

# Action, Passion, and Exorbitant Responsibility: Levinas's Circumcision of Consciousness<sup>1</sup>

R. D. Walsh

“God as merciful is God defined by maternity. A feminine element is stirred in the depth of this mercy. This maternal element in divine paternity is very remarkable, as is in Judaism the notion of a "virility" to which limits must be set and whose partial renouncement may be symbolized by circumcision, the exaltation of a certain weakness which would be devoid of cowardice. Perhaps maternity is sensitivity itself, of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans.” (Emmanuel Levinas, "Damages Due to Fire" <sup>2</sup>)

“This relaxation of virility without cowardice is needed for the little cruelty our hands repudiate. That is the meaning that should be suggested by the formulas repeated in this book concerning the passivity more passive still than any passivity, the fission of the ego unto me, its consummation for the other such that from the ashes of this consummation no act could be reborn.” (Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* <sup>3</sup>)

“Nothing is more unhealthy, amid all our unhealthy modernism, than Christian pity. To be doctors *here*, to be unmerciful *here*, to wield the knife *here*—all this is *our* business, all this is *our* sort of humanity, by this sign we are philosophers, we Hyperboreans!” (Nietzsche, F. *The Antichrist* <sup>4</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas, E. "Damages Due to Fire," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Trans. Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990; hereafter 'DF'.

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, E. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981; 2nd ed. 1978, p. 185; hereafter 'OB'. *Autrement gu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974, p. 233; hereafter, 'AE'.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, F. *The Antichrist*. Trans. H. L. Mencken. New York: Knopf, 1923; p. 49. *Der Antichrist*, in *Götzendämmerung*. Ed. Alfred Baeumler. Stuttgart: Alfred Kroner, 1939, p. 196.

## The Neighborliness of Religion and Philosophy

To approach the concept—or non-concept—of exorbitant responsibility in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, we must undertake a circuitous journey, advancing obliquely through non-philosophical terrain. As with many of the key concepts found in Levinas's work, especially in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, the notion of exorbitant responsibility is adopted from a religious context but is employed by Levinas in a special philosophical manner—without entirely shedding its original religious sense. For better or worse, there is a certain neighborliness between religion and philosophy in Levinas's work.<sup>5</sup> Keeping in mind that one cannot always choose one's neighbors, it is not my intention here to undertake an exhaustive or critical survey of the shifting boundaries of this neighborliness. Nevertheless, the proximity of religion and philosophy must be accounted for, however incompletely, in order to appreciate the full radicalness of Levinas's philosophical understanding of exorbitant responsibility.

Speaking from the religious, i.e., the Jewish perspective of his Talmudic commentary entitled "Damages Due to Fire," Levinas says that for him philosophy "derives (*dérive*) from religion. It is called into being by a religion adrift (*en dérive*), and probably religion is always adrift" (DF, p.182). Religion is here viewed as being ontologically and temporally prior to philosophy. But *dériver* also has the sense of indicating a diversion from. Philosophy diverges from religion. Although religion is responsible for calling it into being, it is, paradoxically, both the skeptical and universalizing power of philosophy that functions as a kind of intellectual asceticism over and against the tendency toward errancy inherent in religion—as an antidote, perhaps, for the proclivity of a "thoughtless" religion to degenerate into idolatry.

On the other hand, speaking from the "Greek" perspective of *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas says that there is revealed at the heart of the analysis of subjectivity worked out in this text a plot that he is tempted to call religious; although he adds

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<sup>5</sup> It seems virtually impossible to cleanly separate these two dimensions of Levinas's work, this "strange dialogue between the Jew and the Greek," as Derrida puts it [Derrida, J. "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 153]. Levinas himself does not provide a great deal of help in clarifying this relation. In one of his interviews he says that "there is a very radical distinction between" his philosophical and religious writing, and then, in the very next breath, he also admits that "there is certainly a relationship between them" [The Provocation of Levinas. Eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood. (London/New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 173-74.]

immediately—In a manner reminiscent of Heidegger's denial of doing ethics—that he does not mean by this "religious plot" any kind of *positive* theology (OB, p.174 / AE, p.185). The religious plot that is revealed by Levinas's philosophical thought, like the philosophical plot that is revealed for him in religion—indeed, which is *produced* by religion—involves the idea of exorbitant responsibility.

Viewed from the perspective of this genealogy, however, one begins to sense the possibility that, despite its benign appearance, exorbitant responsibility may be merely the inverse of a moral absolute, the shadow side of a categorical imperative, a pharmacodynamic purgative that is perhaps more virile than the disease it would cure and toward which the Nietzscheans would prefer to direct the excising knife. What then?

### The Genesis of Exorbitant Responsibility in Religion

"Damages Due to Fire" is Levinas's commentary on a Talmudic text that is ostensibly concerned with the liability one would incur in setting loose the elemental force of fire. The oldest and opening lines of the Talmudic text read:

If someone brings on a fire which consumes wood, stones, or earth, he would be liable, as it is written (Exodus 22:5): "If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stack of corn, or the standing corn, or the field is consumed, he who starts the fire must make restitution."

But, it is asked a little later, "Couldn't the Merciful One have written *field* and dispensed with all the rest?" No, the text responds,

The rest is necessary. If He had written only *field*, one might have thought that for the products of the field one owes reparation, but for other things not. That we are responsible also for all the rest, that is what we are meant to understand (DF, pp.178-79).

Before approaching the important content of this text, and the exorbitant responsibility it reveals at the heart of the Jewish tradition for Levinas, a moment's reflection on a hermeneutical point will be helpful to our reading.

Besides the distinction by historical periods of the texts contained in the Talmud, there are also, Levinas informs us, two different types or levels of Talmudic text,

Halakhah and Aggadah. Halakic texts deal with specific teachings, rules or laws governing particular behaviors, such as the liability one might incur for setting loose a wild ox or a fire; aggadic texts reveal the universal philosophical implications of the more mundane halakic teachings, especially through cryptic fables or maxims requiring interpretation. The job of the Talmudic commentator, then, as Levinas sees it, is to "translate" the movement of thought from the *particular* teaching to its *universal* moral implications.

An analogous hermeneutical strategy can be detected in Levinas's philosophical work. Specifically, it is found in *Otherwise Than Being* in the phenomenological analysis that moves from an interpretation of sensation (the particular) to an exorbitant responsibility (the universal) that would define the very subjectivity of the subject. Even methodologically, it would seem, Levinas finds the philosophical to be derivative of the religious—yet critically guiding it. But the correlation between the movement of thought in "Damages Due to Fire" and *Otherwise Than Being* can be specified even more closely, beyond this hermeneutical neighborliness, from the perspective of an ethical/political reading of its content.

In "Damages Due to Fire," Levinas traces a movement of thought that he finds in the Talmudic text which goes from an initial Halakhah, a rule concerning the liability incurred for setting a fire, to an Aggadah, a moral philosophical perspective which extends this liability indefinitely, exorbitantly—for what is now no longer *merely* fire—and thus results in a new Halakhah, a new and radical teaching which, in this case, concerns the re-creation and infinite protection of Zion by the same "divine fire" that had destroyed it. This new teaching is not quite so mundane as the original.

This "divine fire" is the most ancient metaphor for intellect or consciousness, the ultimate source of which Plato found fit to represent the Good that is beyond being—a metaphor that fuels much of Levinas's own thinking. But, like a wild ox, fire can get out of hand. It can become the rapacious and exterminating disaster of holocaust, consuming its victims with the irrational rationality of that terrible dark angel found in Ezekiel who slaughters the just and the unjust alike. It can get out of hand when it is guided only by its own spontaneous freedom, when it is not cut back and held in check

by the benign circumcision of a firebreak that would celebrate the mercy of the uterus. Thus, the masculine and virile subjectivity of consciousness, uncircumcised by the feminine and sensitive subjectivity of responsibility, leads to the evil of Auschwitz—a horror that is never to be forgotten in any of Levinas's work and which, like the angel of extermination, is invoked directly several times in "Damages Due to Fire".

In the context of this same invocation, a similar movement in *Otherwise than Being*, complete with the same kind of "aggadic" moral twist found in "Damages Due to Fire," can be traced in Levinas's radical interpretation and extension of Husserl's phenomenological analysis of sensation into the realm of the ethical, an analysis which will be investigated in detail in the second part of this paper. But let me present a brief summary of the outcome of that discussion here in advance.

The empiricist notion of sensation, of which Husserl, like Kant, is critical, is guided by a positivistic stimulus/response determinism which would support moral skepticism, as it does in Hume. Husserl's phenomenology, emphasizing intentionality, constitution, and the absoluteness or transcendence of consciousness in relation to the sensible, supports an ethic of autonomy and freedom in the Kantian tradition. Levinas's critical extension of Husserl, however, finds that a certain ambiguity inherent in the instant of sensation reveals an infinite co-responsence between the transcendental and the empirical (the philosophical and the religious; the moral/political and the ethical) and which "produces" an exorbitant responsibility—a new and radical teaching which, Levinas says, exposes itself "imprudently to the reproach of utopianism ... if utopianism is a reproach" (OB p.184 / AE p. 232). Zionism on the one hand, utopianism on the other; from the particular to the universal, from the sensible to the ethical.

But a utopia, although it is precisely that which cannot *be* anywhere, would nevertheless signify, for Levinas, a certain ethical/political topography that is otherwise and better than being, a kind of on-going skeptical consummation or critique, an an-archē in which the very possibility of a pure, spontaneous act by the *ego cogito* the—citizen of the earthly polis—is replaced by the necessity *me* for to respond: from the particularity of the "Greek" to the universality of the "Jew".

But can Levinas philosophically justify this pre-philosophical notion of exorbitant responsibility that his religion calls into being? If, for example, responsibility is to be a phenomenological description of what *is* the case with subjectivity, by what imaginative gymnastics is it possible to leap from this to any prescriptive assertion about what *ought* to be done? And without such a fact/value justification, is there not a certain political danger—allowing an exorbitant responsibility to place its impossible burden upon the subject it calls into being? In the final analysis, can this exorbitant and impossible burden of responsibility be distinguished from a masochistic inversion of the virility of consciousness in the form of a self-inflicted victim-mentality that would be the very condition for the possibility of holocaust, the outcome of what Levinas calls "the exaltation of a certain weakness"—of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans?

### The Philosophical Genesis of Exorbitant Responsibility

In *Otherwise than Being* the phenomenological analyses brought forward to support the claim that an exorbitant responsibility, as Levinas says in one of his interviews, is "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity,"<sup>6</sup> form a train of notions where "signification" is analyzed "as proximity, proximity as responsibility for the other, and responsibility for the other as substitution" (OB, p.184 / AE, p.232). But this train of thought will articulate merely the relation of the Same and the Other. When "the third" comes into the picture, however, these notions—which describe a *pre-conscious* relation to the other understood as exorbitant responsibility—will suddenly blossom into the question of justice. But not until then! And, how this happens is curious. One must be quick to glimpse it. In fact, Levinas's entire analysis of exorbitant responsibility takes place prior to consciousness—although it seems more or less clear that he intends his analysis to fluctuate ambiguously and spill over from the transcendental domain into the empirical. But *moral* responsibility is a matter of a judgement pertaining only to beings that have the possibility of *acting*, i.e., the possibility of having done otherwise. And the only possible "proof" that we are free to act, and thus to have done otherwise in any

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<sup>6</sup> Levinas, E. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p.95. *Ethique et Infini* (Paris: Librairie Arthème et Radio France, 1982, p.91).

given situation, is revealed in the actuality of our moral action itself, as Kant understood. Moral action can only take place where there is the consciousness of choice. But consciousness, like the very possibility of justice, requires the third; whereas the face-to-face relation is prior to consciousness. Therefore, it seems that Levinas's notion of responsibility is predicated (and not always clearly and distinctly) both in a pre-conscious and a conscious sense. It is not always clear, let me add, how Levinas accounts for this ambiguity, or whether it is vicious or productive.

In order to understand this train of thought articulated in *Otherwise Than Being*, it is necessary to see all four of the basic terms which comprise it—signification, proximity, responsibility, substitution—in relation to the key move found in the analysis of sensation that is worked out from the perspective of temporality, language, and the coming-to-be of being. This is a point of departure that Levinas finds suggested in the seminal work of Husserl.

What Levinas learned from Husserl is that there is an ambiguity in sensuous lived experience. In the midst of the apparent 'flow' of experience from the future to the past there is nevertheless the constancy of a present in which, and as which, sensible reality is immediately experienced as present. But not all experience of this presence, this "consciousness of...", can be explained as the active synthesis of "hyletic contents" constituted or imbued with meaning by the intentionality of consciousness, an activity which would make those contents present to me as *this* or *that* kind of experience; as if, in the act of desiring something, for example, there were simply a constituted object to which a feeling state had been added on afterwards by an independently constituted, constituting consciousness. Rather, the object desired already would have been inhabited or animated by desire issuing from my whole "being" before it becomes present to me as the desired object. Something that is already *there* for me, as such, moves me. What is given to be constituted as desirable, paradoxically, is that which has already somehow been constituted as the given desirability of the desirable.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> In "*Notes sur le sens*" Levinas says, in tune with Kant, that "the notion of intentionality, understood correctly, signifies both that being orders the modes of access to being, and, beyond Kant, that being is in accordance with the intention of consciousness: it signifies an exteriority in immanence and the immanence of all exteriority". "*Notes sur le sens*" in *De Dieu qui vient a l'idée*. Paris: Vrin, 1986, p.241; hereafter 'DD'.

ambiguous structuring of the immediate dimension of sensuous lived life, as lived, is more of a *modality* of being than a synthesized object present to consciousness. Although overlooked in the immediacy of naïve consciousness, the dynamics of this lived level of life can be approached by the phenomenological investigator practicing the *epochē*.

It is well-known, of course, that beneath the constitutive activity of consciousness, Husserl discovered that there is already a passive synthesis of the temporal flow in the automatically functioning modalities of "retention" and "protention" that are continually shading off from the present instant. The present instant of inner time consciousness, the *Urimpression* or now-point, from the perspective of sensibility, is not mere presence, or even a flow, but a continuous, repetitive, and creative circuit of sensing and the sensed. Husserl referred to this ambiguous circuit by the term "*Empfindnis*" which is difficult to translate in any language. Richard Cohen offers the phrase "a palpitation of self-sensing."<sup>8</sup> Levinas, in a footnote to "*Intentionalité et sensation*," suggests the term "*sentance*" which, he says, "perhaps expresses the diffuse character of the notion."<sup>9</sup> And, in *Otherwise Than Being*, among other descriptions, he calls this surplussing of sensing over the sensed "a sort of diastasis of the punctual putting itself out of phase with itself" ["...*une sorte de diastase du ponctuel—se déphasant...*"] (OB, p.34 / AE, p.43). At any rate, the idea is that inner "experience" of the now-point in the dynamism of the temporal continuum (if the term "experience" can be properly used here) is an active/passivity which, paradoxically, is and is not. Sensing both senses the object and simultaneously is, in a lived sense, the object it is sensing. Sensuous lived "experience," before it is re-presented consciously, is inherently ambiguous; "varying in its identity," Levinas says, "and identical in its difference," modifying "itself without altering its identity," it is a unity-in-difference (Ibid.).

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Cohen, "Emmanuel Levinas: Happiness is a Sensational Time," *Philosophy Today* 25 (1981); p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> This strange derivative of the verb *sentir* (perhaps coupled with the term "*sentence*"—a maxim or court judgement) is not much easier to translate than *Empfindnis*. Emanuel Levinas, "*Intentionalité et sensation*," in *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 1982, p.157, n.1.



Husserl, given the priority of intentionality, constitution, and the absoluteness of consciousness in his phenomenological program, aimed at overcoming the probabilistic skepticism of empiricism and psychologism, thought that the temporality of sensation, insofar as it was posited "doxically" as meaningful, had to be wholly defined by the intentionality or noetic activity of consciousness, thus making it possible for the sensible to be wholly recuperable or re-presentable to consciousness by the phenomenological investigator – his so-called "doxic thesis."<sup>10</sup> But, beyond Husserl's intellectualist prejudice, Levinas finds in this irreducible ambiguity an "antecedent doxa," the "hearsay" of a diachronic surging that opens out into the exteriority of an "an-archival" or "immemorial past," on the one hand, and a "pure future"<sup>11</sup> on the other, revealing, or producing, the "infinite of the Infinite" in the world -- the sensual/temporal heart of the "plot" that Levinas is tempted to call "religious."<sup>12</sup> The meaningful is not to be defined by consciousness. Albeit in an ambiguous manner, there is meaning prior to

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<sup>10</sup> Husserl, E. *Ideas I*, §103. §105.

<sup>11</sup> OB, pp.35; 38 / AE, pp.45; 48. Cf. "Diachrony and Representation" in *Time and the Other*. Trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987, p.111 ff.

<sup>12</sup> In *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, where he is concerned with "glimpsing" the infinite and invisible dimension of the otherness of the Other in order to establish the fundamentally ethical character of intersubjectivity, exteriority is thought by Levinas in the tropes and figures of enjoyment, separation, fecundity, and the asymmetry of the face-to-face relation, in an analysis emphasizing the "pure future" of temporality. In *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, however, Levinas turns from a consideration of the otherness of the Other conceived as exteriority, to the subjectivity of the subject conceived as a "being subjected" rather than a subjecting being, emphasizing the "immemorial past" of temporality that would constitute proximity and the radical passivity of responsibility. Thus, the rather striking shift in terminology of this text is perhaps due as much, if not more so, to the matter under consideration as to Levinas's struggle to finally get free of binary metaphysical language -- as if this were possible while still doing philosophy. The ethical disruption of the Same by the Other in *Totality and Infinity* -- viewed from the perspective of the Other -- is a loving, gentle, and benign disruption, the way the leisure of the Sabbath "disrupts" the work week. Here, the temporality of sensation is understood as *iouissance*, the ecstatic enjoyment of being immersed in the nurturing plenum of existence. But from the perspective of the subjectivity of the subject in *Otherwise Than Being*, the disruption of the priority of consciousness wrought by an exorbitant responsibility is understood as a vulnerability at the heart of consciousness, a suffering, an obsession, a being held hostage, a wounding invasion of my private parts against my will -- a circumcision of virility. This is what *Otherwise Than Being* finds revealed in the radical passivity of temporality and the ambiguity of sensation, "a passivity more passive than any passivity," a passivity that might be thought of as the very exteriority of interiority, an exorbitant responsibility which would reveal the trace of the Infinite in the world. Although Husserl's pioneering work regarding the phenomenology of sensation set the stage for this understanding of a non-recuperable or immemorial temporality, Husserl was never able to realize the full implications of his work, according to Levinas, because he was still under the influence of a desire for apodictic and adequate knowledge reminiscent of the very scientific empiricism of which he was critical (OB 65 / AE 82).

consciousness in immediately lived life. But, because the meaningful is guided by articulation, this paradoxical (or "protodoxical") ambiguity in the temporality of sensation must also be understood in its connection to language and the coming-to-be of being.

To reduce the essential ambiguity of sensing and the sensed -- the fact that, as Levinas puts it, "sensorial qualities are not only the sensed: as affective states, they are the sensing" as well wholly to consciousness, is to have already placed consciousness within the limiting parameters of the said, to have identified predicative or propositional knowledge and being, as Husserl did. But before being is a *what* it is a *way*. Before the verb "to be" becomes nominalized into a being, it is already a gerund, a coming-to-be, a *manner* of being in the world: a how, a mode, a poetic exegesis, a sensuous immersion in the immediacy of living where what Socrates "is," as Levinas puts it, is "Socrates socratizing" ("*Socrate socratise*") (OB, p.41 / AE, p.53).

Before the "palpitation" of retention and protention in the *Urimpression* becomes instantiated as past, present, and future, the passing of the past is already the barely perceptible process of aging, of growing old in the wrinkling of flesh and the soreness of joints; and the futurity of the future is the not-yet aspect of it which always comes as a surprise.<sup>13</sup> Before language synchronizes this resonating or responsive diachrony through the saying of a said, it will already have been, Levinas says, "the verbalness of the verb that resounds" in an *already said*, an *Urdoxa* which can, indeed, in being spoken, become correlative with a said, but which, in its saturation of the said, never is fully absorbed into it.<sup>14</sup> In short, what Levinas does in order to understand subjectivity as exorbitant responsibility, is to "go back to what is prior to this correlation" of the saying in the said to a "hearsay" evidence that is revealed in his analysis of the

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<sup>13</sup> It is this eminently concrete dimension of lived life that works most strongly against Husserl's rigid conception of the absoluteness or transcendence of consciousness, the focus of Levinas's criticism in *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, and which is succinctly reiterated in J. Claude Evans's article "The Myth of Absolute Consciousness." Commenting on Levinas's focus on Husserl's notion of *Empfindnisse*, Evans says that "It is here that the analysis of time consciousness has to begin, not with the analysis of *inner* time consciousness but rather with a field that is not yet polarized in terms of the inner and the outer, a vital field. And it is here, I suggest, that we find a much more concrete mode of living in the present." [J. Claude Evans, "The Myth of Absolute Consciousness," in *Crises in Continental Philosophy, Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy* 16. Eds. Arleen B. Dallery and Charles E. Scott. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990, p.43.

<sup>14</sup> This is what Jean-Luc Marion focuses on in his "The Saturated Phenomenon," *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 40, No.1, Spring 1996.

temporality of the sensible (OB, p.39 / AE, p.50). The immemorial passivity of the past and the pure futurity of the future that are the *residuum* of the phenomenological reduction of the temporality of sensation—thought in terms of the coming-to-be or subjectivity of the subject—thus constitute the primary justification for Levinas's construal of proximity as responsibility and responsibility as substitution.

Consequently, Levinas concludes that Husserl's theory of intentionality, although helpful, is inadequate for understanding subjectivity or intersubjectivity. Rather than providing a solution, Heidegger's hermeneutic of Dasein, thought in the impersonal and neutral context of the ontological difference—where Dasein goes off to work but never *enjoys* it; and Sartre's ontology of being and nothingness, where the responsibility of *pour-soi* refers primarily to itself in conflict with the other; as well as all sentimental and mystical philosophies of communion ... all of these, along with the whole metaphysical tradition of transcendental idealism, merely underscore the problem. For Levinas, there is more to being human than meets the eye. The identity of the representational intentionality of consciousness within the parameters of experience does not exhaust the signification of meaning. The passion of being sensitively disturbed by an "affective" susceptibility prior to all representational thought, emotion, or value, in the immediate, albeit equivocal, signification of lived-life, indicates a transcendence in which the Other is in the same, while the same and the Other yet remain distinct: separation and substitution. What cannot be represented in the identity of thought is nevertheless signified in the disturbance of a diachronous and unsynthesizable proximity to the other not yet measurable by a concept of distance; a substitution for the Other, a being wounded by the Other, a persecution, a maternal obsession, a being held hostage, an extreme passivity where I am thoroughly vulnerable to the Other, and which thus obliges me to respond before any choice on my part. Before any possibility of choice, the subjectivity of the subject already would have been revealed as an "ethical" *responsiveness* to the Other, an exorbitant "response-ability" for which I am not responsible.

Thus understood, the phenomenological analysis of sensation is the very locus of Levinas's an-archival metaphysics and the origin of his interpretation of subjectivity as responsibility; a responsibility without limit, an exorbitant responsibility that calls for the

celebration of a certain feminine weakness through a circumcision of the presumptuous and irresponsible virility of consciousness, "a relaxation of virility to the second degree," as Levinas puts it—of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans.

### A Critical "Conclusion"

Not counting myself to be among "the Nietzscheans"—a claim, at any rate, that would be as self-refuting as any positive assertion from a Pyrrhonian skeptic—yet wrestling with the dark angel of Levinas's texts, I cannot help but wonder if the corrective called for and performed by his construal of subjectivity as exorbitant responsibility is not itself in need of a further corrective lest it circumvent its skeptical limits and—may the Merciful One forgive us—become a positive doctrine.

The exorbitant responsibility or responsiveness that Levinas finds in the ambiguity of sensation and the surplus of saying over the said, has not yet become moral responsibility. It is a phenomenological description of what supposedly "*is*" the case and not a prescription concerning what one *should* do. In fact, to say that "Responsibility is...(anything)" would already have been to say too much, since exorbitant responsibility is clearly prior to the whole order of being and possibility in any positive sense. It is a perpetual disruption of this positive order. It neither is nor is not. Any positive assertion about exorbitant responsibility is already self-negating. One cannot logically predicate anything meaningfully about what is prior to logical predication without necessarily distorting what is revealed by the predication. Yet this skeptical self-negating is what marks the *positive* aspect of exorbitant responsibility, according to Levinas. And it is precisely this "positive" skepticism at the heart of exorbitant responsibility that constitutes the ethical moment of Levinas's whole philosophy; a tireless, insomniac skepticism, a bad conscience which perpetually prevents the establishment of any final solution, any imperialist sleep—any position on anything! This radical responsiveness at the heart of Levinas's notion of exorbitant responsibility, paradoxically, makes moral action—indeed, *all* action—impossible. Levinas's ethical responsibility is not yet moral responsibility, nor is it clear how it could become such without participating in the arbitrary acrobatics of a metaphysical leap of faith.

Nevertheless, it is as if by magic, as if by sleight of hand, that freedom of choice, which is presupposed by morality, somehow simply comes into being for Levinas as, or out of, pre-conscious responsiveness to the other. Keep your eye on the subtle shift in perspective here. This fundamental responsiveness or sensitivity to the Other, Levinas says, on the one hand, "is not a question of a subject assuming or escaping responsibilities, a subject constituted, posited in itself and for itself as a free identity."<sup>15</sup> Before the subjectivity of consciousness is established as freedom, its very ontogenesis is already in the grip of an exorbitant responsibility. But, on the other hand, this responsiveness to the Other prior to consciousness and being, would signify a fundamental *for the Other* according to Levinas's interpretation—a move which does, indeed, take on the form, if not the content, of a moral imperative, an insistence that we ought to do one thing rather than another, that responding is somehow prior in the moral sense of "being" *better* than being, and that we are in some sense liable for what we have not chosen, guilty already in our *being* a being. The movement from pre-conscious, "ethical" responsibility to/for the exteriority or otherness of the Other, to the moral responsibility that would guide the workings of justice in the political domain, is one of the weakest links of Levinas's analysis of subjectivity in *Otherwise Than Being*, and what is most in need of further corrective "translation."

At the very least, and against Hobbes, Levinas would draw from his phenomenology of ontogenic responsiveness an original and natural imperative against killing a being who has a face. But is the establishment of the neutral, impossible, and virtually meaningless "Thou shall not kill," or any "thou shall not...," the real problem of ethics? Rather, is it not how such an ethical imperative, or any imperative, for that matter, would arise and be practically inscribed amidst the concrete and conflicting exigencies of justice? One might concede to Kant the rationality of his categorical imperative and yet strenuously object to some, or any, *particular* application of it. It is deciding between and ordering competing duties or responsibilities, i.e., justice, which is the perennial problem of ethical politics—in the real world. How can an exorbitant responsibility which perpetually shears off from the synchronization of being in time—

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<sup>15</sup> Levinas, E. "No Identity," in *Collected Philosophical Works*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987, p.149.

refusing thematization—have any bearing on justice except in a most general, abstract, and pre-judicial manner? How can a prophetic call for compassion and charity be specified? And, lacking specification, is not such a "dangerous" call properly consigned to the edifying homiletics of the pulpit or the editorial page? Is Levinas's philosophy of exorbitant responsibility merely a new version of that old Platonic antidote for the "amnesia" of unbelievers—of which so much ill is spoken among the Nietzscheans?

The celebration of feminine sensitivity in the circumcision of masculine virility would be, Levinas says, the "deliverance into itself of an ego awakened from its imperialist dream," a call to remember from beyond memory that the apparent sovereignty of subjectivity issues from the womb of otherness and remains always indentured to the Other, and to the other of the Other -- and thus, as if by magic, to all Others—to the extent that no act could be free of this original passivity; to the extent that no *action* is even possible. Indifference to the Other, however, is also impossible. But the *forgetfulness* of this is possible. Thus, the moral or critical value of Levinas's philosophy would be found in its bringing to self-consciousness this breakup of consciousness, disrupting the amnesic and dogmatic slumber of our forgetfulness; limiting reason, once again, to make room for faith (OB, pp.164-65 / AE, pp.209-10). It is against the supposedly totalitarian predilection of consciousness, its naïve tendency to believe that individuality is prior to the ethical relation, that Levinas is arguing. According to him, it is this presumption—this hubris, this forgetfulness which lets the fire of consciousness get out of control that is in need of circumcision ... a rather painful ritual that will most assuredly wake you up! Levinas's philosophy itself, with its repetitive incantation of formulas resonating from *beyond* being, would be the very enactment of this ritual of recollection, this celebration of the moment of maternal sensitivity inherent in circumcised consciousness.

Circumcision, the "hygienic" ritual that marks Jewish males as members of the patrilineal covenant with Yaweh, separating them from the pagan Greeks and Gentiles, is not born of natural necessity. It is, in fact, a supplement to and a wounding of the natural. Consciousness, forgetful of mercy, like fire, has a natural tendency to get out of hand. That the virile subjectivity of consciousness tends to forget or ignore its origin in responsiveness to the other, which is revealed in the analysis of sensation, would be

the very condition for the possibility of evil in the world, the root of all unnatural suffering. This would not indicate the breakdown of a once perfect creation, but the incompleteness of its genesis in which we are all still involved. The ritual of circumcision, communal by its very nature—as all ritual is necessarily communal—would remind us, especially us men, of our unique and unavoidable responsibility for all others. The idea that responsible consciousness is inextricably connected to a pre-conscious, exorbitant responsibility for the Other, thus situates the notion of community at the heart of Levinas's thought. But mercy, that virtue underlying the welfare of community, can also get out of hand when it is forgetful of its need to be guided by a critical and practical philosophical consciousness.\

In Levinas's view, it is difficult, if even possible, for goodness to be achieved by the isolated individual outside the community. Nietzsche's self-imposed monastic isolation would be the very origin of his madness. The condition for the possibility of goodness, according to Levinas, entails pluralistic sociality. Thus, in "Damages Due to Fire" he reserves some of his strongest language for the self-righteous sanctimony of those Prometheans who would storm the gates of heaven on their own. It is against them that the dark angel of Ezekiel is first sent. "The texts of Ezekiel," Levinas says, "take aim at the impossibility of private righteousness." Private righteousness is the hubris of a virile consciousness caught up in the individualistic ethics of self-actualization and authenticity as found in the Greek tradition of virtue, an ethic exalting *virtus*, virility, masculinity, power. Here is the point at which Levinas's Jewish thought diverges from its pagan derivation. The hierarchical ethics of nobility guided by an aesthetic of self-creation, unhinged from and forgetful of its primogeniture in an exorbitant responsibility to/for the other, naturally tends toward, Levinas believes, the private, elitist madness of Nietzschean individualism on the one hand, and the collective, racist madness of Auschwitz on the other. Thus, Levinas would avoid the natural rapaciousness of *virtus*, as well as the charge of otherworldliness—of which so much ill is said among the Nietzscheans—by locating the moment of transcendence in the horizontal structure of an exorbitant responsibility for the other person within the economy of a worldly "Jewish" community whose membership requires that we remain wide-eyed and wakeful insomniacs, circumcised skeptics, resisting perpetually the

private satisfaction of positioning ourselves in the slumber of any foundationalism, with its nostalgic dreams of imperialistic conquering....

But is there not a certain super-naturalness to this philosophy of exorbitant responsibility that corresponds to the super-naturalness of circumcision? Must one either be a "jew" or less than human? Must an occasional gift of "divine" consolation always involve the violence of transgression? Is not circumcision the greater transgression? In its legitimate and lofty concern to avoid the madness of Auschwitz and the madness of Nietzsche, does Levinas's thought—like that of the dutiful Kant and the virtuous Plato—not overlook or unnecessarily de-emphasise an equally legitimate aspect of human being for which the stark and absolute demand of exorbitant responsibility holds no reward free of guilt? Must we always act without entering into the promised land; that is, not *act* at all? Must all genuinely responsible work be unappreciated? Must the satisfaction of lyric poetry be forever exiled from the synagogue? Is there no room for Alcibiades in Levinas's philosophy of love?

In the caress which, in Levinas's hands, never finds the fulfillment of its infinite and exorbitant desire; in the way sensing and the sensed, or saying and the said, never catch up with themselves; in the strange way that the breakdown of communication in a love relationship is viewed by Levinas as "the positivity of the relationship";<sup>16</sup> in the way even the most tragic suffering reveals in its deferral of satisfaction the religious plot of transcendence by which the deferral would be rendered meaningful; in short, in the very impossibility of the exorbitant responsibility Levinas recalls for us, is there not revealed a certain negative imbalance, a certain nihilism, regarding the concrete reality of the human situation? Is Levinas not the victim of a certain forgetfulness here, perhaps despite himself?

In the final analysis, must not Levinas's exorbitant responsibility for the other, insofar as it would insert itself into a political community, be balanced against a responsibility for oneself grounded in a positive aesthetic and philosophy of nature that are lacking in Levinas's work? Without this equally legitimate concern for the

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<sup>16</sup> Levinas, E. *Time and the other*, p. 94; *Le temps et l'autre*. St. Clement, France: Fata Morgana, 1979, p.89.



sovereignty of masculine consciousness refusing to be circumcised, is there not the danger that the absolute and impossible responsibility that Levinas recalls for us—with its exaltation of feminine weakness and passivity—is there not the danger that this may inadvertently become the source of an unconscious victim-mentality bent on its own suffering, the inverse of a fire raging out of control, and, despite every good intention, the accomplice condition for the very possibility of holocaust—of which so much ill is said among Nietzsche's "Hyperboreans"?

Abbreviations of texts

DF -- "Damages Due to Fire"

OB -- *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*

AE -- *Autrement gu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*

DD -- *De Dieu qui vient a l'idée*