encountering the violent and seductive powers of totalitarianism during the World War II, Lévinas reflected on the crises of modern civilization and traditional religiosity to the extent that he was almost led into atheism.³⁰

Then he came up with a philosophy that deviated from several lessons he learned from his past mentors Husserl and most especially Heidegger. If Heidegger was concerned with *Dasein* (Being), Lévinas was concerned with Ethics. And Ethics, for Lévinas, was Beyond Being—Otherwise than Being.

The Hermeneutic Flexibility of the Lévinasian Texts

a. Lévinas in the French Intellectual Circle

Lévinas' discursive attitude, from the way he wrote up to his innermost thoughts, could be discovered through his status as a Jew philosophizing in France. In retrospect, Lévinas' biography would reveal evidences that his prominence as a thinker only emerged during the latter parts of his philosophic career. Prior to the release of *Totality and Infinity*, he was considered among those thinkers who closely followed (as fervent devotees or critics) the three *maîtres du soupçon* Marx, Nietzsche and Freud during the 50s and 60s.³¹ Lévinas, however, continued to become a fervent inquisitor of Husserl and Heidegger.

Lévinas gained a name for introducing phenomenology to France. But prior to *Totality and Infinity* French intellectuals took Lévinas to the periphery. Collins opined that this mediocrity was due to Lévinas' disinterest in the four dominating themes of the French intellectual critique: "(a) the theme of the end of philosophy; (b) the paradigm of genealogy; (c) the dissolution of the idea of truth; and (d) historicization of categories at the end of reference to the universal."³²

Lévinas reinterpreted the main themes of the contemporary French philosophy, generalized by the words subjectivity and humanism. He proposed a different form of subjectivity with his



emphasis more on the Other than the human ego founded on the Cartesian cogito or Husserl's transcendental ego. This new subjectivity referred to the Self or I as the "*sub-jectus* or sub-jected to the other."³³ This notion was the antipode of the usual totalitarian perspective; the ego was turned as the bearer of responsibility that was as infinite as the space that separated him from the other. The Self's renewed identity now constituted him as a unique individual.

For the post-60s way of thinking, Lévinas said:

The end of humanism, of metaphysics—the death of man, the death of God (or put God to death!)—apocalyptic ideas or slogan of the intellectual high society. Like all manifestations of Parisian taste—or distaste—these phrases are imposed with the tyranny of the latest fashion, but they are priced within the range of every pocket and become degraded.³⁴

Along with the justification of his disinterest to the prevailing philosophic attitude, Lévinas opined that both humanism and anti-humanism, when put to their extremes, become misguided. He opposed extreme humanism because of the self-possessing and self-grounding tendencies of human consciousness. On the other hand, he equally, vehemently objected to extreme anti-humanism because it implies the moral descent of the agent of ethical responsibility. Further, both humanism and anti-humanism caused the Self to molest the Other. Wars, for example, are both caused by the Self's highly humanistic regard of his own Being and his inhumane treatment of the Other whom he considered a threat in his very place under the sun.

The upsurge of Poststructuralism from the late 70s onwards gave Lévinas the chance to prove that his proposals are valid and fashionable to the current mode of inquiry. Younger thinkers, through the poststructural method, reread works on subjectivity and humanism. From these reinterpretations, they scrutinized the social condition and so posited the importance of ethics.

This status in the French intellectual circle enabled Lévinas to craft a discourse that would conform to scholarly rules—completely equipped with references, properly outlined and definitive but soberly

expressed—and bold enough to go beyond the Western traditional way of philosophizing.³⁵ Louis Pinto, in his commentary, raised the idea that this must be due to Lévinas' status as a foreign academician. Even though France is best known for its high sense of liberalism, Lévinas, all through his life, was aware that he was a stranger to the country. He was a Jewish immigrant who did not have a university post for more than half of his career and who wished to be accepted as an insider. For this aim, he opted to avoid confrontational polemics and chose to respect the prevailing scholarly discourse in the academe instead. As a result, he soberly addressed his supposedly bold and daring critique of Western philosophy and ethics by endowing novelty to ordinary terms like the face, substitution, hostage, and responsibility.³⁶

Finally, Lévinas held a special place in French philosophy because his works possessed the three defining qualities of a French contemporary thought. First is the cult of paradox, which is obviously evident as Lévinas, through his exceptional style, (though ironic it may seem) "sensibly" contradicts his very thoughts.³⁷ Second is the belief that western philosophy was established on a systematic concession to the ego instead of the alter-ego. This is not a very surprising mark since the one who conceived the pivotal but theoretically abused, misused and overused cogito of the modern age, is Rene Descartes, a French and father of the rationalists. Third is Lévinas' intellectual attachments to *la sensibilité* evident in the romanticism of his texts and his ethics.

Derrida stressed Lévinas' significance in France when he paid homage to the great thinker and his contributions. To quote:

Each time I read or reread Emmanuel Lévinas, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration, overwhelmed by his necessity, which is not a constraint but a very gentle force that obligates, and obligates us not to bend or curve otherwise the space of thought in its respect for the other, heteronymous curvature that relates us to the completely other...

And I believe that what occurred here... is a discreet but irreversible mutation, one of those

powerful, singular, and are provocations in the history that, for over two thousand years now, will have ineffaceably marked the space and body of what is more or less, in any case something different from, a simple dialogue between Jewish thought and its others, the philosophies of Greek origin or, in the tradition of a certain 'Here I am,' the other Abrahamic monotheisms. This happened, this mutation happened, through him, through Emmanuel Lévinas, who was conscious of this immense responsibility in a way that was, I believe, at once clear, confident, clam and modest, like that of a prophet.³⁸

b. Lévinas and the Postmodern

The broad scope of Lévinas' ethical notions would always guise him variedly: he might be a phenomenologist, existentialist, pseudo-deconstructionist, Jewish scholar, aesthete, theologian, proto-feminist or all of them at the same time—making him a postmodernist. The flexibility of his thought to other fields of thought was attributed to his texts' openness to interpretations. Indeed, his texts might result into fruitful hermeneutics.

Davis added that Lévinas' "reluctance to take sides in academic polemics, his respect for scholarly norms and the ambitiousness of his philosophical project combine to make him appear the potential ally of all or the real ally of none."³⁹ More than this hermeneutic flexibility was Lévinas' exceptional capacity to squeeze additional reflections out of rereading his commentators. In Davis' words, "Levinas has the ability to elicit something from his readers."⁴⁰

Another point that contributed to the flexibility of the Lévinasian hermeneutics was the exceptional difficulty of his texts. Perhaps, this was Lévinas' way of being an Other to his interlocutors. Derrida spoke of Lévinasian language as haunted with alterity and an extraordinary force that induces any reader. This so-called force, when Lévinasian hermeneutics was applied, would portray the text as an Other.⁴¹ Derrida noted:

Your reading is thus no longer merely a simple reading that deciphers the sense of what is already found in the text; it has a limitless (ethical) initiative. It is freely self-obligated from the text of the Other, whose text one could abusively as today, wrongly, today that it produces it. But that it is freely self-obligated in no way signifies any autonomy. To be sure, you are the author of the text you read here, that can be said, but you remain within an absolute heteronomy. You are responsible for the other, who makes you responsible. Who will have obligated you. (*il aura oblige*) And even if you don't read as one must, as E.L. [Emmanuel Levinas] says one must read, still beyond the dominant interpretation (that of domination) integral to the philosophy of grammar and the grammar of philosophy, the Relation of dislocation will have taken place. . . from out of the Other. . .⁴²

Derrida added that the text as the other exuded its alterity through an unwritten disturbance. This disturbance could not be verbalized, inasmuch as it could not be assured, perceived and demonstrated. Neither could it be controlled nor could it be comprehended by logic, semiotics, language, and rhetoric.⁴³ Lévinasian hermeneutics itself was subject to Lévinasian ethical responsibility. The text, like Lévinas' Other, is an impenetrable, unfathomable and incomprehensible entity.

Davis remarked that "the Lévinas effect" in a text "mirrors the frailty and the strength of the Other. This was plausible insofar as the text is susceptible to be considered as the Same. What goes along this susceptibility, however, is its uniqueness and infinite distance that the self must always respect."⁴⁴

Three Hermeneutic Approaches to the Lévinasian Texts

The hermeneutic attunement of the Lévinasian texts and ethics can be delineated into three levels: the ontological, affective and transcendental.

a. Ontological

This is the least, though the initial way, to responsibly deal with the Lévinasian texts. It simply renders a contextualization of the text, and so presupposes the understanding of Lévinas' rootedness in Judaism, phenomenology and fundamental ontology. This hermeneutic level requires a very objective way of understanding, insofar as it quintessentially deals with what was said, where logical pitfalls are necessarily traced and limitations are posited.

The ontological way of re-reading entails an austere exposition. It is primordially done in the name of rhetoric, which takes the form of ethical violence, when taken into its limited sense.⁴⁵ Jill Robbins, as she opens the possibilities of a Lévinasian aesthetics notes that "perhaps Lévinas does not seem a philosopher who would be wedded to the prepositional style: he has too many quirks, both conceptual and stylistic. But there is no question that he is a philosopher who is at pains to exclude the aesthetic."⁴⁶ To stop the hermeneutic capacity of the Lévinasian narrative to the next level would be very delimiting. After all, the second hermeneutic approach is purposed for a discourse higher than propositions created for the sake of argumentation.

b. Affective

The text, at this point taken in a more psychological light, requires the understanding of the objective texts and the first level of hermeneutic approach. This is an appeal to human emotions, and if applied in the Lévinasian sense, on the Self's capacity to dispel egoism and self-serving motives that shall lead one ("I") to deliver compassion towards his fellow. This hermeneutic is plausible through George Kunz who is notable for his application of the Lévinasian ethics in positing power as a paradigm for self-integration. This is due to a person's capability for cognitive development, behavioral efficiency, affective enjoyment and modern enlightenment that consequently enable any Self to practice skills for self-empowerment and altruistic resolves.⁴⁷

This approach is plausible because of psychology's manifest link to phenomenology, a method to which Lévinas was intellectually

honed.⁴⁸ An affective treatment of the text enables one to dispel egocentrism more effectively (while necessarily going through this egocentrism, though not totally dwelling within it) that consequently opens more ethical possibilities. This similar approach likewise opens the Lévinasian texts to more artistic thought responsibly-crafted interpretations, which is actually another response to revitalize or to breath life to crafts that are stiffly trapped into chiseled stones and dusty archival documents.⁴⁹ An affective regard of the Lévinasian texts likewise invokes a dialogue, as language now calls for an ethical relationship insofar the relation "is to be found only in a vocative or imperative discourse, face to face."⁵⁰

c. Religious: Transcendental and Radical

This higher hermeneutic plane is possible because of two things: Lévinas' *poesis* and his consistency to leave most of his discourse open-ended.

Lévinasian texts are always didactic and prosaic. Yet a poet emerges from Lévinas as he elucidates his thoughts through the use of figures and dramatic expressions that can always go beyond the facet of man. Possibly accidental due to the requirements of phenomenology to discourse along things subject to human intuition, the texts nonetheless prove that the poet in Lévinas shall come as he discourses in a higher level.

As a thinker who upholds the alterity of Otherwise than being, Lévinas adheres to the sustenance of life and is conscious that texts are rendered their vigor only through responsible criticism and dialogue; the open-ended characteristic of his textual corpus is not stunning. Moreover, Lévinas is open to the notion of transcendence in a more religious plane.

Lévinas discourses on the notion of transcendence by alluding to the Plotinian proposal of mystic union with the One, which is actually the real return aimed by philosophy. Yet Lévinas criticizes this notion because it presupposes an immobility that overlooks ethics. In his work, Lévinas writes:

The one to which intelligence piously aspires, beyond the ideas it attains and grasps in their multiplicity (in which, however, it is completed,

realized, in act, satisfied)—the One beyond the *noema* that is equaled by the *noesis* of the intelligence—would be, according to the neo-Platonic schema, better than that aspiration and that approach from the One is still absent. There is love in the look of knowing, but because of that absence which is again signified by the dispersal of the known, the love that is worthwhile only because of the transcendent immobility it seek and in which seeking absorbed, because of the One in which the lover coincides with the loved without distinction, in which the movement of ecstasy is abolished and forgotten.⁵¹

Lévinas notes that Plotinian mysticism had projected to the Western terrain apparent union of the *Nous* and of the One, which caused the thematization of the Transcendent. As a result, the Infinite and Transcendent—where God necessarily comes to mind—are placed under the categories of human intuition and necessarily grasped by the perceiving Self.⁵²

Instead of an intellectual grasp, Lévinas proposes piety as a profound resolve that shall respect the sublime and the totally Transcendent in its full alterity. Piety as a form of thinking realizes “more that what it can embrace”: figuratively, it is to behold a “blinding bedazzlement of the gaze of an excess of light and a bursting of knowledge in adoration.”⁵³ Yet more than taming the Self into awe, the transcendent Other puts his viewer into prayer.

With such descriptions of the transcendent, this hermeneutic approach is the most liberating and promising of the three proposed interpretative modes. A Lévinasian attunement taken in the transcendent light welcomes more spiritual or religious possibilities in ascertaining the textual corpus. Insofar as this level comes after the affective textual treatment, this can only take place after ethical reflection. Lévinas notes that the thematization of the transcendent can only be avoided through its immediate recognition as a totally Other. Lévinas once again, speaks of this poetically:

A locus to be sought in the dimensions of the humanity of man. Drunk with being in himself and

for himself in the presence—or the modernity—that he unveils by his cognitive thought and more indubitably planted in his cogito than his feet on the ground, man is capable of sobering up and of his dis-interestedness and extreme vigilance vis-à-vis his absolutely other fellow man. A vigilance of a responsibility that—from me to the other, irreducible—concerns me qua chosen and irreplaceable, and thus unique and unique, only thus, in that identity of I, above all form, outside every order, whom the work of the transcendental constitution already presupposes. Is not the face of one's fellow man the original locus in which transcendence calls an authority with a silent in which God comes to mind.⁵⁴

The transcendental way of textual attunement shall bring a better understanding of Lévinas religious notions, particularly his ideas on substitution, God, infinity and love.

ENDNOTES

¹ From this list of names, the absence of the medieval thinkers is noticeable. Levinas was not given an ample orientation on medieval philosophers because the French universities then considered the medieval thinkers not as philosophers but as theologians. "The eighteenth-century ignorance (or negligence) about the "Dark Ages" was still the prevailing view." See Andriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 10.

It is also important to note that Lévinas' favorite authors would soon become the object of his scrutiny. One of them is Plato whose works like *Phaedrus*, *Republic*, *Gorgias* and *Phaedo*, Levinas would always quote. Another is Descartes whose *Meditations* were often quoted; Kant—his first and second *Critiques*; and Hegel—his *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. See *Ibid.*

² *Ibid.*, 93.

³ *Yeshiva* is an institute of Talmudic learning. See *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵ *Midrash* is a Hebrew term taken from *darash* which means "to seek or search out." This denoted interpretation or exegesis—a search for a text's implicit meaning. This biblical exegesis was popular between the second and fifth centuries

C.E. *Midrash* is geared towards rabbinic interpretation that usually goes with literary compilations containing the earliest transcriptions of the oral deliveries of the original interpretations. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Interview with Myriam Anissimov," *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 288.

⁶ Ibid., 87 and 96.

⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality" in *The Provocation of Levinas Rethinking the Other*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (New York: Routledge, 2001), 174.

¹⁰ Levinas wrote: "There is no necessity for expressing these ideas in Biblical terms; and the *Totality and Infinity* can therefore be read without any familiarity with either Judaism or the Bible. Ibid., 175.

¹¹ Levinas elaborated:

I do not preach for the Jewish religion. I always speak of the bible, not the Jewish religion. The Bible, including the Old Testament, is for me a human fact, of the human order, and entirely universal. What I have said about ethics, about the universality of the commandment in the face, of the commandment which is valid even if it doesn't bring salvation, even if there is no reward, is valid independently of any religion.

Ibid., 177.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ G. Vesey and P. Foulkes, "Phenomenology," *Unwin Hyman Dictionary of Philosophy* (Great Britain: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 220.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 154.

¹⁵ Peperzak, *To The Other*, 16.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Intuition*, 158.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, "Non-intentional Consciousness," *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 127.

¹⁹ Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Great Britain: University of Notre Dame Press and Colin Davis, 1996), 13.

²⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1995), 38.

²² H. Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martin Nijhoff, 1976), 286.

²³ Lévinas, *Entre Nous*, 2.

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²⁴ Spiegelberg, *Phenomenological Movement*, 288.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robbins, *Is it Righteous*, 186.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 190.

²⁹ Ibid., 36.

³⁰ Rev. Fr. John Funelas, OP, MA, "The Face as the Seat of Value in Lévinas' Philosophy," *Philippiniana Sacra* 34 (January-April 1999): 95.

³¹ Davis, *Levinas*, 122.

³² Cf. Ferry and Renaut, *La Pensée* 68, in Davis, *Lévinas*, 123.

³³ Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, "Emmanuel Lévinas' Jewish Experience and Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 27 (Winter 1983): 302.

³⁴ Cf. *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 95 in Davis, *Levinas*, 126.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 128.

³⁷ Ibid., 127. This is evident on the notion of the conflict between anarchy of responsibility and its limitation of justice, which Lévinas established upon the virtue of charity. As justice become the limiting element of responsibility through the consciousness of the Third party, it would seem impossible that such virtue will be grounded on love. Nevertheless, Lévinas must have based it from his Talmudic/Biblical influences.

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Adieu," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 9-12.

³⁹ Davis, *Lévinas*, 128.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁴¹ Alterity of the text as the Other is to be realized from the reader's perspective who, in this case, plays the role of the Self.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," *Reading Lévinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 25.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Lévinas*, 141.

⁴⁵ Jill Robbins notes that Lévinas differentiates rhetoric from an ethical language as it is "devious, that is not straight, that does not face—and with it, implicitly, any language that is figured or troped." Robbins further notes that Lévinas "denounces rhetoric as violent and unjust." See Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading Lévinas and Literature* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 76.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁷ George Kunz, *The Paradox of Power and Weakness: Lévinas and an Alternative Paradigm for Psychology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 5-7 & 9.

⁴⁸ The phenomenological method conducted in psychology has become more clear-cut and defining, as it is known as the study of a phenomenon by way of vivid observation. Phenomenology in the philosophic terrain, on the other hand, is still centralized to the general aim of discovering the "thing-in-itself." This intellectual method provokes a very vivid way to see and describe things, yet broadly maintains the Husserlian *intuition* regulated by *epoché* as the main mechanism regardless how Husserl's followers attacked his tendencies towards transcendentalism.

⁴⁹ Levinas notes that the image trapped by the parameters set by an artist is in the state of impersonal paradox. For him, art as a form of expression and representation is like a shadow, which obscures the image until the critic opens the curtain for interpretation. Art for Lévinas (and even his text, for the purpose of this paper) when considered as such shall idly dwell in the disgusting confines of *thee il y a state*. He notes:

Within the life or rather the death of a statue, an instant endures infinitely: eternally Laocoon will be caught up in the grip of the serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally. Eternally the future announce in the strained muscles of Laocoon will be unable to become present. Eternally the smile of Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden. An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come. The imminence of the future lasts before an instant stripped of the essential characteristic of the present, as though reality withdrew from its own reality and left it powerless. In this situation the present can assume nothing can take nothing and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant.

See Emmanuel Lévinas, "Reality and Its Shadow," *The Levinas Reader* trans. Sean Hand (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), 138.

This stiff and cold phase can only be revitalized by the art critic or the hermeneute as he exhales the life-giving breath to the dead picture frame, the strained muscles of the statue and the jaundiced book. Figuratively, behind every text is a heap of ash that has a potentiality to be humanized. For Lévinas, hermeneutics is an act of responsibility (and not of predation) insofar as it sustains the life of a supposedly passive text. See *Ibid.*, 130-142.

⁵⁰ Robbins, *Altered Readings*, 76.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 9-10.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

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