

Totality, the Other, the Infinite: The Relation between Ethics and Religion in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas

Author: Thomas Tjaya

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/2468>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2010

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

Boston College
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Department of Philosophy

TOTALITY, THE OTHER, THE INFINITE: THE RELATION
BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION IN THE THOUGHT OF
EMMANUEL LEVINAS

a dissertation

by
THOMAS HIDYA TJAYA

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

December 2009

© copyright by THOMAS HIDYA TJAYA

2009

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Title: TOTALITY, THE OTHER, THE INFINITE:
THE RELATION BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION
IN THE THOUGHT OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

By Thomas Hidya Tjaya

Director: Prof. Richard Kearney

The present study seeks to address the general question of the relation between Levinas's ethics and his account of religion. The specific questions pursued here include the following: Is his ethics secular or religious, and in what sense is it so, either way? Does his ethics depend on religion? How does Levinas himself understand 'religion'? This thesis will show that any interpretation of Levinas's ethics cannot be separated from its religious dimension, namely, the openness to exteriority as Desire for the Infinite. Religion, despite all consolations it may bring, cannot dispense with this ethical demand.

Chapter One analyzes Levinas's account of ethics as the outward movement towards the Other and the putting into question of the *I* by the Other. The face of the Other challenges the self-preoccupation and the *conatus essendi* of the *I*, including its tendency to incorporate everything into itself. Through its appeal and demand, the face calls the *I* to responsibility. The shift from self-preoccupation to responsibility for the Other constitutes the asymmetrical relation between the *I* and the Other. The chapter will

end with the discussion of justice that involves the third party, given the fact that we live in a world that consists of a multiplicity of beings.

Chapter Two explores the subjectivity of the human subject that makes possible the responsibility it carries for the Other. It will show that instead of a conscious and thinking subject that often characterizes the modern conception of human subjectivity, Levinas offers us a sensible and feeling subject. Sensibility allows the human subject to feel the appeal of the face of the Other and to respond to its demand. The analysis of the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and temporality brings out the religious dimension of such human subjectivity that is manifested in the election by the Good to the responsibility for the Other.

Chapter Three discusses the metaphysical desire for the Infinite that the very Infinite within the subject produces. It begins with the Levinasian distinction between Desire and Need, which is based on their cause of movement towards their object as well as on their potential fulfillment.. The chapter then analyzes the Cartesian idea of the Infinite and Levinas's appropriation of it in order to show both the limitation of the intending consciousness and the infinity of the Infinite. After the discussion of the relation between the Infinite, God, and the Good, it brings us to a deeper analysis of the Desire for the Infinite that never reaches satisfaction, but instead gets diverted to the neighbor. The responsibility for the Other is thus never the result of the free choice of the subject, but rather of the order of the Infinite.

Chapter Four brings us to a more evident link between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought, namely, to the discussion of the face of the Other as a trace of the

Infinite. Navigating between presence and absence, the notion of a trace brings out not only the unique signification of the face, but also a new conception of God as Illeity that always escapes representation. As a trace of the Infinite, the face is no longer a phenomenon, but rather an enigma. The chapter ends with the discussion of the structure of ethical language through the distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said* that roughly shows the relation between the subject's exposure to the Other and the effort to thematize the encounter.

Chapter Five discusses the major elements that bring together ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. It begins with the analysis of his general concept of religion, which emphasizes, among other things, the relation between God and the human being without totalization and sociality. Then it brings forth the religious character of Levinas's ethics that was discussed in the previous chapters. Following this analysis is the discussion of the ethical character of religion that is centered on the responsibility for the Other. Religion becomes meaningful only if it fully commits itself to the horizontal and sensible dimension of human existence.

ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS BY LEVINAS

The following abbreviations accompanied by page numbers are used in this study in reference to Levinas's works. When a page reference is followed by slash and a second reference, the first refers to the French edition and the second to the English translation. In these cases, translations are taken from the English edition, sometimes slightly modified for consistency or clarity.

- AE* *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Livre de Poche. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978.
- AaT* *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- AeT* *Altérité et Transcendance*, préface de Peirre Hayat. Fata Morgana, 1995.
- BI* "Beyond Intentionality," *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 100-115.
- BPW* *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- CPP* *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- DC* "The Trace of the Other," *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986.
- DE* *De l'évasion*, introduit et annoté par Jacques Rolland. Fata Morgana, 1982.
- DEH* *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000.
- DF* *Difficult Freedom: Essays On Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- DL* *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, troisième édition revue et corrigée. Éditions Albin Michel, 1976
- DMT* *Dieu, la mort et le temps*. Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1993.

- DVI* *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, seconde édition revue et augmentée, troisième tirage. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998.
- EDE* *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, troisième édition corrigée. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2001.
- EES* *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001.
- EEt* *De l'existence à l'existant*, seconde édition augmentée, huitième tirage. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 2004.
- EFP* *Éthique comme philosophie première*, préfacé et annoté par Jacques Rolland. Paris : Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1998.
- EaI* *Ethics and Infinity : Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982.
- EeI* *Éthique et Infini : Dialogues avec Philippe Nemo*. Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982.
- ENP* *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*. Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 1991.
- ENT* *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- GCM* *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- GDT* *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- HAH* *Humanisme de L'Autre Homme*. Fata Morgana, 1972.
- HO* *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, intro. Richard A. Cohen. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
- HS* *Hors Sujet*. Fata Morgana, 1987.
- IH* *Les Imprévus de l'histoire*. Fata Morgana, 1994.
- IRB* *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

- ITN* *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith. London: The Athlone Press, 1994.
- LC* *Liberté et commandement*. Fata Morgana. 1994.
- LR* *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1989.
- NTR* *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Intro. Annette Aronowicz. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- OB* *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh : Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- OE* *On Escape*, intro. Jacques Rolland, trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- OS* *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- PN* *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- QLT* *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2005.
- SS* *Du Sacré au Saint : Cinq Nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977.
- Tal* *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- TeI* *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. Livre de Poche. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.
- TIHP* *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, second edition. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- TIPH* *Théorie de l'Intuition dans la Phénoménologie de Husserl*. Paris: Librairie Philosophie J. Vrin, 2001.
- TA* *Le temps et l'autre*. Quadrige/PUF, 2004.
- TO* *Time and The Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.

UH *Unforeseen History*, trans. Nidra Poller, introduction by Richard A. Cohen.
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Contents

Signature

Copyright

Abstract

List of Abbreviations

Introduction	1
Chapter One	Interruption by the Other: Levinas on the Ethical Relation 27
1.1. Beyond Self-Enjoyment: Ethics as the Interruption by the Other	30
1.1.1. The Self as the Same	34
1.1.2. Ethics as First Philosophy: The Critique of Western Philosophy	44
1.2. The Face of the Other as the First Signification of Transcendence	53
1.2.1. The Notion of Transcendence	53
1.2.2. The Face of the Other	58
1.3. The Asymmetrical Relation between the <i>I</i> and the Other	67
1.4. The Third (<i>Le Tiers</i>) and the Search for Justice	72
Chapter Two	Sensibility and the Responsible Subject 79
2.1. Sensibility as the Basis for Human Subjectivity	82
2.2. The Responsible Subject: the Self as the Hostage of the Other	90
2.2.1. Subjectivity as the Other-in-the-Same	92
2.2.2. Subjectivity as Substitution for the Other	97
2.3. Exteriority and Temporality	109
2.4. Subjectivity, Passivity, and the Traumatic Self: Towards a Phenomenality of Religion	115
Chapter Three	Metaphysical Desire for the Infinite 128

3.1. Desire and Need: Towards the Infinite	128
3.1.1. The Distinction between Desire and Need in Levinas	132
3.1.2. Desire and Love	137
3.1.3. The Making of Desire: Levinasian or Otherwise	143
3.2. The Idea of the Infinite Within Us	147
3.2.1. The Infinite: A Brief Comparison between Levinas and Hegel	148
3.2.2. The Cartesian Idea of the Infinite and Levinas’s Appropriation	151
3.2.2.1. Differences of Focus	153
3.2.2.2. Metaphysical Experience	157
3.2.2.3. The “In” Factor	160
3.3. The Infinite, God, and the Good	164
3.3.1. The Infinite and God	165
3.3.2. Desire for the Other?	174
3.3.3. The Infinite and the Good: Further Considerations	184
 Chapter Four The Face of the Other as the Trace of the Infinite	 191
4.1. The Concept of ‘Trace’: A Phenomenological Consideration	192
4.1.1. Heteronomous Experience	195
4.1.2. Trace and Sign	198
4.2. The Face of the Other as the Trace of the Infinite	202
4.2.1. That Which Leaves Traces	202
4.2.2. The Illeity of God: A Closer Look	207
4.2.3. The Face as Trace	216
4.2.3.1. Face as Revelation	216
4.2.3.2. Encountering the Face as Trace	219
4.2.3.3. The Passing of the Infinite – Ordering to Neighbor	226
4.2.3.4. <i>À-Dieu</i>	231

4.3. The Saying and the Said: The Structure of Ethical and Religious Language	236
4.3.1. The Saying and the Said: The structure of the ethical language	237
4.3.2. The Saying and the Said: The religious dimension	246
Chapter Five The Intertwining Between Ethics and Religion	251
5.1. Levinas's General Concept of Religion	253
5.1.1. Religion as Relation with the Infinite	255
5.1.2. It is A Relation Without Totalization	258
5.1.3. True Religion Requires A Separation From God (Atheism)	265
5.1.4. Religion Is Fundamentally Social	268
5.1.5. Religion as Desire	272
5.2. The Intertwining between Ethics and Religion	273
5.2.1. Ethics as fundamentally Religious	274
5.2.1.1. Ethics as A Religious Quest	274
5.2.1.2. Ethics as the Realm Where the Word 'God' Has Meaning	277
5.2.1.3. Ethics as the Passage to God	279
5.2.2. Religion as Ethical	288
5.2.2.1. Religion of Responsibility	288
5.2.2.2. Religion as Adrift	298
Chapter Six Conclusion	303
Bibliography	319