THE PRIORITY OF RESPONSIBILITY
IN THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS FOR THE MAJOR TEXTS OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS USED IN THIS STUDY

ThI	The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology. Translated by André Orianne. 1973; reprint ed., Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1985. Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl. 1930; reprint ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1984.
EE	Existence and Existents. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1978. De l'existence à l'existant. 1947; reprint ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1986.
TO	Time and the Other. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. Le temps et l'autre. 1947; reprint ed., St. Clement, France: Fata Morgana, 1979.
DEHH	En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger. 1949; reprint ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1982.
TI	Totality and Infinity. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. 1969; reprint ed., Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985. Totalité et Infini. 1961; reprint ed., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984.
HLH	Humanisme de l'autre homme. Paris: Fata Morgan, 1973. The essays in this text are translated by Alphonso Lingis in CPP.
OB	Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981. Autrement qu'etre ou au-delà de l'essence. 1974; reprint ed., The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986.
DDQV	De Dieu qui vient à l'idée. 1982; reprint ed., Paris: J. Vrin, 1986.
EI	Ethics and Infinity. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1985. Ethique et Infini. Paris: Arthéme Fayard, 1982.
CPP	Collected Philosophical Papers. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987.

(N.B.: Where English translations exist and are used without modification, endnote citations will first give the page number or numbers of the English text with the page number or numbers for the French text immediately following the '/' in the citation, unless otherwise indicated. If no English translation exists or if the English translation is unsatisfactory, our own translation will be provided and will be so indicated in the endnote.)

INTRODUCTION

1 Texts and Contexts

Every text is written in relation to a context or set of contexts which functions as a kind of pre-text for the text. The context itself does not appear directly in the configuration of the text, of course, since this is precisely what would remove it from its contextual situation. Operating always behind the back of the text, the context establishes the parameters for the appearance of the text.[1] Whereas the text has a certain specificity, the context involves an infinitely variegated field of historical, social, cultural, intellectual, emotional, and other influences. These more or less indeterminate forces operate as an invisible limit situation governing the determinateness achieved by the visible text. The context of a text always remains passively in the background; but it nevertheless acts as the 'blind spot' of a painting which establishes the 'origin' of the painting's represented perspective.

Although the author's focus on the emerging text necessarily conceals the text's contextual background, the context of a text <u>can</u> be made conscious through a secondary reflection on it. This results in the birth of a new text within a new context. What is commentary if it is not a bringing to light of these hidden sources of influence, these

contexts that were operating behind the back of the author and which formed the very matrix from which the text was born? The present commentary on the priority of responsibility in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas aims at such contextual revelation. But this decontextualism, so to speak, must take certain precautions to guard against capriciousness and self-interest.

The impact of the context of a text brought to light in a commentary must be allowed to show itself as far as possible in its natural relation to the text it lets appear, without the commentator influencing the rendition of that relation toward a predetermined end. This is a situation that can never be achieved with perfect clarity. What is thus required on the part of the commentator is a sincere attitude of humility, openness, and generosity toward the text, as well as a critical distance guided by a willingness to listen to and be affected by the text. Toward this end, the present investigation will employ the very method underlying the philosophical questions being investigated. The texts and the contexts of Levinas' ethical philosophy will be approached through the practice of the phenomenological method, even as this is made, in part, the object of study. Guided by the striving for presuppositionlessness called for by the phenomenological epokhe, we will work toward seeing without bias the contexts that have shaped and molded Levinas' original philosophical thought. In accordance with the spirit of the French proverb, "Bien faire et laisser dire,"[2] we leave to someone else the problem of bringing to light the unsuspected contexts of this present investigation of texts and contexts since, ultimately, the eye of even the most discerning and unpresupposing phenomenological investigator cannot see its own seeing absolutely.

2 Husserl, Heidegger, and the Holocaust

The present investigation thematizes three major contexts from which it is necessary to view the development of Levinas' ethical philosophy, and apart from which that philosophy cannot be adequately understood. These contexts are, in the order of their priority for us, first, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and, in particular, his theory of perception and the phenomenological method developed in conjunction with this; second, the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger; and, third, the influence on Levinas' work from his experience of the horror of the Holocaust in relation to his deep and abiding commitment to Judaism. The fact that we will explicitly focus on these three contexts should not be taken to mean that Levinas is wholly unaware of them. On the contrary, we take our lead from his own suggestions. But as they will be formulated here, and indeed in the very fact that we have decided to focus on them, they are naturally our own construal, our own perspective of the situation. It is what we are saying forms a crucial aspect of the unsaid background of Levinas' work. And it is our view of how this unsaid background influences his philosophy and the difference it makes. It is no secret that Levinas has been influenced by Husserl and Heidegger and that he was incarcerated in a Nazi stalag during World War II. How these experiences have influenced the development of his philosophical thought, however, how they have shaped its contours and given it a direction and purpose, how they have been instrumental in the formulation of Levinas' understanding of the priority of responsibility, this we put forward as our own interpretation.

In themselves these contexts are not major questions. That is to say, we do not intend, for example, to undertake a study of Levinas' relation to Husserl and Heidegger or to perform a psycho-social analysis of his response to National Socialism as a purely historical study for its own sake. Rather, these contexts are utilized in this study in a heuristic manner to the extent to which cognizance of them makes for a more meaningful interpretation of Levinas' notion of fundamental responsibility. Indeed, in our view, this cannot be adequately understood apart from them.

3 The Nature of Responsibility

The central argument of our study is that the ethical priority of responsibility functions as a paradoxical linchpin for the whole edifice of Levinas' philosophy. It is a linchpin because it holds together all of the other elements of Levinas' ethical metaphysics. It is paradoxical or "ambiguous," as Jacques Rolland has pointed out in a recent essay, because it is both the origin and the end of Levinas' philosophy, a making present of that which, properly speaking, has never been.[3] To see how this is the case, it will be necessary to undertake a hermeneutic archaeology of the ethical priority of responsibility in Levinas' thought.

We will find various predications of the term responsibility in Levinas' quasi-phenomenological philosophy. In the most profound and subtle way that Levinas deploys this term, and what is of central interest in the present study, responsibility will be shown to be not a concept at all, and thus that which absolutely cannot be represented

conceptually. This is a problem which must be taken up within an understanding of Levinas' radical development of method at the heart of his unusual linguistic style. To the extent that Levinas' fundamental understanding of responsibility is grasped, it is missed. Responsibility in this Nietzschen sense can only be mis-taken. Such will be the paradoxicality percolating at the heart of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, a fundamental ethics which must be distinguished from morality, a responsibility prior to the light of consciousness and freedom.

Understood in the context of this priority, Levinas' depiction of responsibility might better be expressed as 'response-ability' in the sense of a pre-thematic, autonomic response or reaction to the ultimately incomprehensible dimension of the Other, like breathing, an 'affective' responding before I choose to respond which thus disrupts the totalitarian predilection of representation and knowledge.[4] Thus, response-ability, in Levinas' view, will be shown to be not only prior to and the ground of freedom, consciousness, and knowledge, but of all moral responsibility as well.

The invisible domain of response-ability, although it cannot be grasped as a cognitive object, can be approached, according to Levinas, obliquely, indirectly, apophantically. The "glimpse" will serve here methodologically as a tertium quid between the domination of sight and a skeptical blindness; the grasping hand of thought will be replaced by the groping hand of sensitivity. It will be necessary to take precautions not to fall prey to the immature aggressiveness of those callow and importunate lovers of truth, as Nietzsche conceives the situation in the Preface to Beyond Good and Evil, who would go rushing directly in to grasp and dominate the beloved truth.[5] This is a futile grasping, as the

more mature and seasoned lover comes to learn, albeit through much difficulty. Thus it will be necessary to retrace in our own groping and glimpsing the many phenomenological analyses that Levinas employs as evidence for demonstrating the fundamental place of responsibility in his philosophy.

4 Levinas' Fundamental Argument

Levinas' argument for the priority of responsibility begins from 'below', as it were, in an analysis of what it means to be, an analysis that focuses on an original interpretaton of sensation, experience, and meaning. His philosophy is thus, properly speaking, an ontology, although not in the Heideggerian sense since it is exactly the ontological distinction at the foundation of all thought and knowledge that Levinas questions beyond. And, indeed, upon closer scrutiny, one finds that the 'below' of sensibility is already a 'beyond'. If we look for the beginning of Levinas' ethical ontology in the sensibility of the face to face relation of sociality, we find that the face does not, properly speaking, exist. The face is a trace, what Levinas will understand as the very passing of the Infinite; the face is a facing, a gerund that has not yet achieved the visibility and sovereign status of the noun. The metaphysical face of the Other is invisible. And invisibility will be shown to be the very 'structure' of the Infinite. Thus, already in the 'below' of the social relation understood through the pre-reflective affectivtiy discovered at the heart of the paradoxical ambiguity that conjoins sensing and the sensed as an identity in difference, there is the revelation of God-in-the-world, for that is what

the infintie horizon of the face to face relation of sociality ultimately indicates or, as Levinas prefers, produces.

This argument hinges on the establishment of the possible 'experience' of exteriority, i.e., that the otherness of the Other, which cannot be reduced to a theme, to a representation, can nevertheless be approached in the intersubjective relation of sociality and glimpsed in desire analyzed in retrospect. Desire, understood metaphysically, i.e., having the structure of infinity, will establish a relation with exteriority prior to understanding the possibility of this relation. Levinas' point of departure, what we might misleadingly call his 'self-evident first principle', rests in the spontaneous desire for the divine found among humans, the idea of the infinite in us, a thought which thinks more than it thinks — a notion Levinas borrows from Descartes. To disagree on this fundamental contention, that it is possible to establish various 'degrees' of exteriority breaking forth from the totality of thought, would make further discussion fruitless.

But how successful are Levinas' many analyses of exteriority in establishing his central thesis of response-ability? Here it becomes a matter of 'evidence'. For this reason, as we have already indicated, it will be necessary to unvestigate in detail the seemingly endless phenomenological analyses that Levinas uses to establish his basic thesis of the priority of responsibility: insomnia, wakefulness, ultramateriality, laziness, action, effort, fatigue, separation, solitude, the feminine, the home, the body, erotic desire, the caress, fecundity, work, light and darkness, desire and need, enjoyment, totality and the infinite, being and its otherwise, language, sensibility, proximity, substitution, and so forth. We will approach these analyses as supportive evidence for the central thesis of the priority of

responsibility. We will show how Levinas arrives at this central thesis through our own analyses of these analyses, arguing that from the beginning this had been the general drift and whole purpose of the agenda of exteriority guided by the contexts of Levinas' critique of Husserl and Heidegger and his experience of the horror of the Holocaust.

5 The Schema of This Investigation

We will begin our study in Chapter One with an argument for the use of extratextual evidence. In the context of this argument, we will provide a brief biography of Levinas' life up to his engagement with Husserl's philosophy. An overview of Levinas' philosophy also will be presented in order to familiarize the reader in advance with the specific terrain to be traversed in the course of the investigation.

Chapters Two and Three will deal with Levinas' critical response to Husserl insofar as this is pertinent to the development of the concept of responsibility. Levinas adopts Husserl's method, but goes beyond it. He is critical of Husserl's notion of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the primacy given to consciousness, and the abstract intellectualist character of Husserl's work, its overlooking of the concrete, lived dimension of reality. Levinas' criticisms of Husserl will lead him to a new understanding of intentionality and sensation, as well as of method, which will be integral to his own philosophy.

Chapter Four will investigate Levinas' ill-fated relationship with Heidegger from the perspective of the ontological distinction, and the questions of being, freedom, and subjectivity. It is at this point that we will look at how the Holocaust figures as a major context for Levinas,

catapulting him beyond Husserl and Heidegger and the whole tradition of Western philosophy and leading him to the claim that Ethics, rather than Ontology, is First Philosophy. What makes this surpassing possible is Levinas' extension of the phenomenological method. Methodologically, Levinas walks the edge between philosophy and poetry, operating beyond Aristotelian logic in the domain of sensibility.

Chapter Five will show how Levinas uses this method to begin developing his own ethical ontology out of his critique of Husserl and Heidegger and under the influence of the Nazi horror. Levinas argues that the existent emerges as a struggle against the regressive pull of anonymous Existence, and not against the anxiety of nothingness as Heidegger believed. Consciousness is the mastery of being; i.e., freedom. But the solitude that makes this mastery possible is a double-edged sword: solitude is both mastery and suffering.

This two-fold aspect of separation or solitude will be taken up in Chapter Six where Levinas begins to set the stage for his rendition of a 'solution' to this existential 'problem' concerning the freedom of the existent: How can the existent overcome its solitude and separateness in the transcendence of genuine relationship without losing the very separateness that is necessary for that relationship? How can one be free and not free at the same time? Here it will be necessary to distinguish between two levels of intentionality, representational and non-representational, which will hearken back to the whole question of sensation in the philosophy of Husserl. This will lay the groundwork for the notion of sociality or what Levinas calls the escape from solitude, the heart of which, Levinas will argue, is ethical responsibilty.

The escape from solitude will be taken up in Chapter Seven. Focusing on the negative aspect of solitude, Levinas argues that we seek

responsibility. We will show how Levinas arrives at this central thesis through our own analyses of these analyses, arguing that from the beginning this had been the general drift and whole purpose of the agenda of exteriority guided by the contexts of Levinas' critique of Husserl and Heidegger and his experience of the horror of the Holocaust.

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salvation from our bodily existence. We will question whether this emphasis of the negative aspect of individuality, as opposed to the positive aspect of mastery, does not create to some degree a "no" to life. How Levinas sees that the existent escapes its solitariness in sociality or the response-ability of responsibility, and how this involves the human in a relation with the divine, will be approached through phenomenological analyses of time, death, and the face to face relation.

Chapter Eight will continue this analysis of exteriority beyond the face to face relation of sociality through Levinas' understanding of the feminine. In general, the feminine will be understood as the otherness of the Other as opposed to the masculinity of consciousness, a view which gives rise to a question of sexism in Levinas' thought. In particular, the feminine will be viewed, on the one hand, as the very structure of the home and the primary force behind individuation, and, on the other hand, in the context of the erotic relation, as the possibility of fecundity and self-transcendence toward a time beyond my death, a transubstantiation embodied in the child and calling forth the ultimate form of responsibility.

Chapter Nine concludes our study by turning from the exteriority of the Other as the foundation of the primacy of the ethical, to the priority of responsibility understood as the subjectivity of the subject. Levinas' argument for understanding subjectivity as responsibility is generated from an analysis of the interrelation of language, time, being, and sensation. This reveals the otherwise than being at the very heart of intersubjectivity and is construed by Levinas as proximity and substitution. This argument will be shown to have two, not necessarily distinct, outcomes: the necessity for establishing peace

and justice in the world, and an understanding of the inherent nature of subjectivity as a relation with God. The concrete application of this argument will be illustrated through Levinas' understanding of the genuine work. In the process of this analysis, the equivocal nature of Levinas' philosophy will be questioned and found to be itself the answer to the meaningfulness of his theory of the priority of responsibility.

* * * *

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1. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," in CPP, p. 95.

2. "Do your work well and never mind the critics."

3. Jacques Rolland, "Une Logique de L'ambiguité," in Autrement Que Savoir, (Paris: Osiris, 1988), pp. 35-54.

4. Throughout this study we are following A. Lingis in rendering "autrui" as the "Other" (the personal Other, you) and "autre" as the "other"; see TI, Trans. Pref., pp. 24-25, n.*.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, (New York: Penguin, 1973), pp. 13-14.