CONCLUSION

1 Voices

Levinas' voice is a voice crying out in the wilderness: "Responsibility is prior!" It is a critical voice raised up against the pretensions of a self-consciousness that would be sovereign, raised up against a political voice whose arrogant will to power would otherwise be uncontested in its desire to conquer the world. In the marketplace the political voice declares: "Freedom is prior!"

Levinas' voice is a voice guided by a vision: that the disruptive response inspired by the otherness of the Other is a revelation of God and the origin of subjectivity and, therefore, must not, indeed, cannot be reduced to an object of knowledge or pleasure or use without the loss of one's very humanity. If Kantian language were appropriate to the pre-conscious situation of responsibility, one might hear in Levinas' voice a call for the establishment of the kingdom of ends. But Levinas' voice resounds and echos otherwise, in a 'kingdom' prior to the distinction between means and ends.

Levinas' voice is inspired. It is a voice obsessed by the trace of the Infinite revealed in the countless faces of the poor, the hungry, the disenfranchized, and the oppressed people of the earth whose place in the sun has been usurped by the barons of power. In short, it is a prophetic voice -- exhorbitant, disturbed, and disturbing; a poetic voice

de-ranged by a dazzling and insatiable desire for the Good which surpasses all understanding.

But neither the prophetic voice nor the political voice is the philosophical voice. Whereas the prophetic voice is troubled and troubling, the philosophical voice is leisurely, measured, reasonable. Like the voice of the prophet, it is situated outside the perimeter of the polis, but it remains close to the gate. The prophetic voice is unhinging; the philosophical voice is a hinge.

In one ear the philosopher hears the thin and frenzied poetic voice of the prophet preaching to stones in the desert for want of an audience; in the other ear he hears the pompous prattling of the political voice proferring its goods in the marketplace. The philosophical voice wonders and reflects: Where is the truth? Who is right? Which is better? How shall we know? What should be done about it? The voice of philosophy neither preaches nor persuades. Coming late on the scene, it thinks. It thinks about the prophet, the poet, and the politician. And then it thinks again about its own thinking about these things, in an endless proliferation of thought.

The prophetic voice and the philosophical voice come together as strange bedfellows in Levinas' writing. They achieve a unity and a uniqueness in their outcry against the sophistic pretensions of the political voice. It is as if the one voice of Levinas' work had many tongues, or the one tongue had many voices. The prophet, the sage, the poet, the aritist, the theologian, the outcry of six million dead — these separate tones converge in the harmony of a single philosophcal chord: responsibility. Levinas' philosophy is an opened-up philosophy as well as a philosophy of openness.

2 Skepticism and Knowledge

The prophet preaches; the philosopher teaches. Knowledge is the proper object of philosophy, even if this knowledge involves the skeptical undoing of itself. There is knowledge in the one becoming many just as there is knowledge in the many becoming one. Diachrony and synchrony reflect the two basic movements of thought, both involving a touch of skepticism — the ignition-switch of wonder. Each is in need of the other. Separating the former from the latter results in a playful relativism of dissemination; separating the latter from the former results in tyranny. Skepticism, the court-jester of philosophy, keeps this separation from happening. To the extent that Levinas' writing is productive of knowledge, to the extent that it teaches the 'knowledge' that the knowledge of rational comprehension is not the only kind of knowledge that there is, it is philosophical. The self-contradiction inherent in all skepticism does not prevent its perennial return. It takes its seat near the crown of philosophy as a perpetual leave-taking. The very force of its critique is its own undoing. Like poets and prophets, all skeptics are thus a little mad.

The voice of skepticism, like that of the prophet, is primarily negative. Its positive content, if one can speak of such, is this very negativity; the presence of an absence, the programmatic disruption of the program. The priority of responsibility is a skeptical critique of the sovereign status claimed by comprehension, consciousness, and freedom. This would not be replaced by a new comprehension but by a comprehension that is incomprehensible, a return to wonder. It is a

refusal to let absolutism have the final word. Skepticism is an insomnia intent on disturbing all dogmatic slumber.

One cannot help but hear the thoroughgoing negativity at the heart of Levinas' skeptical critique: the virility of individuality is checked by a disruption issuing from a pre-conscious sociality; the positive enjoyment of earthly delights is traumatized by the suffering and persecution of vulnerability to the Other; the power of the body to act, to initiate a cause, is challenged by the radical passivity which Levinas locates in a more fundamental analysis of embodiment and incarnation, its susceptibilty to being affected before it is effective.

Because of this re-actionary, negative quality of Levinas' philosophy, however, there is the danger of it communicating a negative judgement about the goodness of the world and the enjoyment of material existence. It leaves itself open to the interpretation that it is a philosophy of ressentiment born of a frustration of the ability to act freely, a frustration caused by the barons of power controlling the world. This resentment would then be repressed and sublimated into a denial of worldly life justified by a projection of a true life 'beyond' this world, a heavenly life that cannot be dominated and controlled by the powerful ones. Is there really a difference between Levinas' "beyond" and the one Nietzsche critiques? Levinas' philosophy has yet to be defended adequately against this Nietzschean attack. Perhaps one will find that Levinas' critique and Nietzsche's attack are two sides of the same skeptical coin.

None of Levinas' arguments would prove conclusively to one who is not already disturbed by injustice, poverty, and human misery, that the Infinite is revealed in the invisible face of the Other. But, then, in Levinas' view, such a one would already have committed a kind of suicide,

a deadening of that 'bad conscience' whose relentless troubling keeps one awake at night demanding that justice be served.[1] Levinas' philosophy itself is like such a bad conscience. But it is exactly the lack of such bad conscience, in Nietzsche's view — and despite his being an insomniac himself — that constitutes the very nobility of the noble: what is 'evil' from the perspective of the slave is what is 'good' from the perspective of the noble; what is 'bad' from the perspective of the noble is what is 'good' from the perspective of the slave. It would be of some value to work out a Levinasian response to Nietzsche's critique — and a Nietzschean response to Levinas' critique — although such a project exceeds the scope of the present study.

3 Theory and Practice

There is another problem connected to the negativity of Levinas' philosophy. The theory of the priority of responsibility — that it is a pre-thematic responding to the Infinite revealed in the invisible exteriority of the Other, a responding that defines the very subjectivity of the subject — is understood by Levinas to be a fundamentally ethical situation. It is this fundamental situation of responsibility that leads Levinas to define Ethics as First Philosophy. But fundamental ethics must be distinguished from moral philosophy, a point which gets blurred in Levinas' work. Fundamental ethics is not morality. Nowhere does Levinas take a stand on any particular moral problem. Despite his critique of theory, his fundamental ethics is, in fact, a theory of ethics. And, insofar as this gives rise to a new theory of subjectivity, it is closer to philosophcial anthropology and ontology than Levinas admits.

The pre-thematic and pre-ontological susceptibility which defines the subject as responsibility, uncovered by Levinas' phenomenological-poetic method, is nevertheless the establishment of the be-ing of subjectivity. It is an 'ontology' despite itself. This ontological orientation is reflected negatively in the lack of consideration given to concrete moral problems in Levinas' work. We are shown that subjectivity is responsibility, but we are given no indication of what one should do about this. But practical philosophy, ethics, addresses the question of action, human behavior. It may not be possible to reduce Levinas' understanding of subjectivity to a 'what', but that is what he has nevertheless done even though the essence of this 'what' involves a skeptical and anarchical undoing of itself. The danger here is that such ontological considerations, particularly when they are blended with metaphysical and theological speculation, can slip imperceptibly into moralistic sermonizing. The very word "responsibility" reflects this danger. It is a term taken from moral philosophy although in Levinas' work it is predicated ontologically insofar as it is used to denote what subjectivity is or what it means to be human.

Levinas has presented a coherent — albeit equivocal — analysis for understanding responsibility as a pre-thematic response to the otherness of the Other which defines the very subjectivity of the subject, a being-called-by-God in a non-indifference to the Other. But does this mean that everyone should give away all that they own to the poor and go live in monastaries and convents? Surely it does not mean that. But what does it mean, concretely, in terms of actual human behavior? It may be true that I am responsible for all others, but what percentage of my salary should I give to the poor? And how should this

be reflected in social institutions? Levinas' 'ethical' theory of transcendence and subjectivity provides no immediate answer. One finds in Levinas' notion of the ethical a primacy of contemplation not unlike that which Levinas found in Husserl. And like Husserl's phenomenological theory, it is left to those who come after Levinas to apply his highly original ethical ontology to the practical problems of moral philosophy. We saw in the last chapter that there were two outcomes of Levinas analysis of the priority of responsibility as the subjectivity of the subject: the establishment of justice in the world and the contemplation of the divine. Levinas has followed the latter path in his most recent work, tending toward the desert. But he might just as well have gone toward the marketplace where there is also pressing work to be done. A phenomenology of social, political, educational, religious and cultural institutions remains a task to be done.

Underlying both of these outcomes is the task of establishing Levinas' ethical ontology against philosophies in which freedom and consciousness are thought to be prior to responsibility. In the practical sphere, responsibility, like consciousness, has gradations. What is truly original in Levinas' philosophy is that the process of becoming conscious — what would be a measurement of one's freedom of spontaneity and hence of one's moral responsibility or culpability — is understood to be a process of becoming conscious of one's ultimate responsibility to one's neighbor. To say that one person is less conscious than another is to say that they are less aware of how they are already called by the Other to be responsible. Responsibility is there from the first. It is not a result of consciousness and freedom, but the very furnace out of which consciousness and freedom are being forged. Consciousness is not being born out of the dialectic of experience but

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out of the quasi-experiential approach of the Other. This ontological situation requires a whole new way of thinking about the ontic situation, a new sensitivity to the prodding and disruption of the approaching Other, a new sensitivity to language. This is what accounts for the newness of Levinas' language. His new wine would burst the old wineskins.

But in a world that has been dominated for so long by the idea that freedom and consciousness and knowledge are "for-me," the for-the-Other that Levinas teaches is like a whisper in the midst of a hurricane. What Levinas has provided is a new approach to moral philosophy. But it needs to be explicated in terms of concrete issues such as abortion, nuclear weapons, poverty, pollution of the earth, etc. It is not merely a matter of spinning out more rationalistic arguments, but of doing a phenomenology of economics or business or religion or education or family life, without preconceptions, in order to see what is happening in these areas, in order to see what ought to be done. Levinas' ethical ontology has opened the door to a genuinely new possibility for philosophy. This revolutionary insight is not the end, however. Like all revolutionary insights, it marks the beginning of a work to be done.

4 A Third 'Copernican Revolution'

Prophets appear when the people have become forgetful and blinded by the values of the marketplace, when they have lost their way. Levinas' prophetic philosophy is responding to the overvaluation of the self, the "transcendental pretence" of the idealist tradition and the

secular humanism of Enlightenment rationalism that supports it. Philosophy lost its way. The absolute and sovereign primacy assigned to a rationality based on the principle of identity framed within the ontological distinction, and the conception of self-consciousness and freedom underlying this primacy, led to an arrogant and self-righteous domination of the Other by the Same, a movement which, like the mythical tower of Babel, sought to storm the gates of heaven itself and grasp God as the Absolute Idea or Supreme Being — the ultimate reduction of the infinition of Otherness to the sameness of a totality. Translated politically and set on an earthly scale, this philosophical arrogance took the form of National Socialism's "final solution" where the search for pure knowledge became a search for the pure race. Husserl and Heidegger kindled Levinas' philosophical fire, but it was out of the ashes of Auschwitz that his prophetic voice was formed. It is this prophetic voice that takes the philosophical form of Levinas' argument for the priority of responsibility.

There are two basic approaches to this argument in Levinas' work. We have characterized these as the "escape from below," and the "escape from above" — escapes from the atheistic solitude intrinsic to theories that assert the priority of freedom. These two approaches, however, have a common ancestry in Levinas' theory of non-representational 'intentionality'.

The escape from below argues from the ambiguity in the instant of sensation that the temporalization of being's essence does not exhaust the signification of being. The object sensed is simultaneously the affective sensing of it that is irreducible to the objectification; the subjective color overflows the objective color; the eye cannot at once see and see its own seeing. This surplus of meaning over the meant that

haunts the self-satisfied presence of every present representation like a bad conscience, thus 'signifies' beyond the rememberable past and the anticipatable future to an immemorial past and a pure future prior to what is recuperable in representation. It reveals a 'signification' resounding to infinitiy, prior to the pretentious march of ideas toward the absolute idea, a saying prior to every said. On the one hand, the objectification of the said, the represented object, is condensed or constituted out of this pre-objective surplus of saying; but on the other hand, the surplus of saying always goes beyond the said in a break-up of being's essence that indicates the otherwise than being, the trace of God in the world at the heart of the subjectivity of the subject.

The escape from above argues from an analysis of exteriority that there is an invisible dimension of the Other that is irreducible to either thought or pleasure. Differing from a need that can be fulfilled, the exteriority or otherness of the Other is revealed as a metaphysical desire whose 'satisfaction' is its inability to be satisfied, a thought that thinks more than it thinks, a burning bush that does not burn out, a desire which opens unto the infinite and reveals the trace of God in the world. The exteriority of the Other disrupts the totalizing pretensions of the same. Subjectivity is intersubjective response-ability, illustrated in the caress and exemplified in paternity and genuine work.

Levinas thus concludes that Husserl's theory of intentionality is inadequate for understanding human being and that this is why he was unable to account for intersubjectivity. Rather than providing a solution, Heidegger's hermeneutic of Dasein and Sartre's ontology of being and nothingness merely underscore the problem. There is more to being human than meets the eye.

The identity of the representational intentionality of

consciousness does not exhaust the possibility of experience, where experience is understood as the comprehension of a constituted object grasped by a transcendental ego. The hunch, the inspiration, the urge, the intuition, the passion of being disturbed by an 'affective' susceptibility prior to all representational thought, emotions, or values, in the immediate, albeit ambiguous, 'experience' of lived-life, these indicate a transcendence in which the Other is in the same while the same and the Other yet remain distinct: separation in transcendence. What cannot be represented in the identity of thought is nevertheless 'experienced' as the disturbance of a diachronous an unsynthesizable proximity not yet measureable by a concept of distance; a substitution, a wounding, a persecution, an obsession — terms which describe the non-representational 'intentionality' of responsibility.

It is this paradoxical identity-in-difference that situates responsibility as prior to freedom, prior to there being a subject who could be free or not free. It is in this non-objectifiable response-ability prior to being that the coming-to-be of the subject occurs. The 'freedom' to be in which not-yet being is a coming-to-be is prior to the freedom in which one can choose to be or not to be. It is not that we are first free and then, secondarily, in need of some constraint on or sharing of our freedom, as Hobbes and Rousseau believed, in order to have a peaceful and just society. Our very freedom is already in the grip of the for-the-Other. Political society is an emenation of responsibility. Thus, to act for-myself, for my own gain, my good, my pleasure, is already an aberration of the fundamental situation of responsibility. And one must wonder if even this aberration is possible. To refuse responsibility is not to have negated it. To act in accordance with responsibility is to act in such a way that the good

of the Other is primary, whether one is conscious of this or not. Levinas' argument is that the priority of responsibility already is the situation before the reflection which grasps it comes on the scene. This is the net outcome of the analyses of sensation and exteriority. The very first movement toward subjectivity takes place in the context of a drama of inter-subjectivity. To be is to be for-the-Other. The ethical dimension of responsibility is located in its priority.

If there were only one person in the world there would be no reason to act at all. In fact, according to Levinas' theory, it is inconceivable that there could be only one person (understood as a subject) in the world, since there would be no possibility for that 'being' to become a subject. Adam had to be something more or less than human before Eve arrived on the scene. In Sartre's world, where there can only be one person, locked-up in the burdensome freedom of spontaneity, the most valiant efforts to make something of one's life cannot overcome the prison of boredom and despair to which "looking out for number one" inevitably leads. And neither is Kierkegaard's resignation to faith in a reward to come after this life the answer since this merely transplants the same self-interest into a heavenly economics. Mineness is the pathway to despair. The genuine project of freedom is only conceivable as a for-the-Other. Levinas' theory of the priority of responsibility is a third 'Copernican revolution'. But the full impact of understanding subjectivity as fundamentally for-the-Other rather than as absolute freedom has yet to be felt.

The voice of philosophy can no longer afford the luxury of lounging by the gate. The political voice promises fame and fortune, while the prophetic voice has only locusts and wild honey to offer. There is power in the polis, to be sure. But there is wisdom in the

desert. There is really no choice.

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1. Emmanuel Levinas, "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in Face to Face with Levinas, op. cit., pp. 35–40.