

EMMANUEL LEVINAS IN THE LIGHT OF *FIDES ET RATIO*

• Roger Duncan •

“What is needed is a way to speak of being from the height of Trinitarian *perichoresis* as that is reflected in all of creation via the *analogia entis*.”



Levinas is mentioned more than once in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, where he is cited as an important thinker who presents new angles on the truth about man and the world and unveils new dimensions of anthropological experience;¹ he is absent from *Fides et Ratio*. This absence is not surprising since in *Fides et Ratio* the Holy Father recommends a reconsideration of philosophy in its large, metaphysical scope; he invites the development of a bold philosophy of being. Levinas does not offer that sort of philosophy. He is a minimalist, a philosopher impatient with metaphysics and the alleged pretensions of “onto-theology,” teaching instead that ethics is “first philosophy” and that a systematic view of being, though in a way unavoidable, must inevitably betray a more proximate revelation. It is natural, though an oversimplification, to class Levinas with those thinkers for whom some version of the “distrust of reason” is the predominant note.

¹John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 35–6. Cf. also 210.

However, the message of *Fides et Ratio* is not that minimalist thinkers have nothing to say, but rather that their insights need to be mined and ultimately placed in a larger, more ontologically confident context. Catholic theologians and champions of *Fides et Ratio* will profit from looking into Levinas in the spirit of the encyclical. We might call that spirit the perspective of the *analogia entis*.

By the *analogia entis* I mean a broad philosophical current in which it is held, against excessive metaphysical timidity, that being is the inescapable theme of the philosophic quest, because it is our most inclusive notion—there is no stopping short of it as there is no going beyond it. At the same time, against metaphysical *hybris*, the analogical tradition holds that being is not manifested in a clear and distinct idea, as some ultimate genus or univocal idea matching the requirements of a mathematically mesmerized intellect. Rather, being unfolds for us as a rich analogical unity, in which essential difference and essential sameness preclude Parmenidean or rationalist monism. From the perspective of the *analogia entis* being everywhere overflows sameness into patterns of difference which nevertheless “hang together,” ontologically in relations of participation, epistemologically in patterns of discernible similarity. This philosophy typically holds that between a better known but derivative world of phenomena and a lesser known but originary world of invisible being, something of the latter can be known from the former. In theology, reference to the *analogia entis* implies that between God and creation the “ever-greater” difference between the two continually offsets the ineluctable relation of similarity between created and Creator.² Yet even here “being” covers everything, extending to, yet without restricting, even the Absolute.

From this point of view *Fides et Ratio* may be read as urging against both the “univocal” reduction of being to the phenomenal realm (materialism) and, even more insistently, against the “equivocal” separation of phenomena from noumena, a philosophical move that

²The reference is to the Fourth Lateran Council, so often quoted by Hans Urs von Balthasar following Erich Przywara. For a brief account of the difference in “accent” in the interpretation of this formula in the works of Przywara and Balthasar, the former’s more negative and the latter’s more positive, see Medard Kehl, “Hans Urs von Balthasar: a Portrait” in *The von Balthasar Reader*, eds. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 19–22.

would dissolve even the loosest unity of “being” language.³ Levinas then appears as a thinker whose insights need to be rescued from the trajectory of this equivocal detachment from the perennial wisdom. For instance, it is certainly true that unqualified emphasis on the hiddenness or absence of God could lead to a repudiation of the goodness of creation, and Levinas has been roundly castigated for this sort of heterodoxy.⁴

At the same time, in the spirit of *Fides et Ratio*, we may recognize that the philosophers of the *analogia entis* need to work continually to take bolder possession of its own rich possibility. Specifically it needs to become more Trinitarian, where the Trinity is recognized as the paradigm of being in all its relationality and difference, and where everything that has being is seen as participating in the Trinitarian base. To put it less theologically, the metaphysical One of the tradition needs further qualification by relation and difference to secure the response to Parmenides that Plato had desired and to some extent adumbrated.

The fact is that the fierce hegemony of the pagan and ultimately pessimistic One has thus far biased the analogical tradition against the full status of relation, which requires difference, so important to the articulation of the wisdom of the Covenant. The bias against difference has been evident also in the confidence with which a single system could claim philosophical ultimacy. To the end of bringing the tradition to its maturity it is well to consult Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish, Talmudically trained philosopher grounded in the profound postmodern experience of difference and sensitivity to language.

1. *Non-Intentional Consciousness and the Ethical Imperative*

Twentieth-century philosophy moved as a whole from the modern search for a bedrock minimum certainty to the recognition of

³Of course it is possible to commit the “univocal” heresy by reducing the phenomena to the noumenal realm, as pantheism does. I cannot of course pursue here the interesting work of basing a typology of philosophies upon the permutations of the univocal, equivocal and analogical mind-sets.

⁴Phillip Blond, “Emmanuel Levinas: God and Phenomenology” in *Post-Secular Philosophy*, ed. Phillip Blond (London: Routledge, 1998), 195–228.

inherent ambiguity disturbing to rationalist and empiricist alike. Kantian categories melted along with Euclidean space. Logical positivism and naive empiricism gave way to Wittgensteinian tolerance for language games. Husserl had explored consciousness as the intentional constituting correlate of an objective and invariable structure of meanings, only to keep coming up against a surd of non-intentional consciousness prior to and controlling intentionality, relativizing its clarity.

Levinas affirms what Husserl admits, and turns his philosophical attention to the non-intentional awareness accompanying and preceding each intentional act.

But a consciousness directed at the world and at objects, structured as intentionality, is also indirectly, and supplementarily, as it were, consciousness of itself: consciousness of the active self that represents the world and objects to itself, as well as consciousness of its very acts of representation, consciousness of mental activity. But it would be an indirect consciousness: immediate, but without an intentional aim; implicit and purely of accompaniment.⁵

He finds a fundamental ethical orientation in this region, and for that reason “ethics precedes philosophy.” That is, before all thematization in the realm of the “said” is the “saying” itself, in which the speaker is ethically implicated with and toward an O/other.

I have said that this exploration is Levinas’ “philosophy,” and indeed it is; he calls it that. But to say that ethics precedes philosophy is to say something much more radical than that a decision about what is valuable has to precede theory, let alone to say that we have to work up an ethics first before we go on to ontology. It is rather to make the claim, as Levinas does, that what precedes all theory yet invites articulation is an awareness that is in no way a perspective on reality or an opinion about being. And Levinas conceives this preceding connection to the O/other more radically than the I-Thou meeting celebrated by Buber. He thinks of it as a predicament about which no one has any choice. Levinas teaches that before the “I am” draws itself up and decides about what to do, there is the I-am-in-the-thrall-of-the-other, the self as orientation, a relation to another that is much

⁵Emmanuel Levinas, “Non-intentional Consciousness” in *Entre Nous* [=EN] (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 127–8.

more like a captivity than a dialogue. In this relation I *am* only as given over to the recognition of the majesty and the poverty of the other; I *am*, as not-my-own, in service to the other. This blessed servitude precedes my autonomous adoption or refusal of it as policy, and indeed, the only founding decision I can claim is the decision to *reject* this *a priori* ordination. I am Cain tempted to murder.⁶

In other words, Levinas evokes the very pre-theoretical milieu that has so interested contemporary thought, a region sometimes represented as the realm inhabited by primitive consciousness,⁷ ascribing to it the character of stern ethical demand, with “Do not kill” as its primary principle.⁸ This is the place of the inescapable importuning of the other. We might say that Levinas, the philosopher of the Covenant, finds a dimension of unrelieved accountability where the pagan inhabits a murky realm of gods both fearsome and consoling.

The pagan has in fact substituted a magic or mythical dimension of pure sensation, which according to Levinas survives in our time as art,⁹ for the original Face, a Face neither seen nor touched. Now, insofar as philosophy represents an escape from this dreamworld into the autonomy of reason it is good, according to Levinas. Yet he fears that a philosophy of being, corresponding to intentionality, always masks an orientation to self-interest and autonomy vis-à-vis a theoretical and therefore manageable object. Either it becomes a philosophy of presence, distorting the real by way of a spatialization of time, or, in an attempt to include the subject’s presencing on its own account, it becomes a solipsistic totalizing of all there is, as in the thought of Heidegger. Therefore unlike Heidegger, or even Marcel, who direct us to the realm of a more global and surrounding Being, Levinas relegates being and all talk about it to the objective and theoretical, and finds the good beyond being, in the unmediated Glory shining in the face of the other,¹⁰ calling forth service and sacrifice.

⁶“Philosophy, Justice, and Love,” *ibid.*, 110–11.

⁷“Levy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy,” *ibid.*, 49–51.

⁸“Is Ontology Fundamental?” *ibid.*, 9–10.

⁹“Reality and its Shadow” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

¹⁰Cf. “From the One to the Other: Transcendence and Time” *EN*, 147, 151, 153. In other places, notably in *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 144–5, Levinas uses “glory” with reference to the subject. It comes, instructively, to the same thing. Glory “takes place” precisely at the

It is important for the theologian to recognize that Levinas, in this respect not unlike Buber, or even Kant, wishes to offer a direct way to God, or perhaps it would be better to say a direct way from God to us. It is an ethical way, circumventing, so Levinas claims, even an implicit metaphysics. This ethics would be a natural “preamble” to faith, a preamble that cannot be formulated as an argument because it precedes and contextualizes all argument. When we begin speaking we already know we have been addressed, by an other who refuses objectification.

There is more than some sort of existential “apologetics” here, because at issue is the profoundly moral character of any approach to the God of the Covenant. We may know of God through his creation, but then we already know him as the one to whom we are speaking in the very act of thinking, the one who calls us into the truthfulness within which we consider the argument or make the inference.¹¹

The important thing to learn from Levinas’ insistence on this moral *a priori* might be that, apprehended out of a milieu prior to self-determination, *the attraction of the Sacred qua Sacred cannot be reduced to an appeal to self-realization*. This is not because it threatens with annihilation or seduces to self-immolation. It is rather because, touching us from a realm *peripheral to* that of self-possession it captivates self-forgetfulness in the attraction to a Glory beyond these alternatives, securing the truth of both.¹² This Glory is the substance of the Old Covenant as it underlies the Good News of the New, and it is inseparable from the service of the neighbor.

If Levinas is right then the thinkers of the *philosophia perennis* have something to do besides sketch the map of being. They need to recognize non-intentional consciousness and its ethical content, and they need to do the phenomenological tradition’s present work of

point of proximity, where the subject is in relation to an other.

¹¹Of course St. Thomas Aquinas rejected this consideration, championed by Augustine, as an argument (*Summa Theologiae* I., 2., 1.). For Thomas, these existential considerations have to be linked up with some sort of causal argument if we are to identify the one who calls us as God. This is only to say, from Levinas’ point of view, that we cannot escape doing onto-theology, even though *it always introduces a distortion*. We cannot simply rest with the prior and more important knowing.

¹²We shall have to say more about Levinas’ view on ethical motivation. See below, 121ff.

expressing what is in the margins of the systems and, paradoxically, closer than any phenomena. They need to dwell with the *saying* in which the *said* will be embedded. This activity will sometimes look more like poetry than philosophy,¹³ yet it will be a thinking that occupies, as Heidegger says, its own mountaintop.

At the same time, Levinasian thought cannot in the long run get along without the help of “being” language. It is a truism to say that non-intentional consciousness is not about being in the sense that it is not focused on grasping the essence of what is. It does not follow that either it or its contents do not *be*. When we agree that this is so we may begin to apply its discovery to philosophical anthropology and to metaphysics and theology. For instance, our idea of human action gains coherence through the idea of a mirroring consciousness accompanying our intentionally governed actions and providing the basis for self-determination in the action.¹⁴ Our notions of the divine nature and its so-called transparency to itself may be enlarged as we see that being can never be reduced to intentional consciousness. But such a theology requires the bold application of the philosophy of the *analogia entis*.

In such a philosophy we will want to recognize non-intentional consciousness as a kind of environment bathing or accompanying all intentional acts, containing the seeds of self-possession: if you ask me what I have been doing for the last five minutes, while I have been attentively writing this paragraph, I can tell you. At the same time, within this penumbra the ordination toward another is already inscribed. Here, we will want to acknowledge Levinas’ stern ethical teleology without limiting the notion by this philosopher’s concerns. For instance, it is here that we will recognize

¹³Levinas’ writings depend for their impact on a radical renaming that many find hauntingly “poetic.” Yet Levinas would want to sharply distinguish this illuminating rhetoric from the art form known as poetry, since the latter ties its works off, so to speak, and does not open to dialogue. See “Reality and its Shadow,” 131. For him, poetry is more like a disengagement from speaking than an exercise of it.

¹⁴Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), 32–33, *passim*.

the space beyond the play of egoisms in which *receiving* is also possible.¹⁵

We have seen above that Levinas rejects all notions of participation in a sacred milieu, though he grants that the insights of Lévy-Bruhl into the nature of primitive consciousness support his own contentions regarding non-intentional consciousness. All such ideas represent, for Levinas, the substitution of an impersonal, sub-ethical dimension for the ethically demanding personal sphere. In short, they are pagan. It is questionable, however, whether an either/or is necessary here. Catholic theology, at any rate, essentially includes ideas of participation—we not only *see* Christ in the neighbor, and try to respond *as* Christ; we are *in* Christ, and without this inclusion we are of all men most miserable. This teaching in turn is supported by a philosophical anthropology that allows for an archetypal awareness haunting consciousness, and a fundamental desire for participation in a larger story luring human desire. Catholic philosophy and theology will want to distinguish, and unite, the subconscious and the superconscious, or the mythical and the mystical. It will spell out levels of being, an analogy of being, and appraise levels of participation in being.

In short, without a notion of *participation* the religious thinker's accessing of non-intentional consciousness remains at the level of a meditation on the seriousness of infinite obligation. With a notion of participation it may think of itself and the other as co-participants in which each is called to a fullness of being mirroring the Divine Glory. Without the *analogia entis*, however, a religion of participation resolves into crude pantheism, a danger to which Levinas is particularly sensitive.

Of course, the question arises as to whether the whole philosophy of the *analogia entis* is sustainable without belief in the Incarnation, without an actual personal and divine center that is its plenary expression in history, as Balthasar once said.¹⁶ Levinas' "equivocal" severity may be as understandable as the Mosaic proscription of images. I can only raise the question here whether

¹⁵See below where I briefly discuss the implicit presence of a third, which according to Levinas grounds the emergence of justice and philosophy. This too will form part of the richness of non-intentional consciousness.

¹⁶Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 74.

Levinas has not in fact rendered faithfully an essential note of the Old Law.¹⁷

2. Difference and the Trinity

Christian thinkers, in line with *Fides et Ratio*, may be less apprehensive than Levinas about developing a philosophy of being beyond the confines of intentionality. However that may be, it is worth noting that Levinas' understanding of subjectivity favors the typically post-modern break up of the hold of the unrelieved One that has dominated traditional ontology. The self is not a monadic unity, but is "broken," poured out relationally, prior to self-possession. Levinas says the self is "denucleated." It is thus "other than itself," its identity richer than that of a mathematical point.¹⁸ Thus difference or otherness permeates all significant oneness. This means a definitive break with the traditional understanding of the transcendental One insofar as that understanding has excluded difference from perfection.

Metaphysics, both East and West, has tended toward pessimism,¹⁹ insofar as difference has been seen only as a function of the less-than-fullness riddling that which is less than God. In this picture no matter how much a theology may extol the goodness of creation, difference as such can never really be good—only sameness and oneness are positive. Opposed to this model Christian theology in our time needs the help of a Trinitarian metaphysic by which pessimism is overcome, where "the positive otherness of the Son,

¹⁷Yet the Old Law, with its covenant, contained its own presages of participation, e.g., "Be holy as I, your God, am holy" (Lv 11:44).

¹⁸Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 14–36.

¹⁹Donald J. Keefe, S.J., *Covenantal Theology* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1991), *passim*. Keefe develops this point convincingly and at great length throughout his work. According to him, the Christian Covenantal and Trinitarian doctrine, expressed in the liturgy and taken in full Scriptural strength, that is, historically, offers an insuperable challenge to philosophy, whose worth is determined in relation to this inevitable and intrinsic limitation. Keefe therefore has no interest in offering the metaphysic we project. How far this commits him to a kind of theological positivism in considerable tension with the spirit of *Fides et Ratio* remains an open question.

eternally begotten from the Father, makes possible the positive otherness of creatures."²⁰

Postmodern celebrations of difference tend to revel in the fracturing of oneness, and to approach a demonic exaltation of chaos. From the standpoint of the *analogia entis*, what is needed is a Trinitarian metaphysic upholding an eternal fission at the heart of the Same, though distinguishing between difference pure and simple, and difference that is overcome or complemented by interpenetrative relation, *perichoresis*. The latter would characterize being itself, being understood ultimately as love. Here must lie our answer to Parmenides. Opposed to his tightly packed monistic sphere, we would propose an infinite being which always/already encompasses and grounds all the non-being that can be, within an excessive largesse that eternally gives itself away.²¹

Ever since the advent of the "philosophers of the dialogue principle," as Balthasar calls them,²² we have been sensitive to a metaphysical mandate to identify being with love, particularly as mutuality.²³ The mutuality model however, needs supplementation in at least two ways, ways Levinas adumbrates in his phenomenology of the self.

First, Levinas' relation to the other is *asymmetrical*. Being-toward-the-other escapes self-centeredness only in a radical abandon, a "subordination" that does not wait for the other's response. This asymmetry would seem to be necessary to keep being "open" in its infinity, to keep it from collapsing back in on itself. The excess of gift, and of self-gift, precedes mutuality, we would say, as the Father precedes the Son. This analogous priority, as proper to creatures, translates into the priority of obligation to give (back).

Secondly, lest we put too much weight on a model construing mutuality as the result of free association between ontologically independent units, individuals realizing their personhood by freely

²⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama. V. The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 399.

²¹Here and the following paragraphs cf. David Schindler, "Is Truth Ugly?" *Communio* 27 (Winter 2000): 711–718.

²²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. I Prolegomena*, 626–643.

²³For an excellent, more or less popular expression of this theology, see Mary Timothy Prokes, *Mutuality: the Human Image of Trinitarian Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

entering a bonded relation, Levinas complements and corrects this model with something like *necessity*. We are already, ontologically, structurally, not our own, but handed over to the other. This is not a matter of choice. From the standpoint of the *analogia entis* this may tighten the positive analogy between the human and the divine. Without in the slightest compromising the divine freedom, we have to say that the persons of the Trinity do not come together as friends might, by chance, out of separate quarters. Something true is captured in the halting statement that God cannot *not* be a Trinity. Even so, according to Levinas, our own free adoption of the I-Thou is only an obedience to an inescapable reality—lest anyone should boast.

Once again it goes without saying that Levinas would not accept this extension of his thought to a grand theological scheme, let alone a Christian one. Yet without the support of a metaphysical prime analogate his insights tend to collapse into the sheer celebration of difference characteristic of postmodernism. If there is no access to a standpoint wherein difference is tempered by analogical unity, everything, and especially the self, unravels. The *analogia entis*, properly understood, holds in tension the claims of asymmetry and of mutuality, of necessity and freedom. In a theological key, a Trinitarian perspective, I would suggest, *one that is properly inclusive of the severe unraveling realized at the Cross*, can provide the needed intellectual *Gestalt*.

3. *Desire and the Good*

Levinas is sometimes accused of providing no account of ethical motivation, since, in commending expressions of solicitude for the neighbor, he excludes all appeals to self-interest, even of the highest sort.²⁴ From a Biblical point of view such a teaching would appear one-sided; the Bible is full of incentives.

The traditional way of dealing with ethical motivation within the Christian tradition has been to supplement a kind of psychological egoism—we cannot help but seek what is best for ourselves—with the

²⁴A.T. Nuyen, "Levinas and the Ethics of Pity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2000): 411.

recognition of the ecstatic nature of engagement with goods.²⁵ Bishop Butler's famous distinction between the times of such engagement, which are naturally altruistic as delivered from self-attentiveness, and the "cool hour" when we consider what sort of life-style will make us happiest, perhaps says it best.

The problem with such accounts is that they do not bring the two halves of experience together. They do not explain how considerations from the cool hour do not infect the ecstatic consciousness and reduce it to egoism. Nor do they adequately explain how ecstatic self-gift preserves self-becoming or any interest in it.

One thing that is needed here is a *notion of desire that does not reduce to need*. If everything I tend toward answers to some need in me, in the sense of an emptiness to be filled, an unactualized potency, there is little hope of seeing even the most exalted charity as anything but ultimately self-serving. The notion of a desire transcending need provides at least the beginning of a solution.

Levinas introduces this notion in the opening pages of *Totality and Infinity*, where he identifies it with what he then called "metaphysics" (as opposed to ontology).

For we speak lightly of desires satisfied, or of sexual needs, or even of moral and religious needs. Love itself is thus taken to be the satisfaction of a sublime hunger . . . The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it.²⁶

Such a desire has a freedom about it that makes atheism possible. But it also makes possible a service of the other transcending self-fulfillment.

To begin with the face as a source from which all meaning appears, the face in its absolute nudity, in its destitution as a head that does not find a place to lay itself, is to affirm that being is enacted in the relation between men, that Desire rather than need commands acts. Desire, an aspiration that

²⁵For a recent exposition of these issues with some comments on Levinas see J. L. A. García, "Interpersonal Virtues: Whose Interest Do They Seek?" in *Virtues and Virtue Theories*, Annual ACPA Proceedings, vol. 71: 31–60.

²⁶*Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 34.

does not proceed from a lack—metaphysics—is the desire of a person.²⁷

Classical philosophy did not adequately distinguish this larger desire, this expansive attraction, from need, though the distinction is adumbrated in Plato.²⁸ But it could never account for the simple fact that the more alive I feel, the stronger are my desires. Nor did it adequately achieve a notion of free self-determination, the vertical transcendence Karol Wojtyła distinguishes from the horizontal.²⁹ Cartesian philosophy only sealed this captivity of the Other to the Same.

We need to take this larger notion of desire farther, into an understanding of the self. Levinas begins this in *Otherwise than Being*, where he introduces the “denucleated self” mentioned above. The monadic ego of autonomy is only superficially real, if we may so speak; the deeper self is already stretched beyond itself in the interest of the other.

The renovation I would suggest begins with seeing that the dynamism of self-determination differs importantly from standard models of becoming; it neither slakes nor aggrandizes. It is *self-determination*, yes—but it is *self-determination*. That is, it involves a submission to the exigency of *becoming other*. We might want to urge Levinas to accept the idea that the reason why the very loss of self in the primal captivity to the other results in the gain of self is that gaining a self is always accepting a “new” self. He himself goes so far as to say that the relation with the other “introduces into me what was not in me.”³⁰ The choice for the other is always a choice to be a new self, to go beyond where I am and what I have so far become, and as such is free and never reducible to interest. Because it is about who I am to be

²⁷Ibid., 299.

²⁸See *Lysis* 221c where it is asked whether, with respect to the “dear” there is not something which remains when privation is gone. And see Gadamer’s remarks in this connection, *Dialogue and Dialectic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 15–20.

²⁹Wojtyła, 119.

³⁰Ibid., 203.

it can never be understood totally in terms of what I now am—or what I now need, want or wish. It is a risk and an acquired taste.³¹

Such a radical philosophy of the self helps us to see dimly, by way of the *analogia entis*, how God can desire our becoming. God has no needs, only tremendous desire. He has no need of creation; in the excess of desire he freely wills this “more.” He intensely desires our becoming who we are called to be, much more than we do. His own self is trinitarianly “stretched,” so that by creating us “in Christ” he can love us from the Heart.

The divine in itself transcends the coldly monadic, and must include freedom and obedience, humility and exaltation, eternally new in the surpassing of the Same.

To sum up, then, the philosophy of the *analogia entis* needs to advance beyond the constriction of the act-potency analysis of desire and becoming. Levinas of course would not want to follow this line of metaphysical expansion but the question remains, how, without such an extension, the reality of the self and its becoming could ever be brought into the picture. Of course Levinas may not want to bring it into the picture, but in explaining why he does not, it is noticeable that he does not escape metaphysical pronouncement. Being is all about self-realization, he tells us.³² Therefore we must eschew being for what is beyond being, he says, thereby falling into the dualist trap of which his detractors accuse him.³³ For to divide the whole into being and the “otherwise than being” in this “equivocal” manner, is to condemn the

³¹What is needed is a notion of change in which there is continuity without the cyclic repetition to which the act-potency analysis is ultimately tied, change that is neither accidental nor substantial. Donald Keefe, in the work cited above, *passim*, calls for such a concept based in the freedom of the covenant in its historic unfolding, and applicable to the Eucharistic transformation.

³²In passages unexpectedly comforting to the metaphysically unreformed who, though they may disagree, feel themselves at home in these generalizations from the inspection of nature (*EN*, “Author’s Preface,” xii). Where they might wisely disagree is in the ascription of complete selfishness to sub-human nature.

³³It seems that Levinas is guilty of a certain equivocation here. On the one hand, being language represents a certain limited perspective on reality, inadequate to transcendence. On the other hand Levinas wields being language here uncritically to pass judgement on the whole world of nature. Would consistency demand granting significant otherness to the less-than-human? In any case, this passage may illustrate just how impossible it is to stay out of something like onto-theology.

cosmos as evil or at least as not good. Theologically this challenges the goodness of the Creator and in addition raises the philosophical problem of why or how we have bodies in the first place.

In response we must recognize some continuity, some analogy between levels where essential difference is balanced by essential similarity. Nature, for example, is only caricatured, not essentially characterized, by ascriptions of selfishness. Of course everything presses for its own being, a condition without which the ranges of sacrifice, as of mothers for their young, could never be expressed, since it presupposes the will to live of the young. Yet this self-surpassing is just as real, just as much a matter of being, as any press toward survival. And human self-gift must also presuppose a fundamental level of self-desirability, since it makes no sense if the other does not value the very being I support with my gift.³⁴ What is more, at the human level where we begin to make distinctions between ego and a higher self, self-gift contributes to the higher self-realization. In God, finally, the convergence of self-desirability and self-abandon finds realization in the infinitely adorable Trinity.

4. Love Ethics and the Cross

In Levinas a very “Old Testament” perspective leads to what Christians might be tempted to think of as a very “New Testament” ethic. Yet a central part of the message of the New Testament is the clarification of the old Law as love of God and love of neighbor. What is clear is that Levinas’ ethics is not Greek. Of course, if Greek justice is giving what is due, it could be argued that radical service of the other is precisely justice, and sometimes Levinas uses this word. Yet presumably because justice carries connotations of equilibrium and measured allocation, Levinas ultimately prefers to use the word justice only for what comes next, after this radical confrontation with the other is readjusted through the ever-insistent presence of a third party.³⁵ Do we call the prior relationship “love” then? Levinas sometimes does,

³⁴Unless, of course, we refuse to talk about the being of the other. Levinas tries to stay on this side of such an erosion of the asymmetry of fundamental response, but one of the main contentions of this paper is that we cannot do that forever.

³⁵*Otherwise than Being* [=OB] 153–162.

but he is careful to avoid the idea of an overflow from a self-assured being. Above all he avoids the idea of a specially graced elevation above a perfectly good but less demanding natural level, corresponding to Aristotle's rational man. In Christian terms there is according to Levinas' philosophy no ethics of the "natural man"—the only ethics is the radical ethics of the Good Samaritan.

Levinas points Christians to the ethics of Matthew's Gospel, where the face of the divine master cannot be distinguished from that of the human beggar, and glory and poverty cannot be disentangled. In a rather astonishing lecture undertaken at the invitation of Christian thinkers, Levinas offers a philosophical evaluation and appropriation of a Christian theological teaching, saying that Christians possess a matchless symbol in the God-man on the cross (distinguishable from the *dogma* of the Incarnation). His rationale here will especially interest readers of *Fides et Ratio*. Referring to Christ's divine condescension and expiatory passion, he says:

These ideas, at first blush theological, overturn the categories of our representation. So I want to ask myself to what extent these ideas, which have unconditional value for the Christian faith, have philosophical value, and to what extent they can appear in phenomenology. True, it is a phenomenology that is already the beneficiary of Judeo-Christian wisdom. That is no doubt the case—but consciousness does not assimilate everything in the various wisdoms. It supplies phenomenology only with what has been able to nourish it. Hence I ask myself to what extent the new categories we have just described are philosophical. I am certain that this extent will be judged insufficient by the believing Christian. But it may not be a waste of time to show the points beyond which nothing can replace religion.³⁶

Levinas then goes on to explain how the philosophical notion of divine transcendence, as developed within Western theism, proves inadequate to the needs of religion: the Greek gods are close, but not, ultimately, divine. The god of the philosophers must remain remote and unmoved at the human spectacle, though the philosophers can offer man a pale participation in this unperturbed dimension. But every philosophical attempt to draw the absolute and the created into

³⁶“A Man-God?” *EN*, 54.

closer relation falls into pantheism, into immanence without transcendence.

Now according to Levinas finite being, the only being we know directly, manifests everywhere a tendency to self-affirmation, self-realization, in fact, the will to power.³⁷ Transcendence, then, to be truly transcendent, must be really *different* from all this, *other*. Then it would make a kind of sense for the transcendent, if it is to reveal itself to us, to identify not with the power and self-affirmation of being but with the lowliest and poorest, with that which abandons and is abandoned by the powerful press of “healthy” being. The divine therefore reveals itself as identified with the stranger, the destitute neighbor.

At the same time, that identification must not be like a mask that can be easily taken off to reveal the power and the glory just under the surface. That would be, to the confident “aha” of the revelation’s recipient, a betrayal, a declaration that the whole show was a comedy after all. Instead there must be a play of approach and concealment, in which we are left with only an ambiguous trace. This is in fact what we have.³⁸

The play of manifestation and hiddenness brings with it a corollary. Doubt and faith coexist, necessarily.

The ambiguity of transcendence—and consequently the alternation of the soul moving from atheism to belief and from belief to atheism . . . is not the feeble faith surviving the death of God, but the original mode of the presence of God
...³⁹

As God, the Man-God hides under the visage of the neighbor, the destitute, the hungry. As man, he expiates. This expiation or substitution is not, or not first, to be understood juridically or retributively. Deeper than justice, it has to do with the very structure

³⁷*EN*, Preface, xi-xii.

³⁸The extent to which his essay represents also a critique of Christianity should not be overlooked. Levinas hints that Christianity with its concrete resurrected and glorified Christ idolatrously relaxes the tension necessary for the ambiguous revelation of the Transcendent. A Christian response to this charge might rely on the intrinsic ambiguity of the Resurrection and the Eucharistic hiddenness of Christ till the end of time.

³⁹“A Man-god?” in *EN*, 56.

of embodiment. It is in fact an anthropological universal, according to Levinas, for the following reason.

If the incarnate self, as opposed to the ego, is already in fission, “out there,” exposed and captive to the other, it is characterized by a passivity deeper than all potentiality. Its “incarnation is already its expulsion into itself, exposure to offense, to accusation, to grief.” But is there not a limit set by self-identity, a “final resistance that even matter opposes to its form”? Levinas answers that the passivity of the self is not matter, but consists instead in a kind of inversion of identity. But what is this inversion?

If such a desertion of identity, such a reversal is possible without turning into alienation pure and simple, what else can it be if not responsibility for others, for what others do, even to the point of being made responsible for the very persecution it undergoes.⁴⁰

Levinas thus suggests, in the name of the post-modern loosening up of the identity of the self,⁴¹ that the theological concept of substitution is not as strange as it might sound. For the theology of the *analogia entis*, this perspective suggests that *atonement is not a dogmatic puzzle foreign to philosophy but an anthropological archetype of which the death of the God-man is the prototype.*

All this of course smacks of the “participation” Levinas wants to avoid. For him, the symbol of the cross speaks of two matters, as we have said. As God, Christ signifies God’s hiddenness under the form of the broken and helpless. As man, it symbolizes the wounded neighbor, but also my possibility of expiating for another. The Christian of course wants to unite the two natures in one person and Levinas does not. We would have to leave it at that, were it not for the philosophical problem inherent in the strict Levinasian asymmetry and implied in the statement that no one can expiate for me. What Levinas means is that from the standpoint prior to all bird’s eye views I cannot judge another nor contemplate his gift to me—there is no time. It is a matter of “bearing the burden of the misery and failure of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me,” so that “to

⁴⁰Ibid., 59.

⁴¹*EN*, 59: “Modern antihumanism, denying the primacy of the person . . . may have left a place for subjectivity as substitution.”

be a “self” is always to have one degree of responsibility more.”⁴² Yet this means I really *cannot see* the other. But then, we might object, this blindness would seem to render hopeless the project of serving him or her. It seems impossible to resolve this paradox unless I allow the objective vision of the others within the whole to seep into my more primordial response to the other, granting the shift of perspectives implied. But if we allow these perspectives to be somewhat porous to each other, it is fair to allow that another can expiate for me and that I can be thankful for it, and that this gratitude can and must inform my action. This does not get us all the way to the Incarnation, but it does make expiation something that goes on *in being*, since we can, so to speak, contemplate it in the third person.

5. Mission

The next morning he left the town and set out into the open country. The crowds went in search of him, and when they found him they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said to them, “To other towns I must announce the good news of the reign of God, because that is why I was sent.” (Lk 4:42–43)

Radicalizing ethics in the manner of Levinas brings with it a great problem. How do we avoid the guilt of infinite responsibility? If the face of each other represents a call to serve unreservedly, how can anyone bear this truth? Derrida expresses it dramatically:

Let us not look for examples, there would be too many of them, at every step we took. By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time, my attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher, writing and speaking . . . I am perhaps fulfilling my duty. But I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligation to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows . . . who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens . . . [and] also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my son, each of whom is the

⁴²“Substitution,” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, [= BPW] ed. Peperzak, Critchley, Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1996), 91.

only son I sacrifice to the other, every one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day.⁴³

One way to deal with the problem is to turn away from the whole issue, capitulating to life's absurdity; inescapable moral obligation represents an infinite impossibility. Levinas offers two directions leading away from this distress and this paralysis. One is the transmutation of the intense and infinite charity owed to the face-to-face other into the milder and measured justice necessary on the occasion of a third party's entrance.

From the start, the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him. That is the responsibility for my neighbor, which is, no doubt, the harsh name for what we call love of one's neighbor . . . it applies to the first comer. If he were my only interlocutor I would have had nothing but obligations! But . . . there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow. Hence, it is important to me to know which of the two takes precedence. Is the one not the persecutor of the other? Thus justice, here, takes precedence over the taking upon oneself of the fate of the other.⁴⁴

We can give ourselves to justice in this sense, and in this spirit, to its works and to its theory, and even to philosophy, which is but the thematization of a grand order. But this does not completely resolve the problem—the face of the other is always there, not just as a residual problem but as the continual undergirding of the whole work of justice. Levinas gives another response to an interviewer's question as to whether, since the ethical subject is responsible to everyone for everything, the situation doesn't become intolerable.

I don't know if this situation is intolerable. It is not what you would call agreeable, surely: it is not pleasant, but it is the good. What is very important—and I can maintain this without being a saint myself, and I don't present myself as a saint—is to be able to say that the man who is truly a man, in

⁴³Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 59.

⁴⁴"Philosophy, Justice, and Love" in *EN*, 103–4.

the European sense of the word—descended from the Greeks and the Bible—is the man who understands holiness as the ultimate value, as an unassailable value. Of course it is very difficult to preach this; it is not very popular to preach and it even makes advanced society laugh.⁴⁵

Elsewhere he says, “I leave the whole consoling side of this ethics to religion.”⁴⁶

Now certainly part of the religious consolation must include the specification of spheres of duty within the law, Torah itself seen as the ordering corresponding to justice as a function of the third party. However, since responsibility for each and every other does not disappear, but hums under the busy attention to duties, the question who is my neighbor threatens always to break out. As one writer puts it, “[t]he only thing that may save us from this danger [of slow exhaustion turning into indifference]—and Levinas himself seems not to have mentioned it—is the specific concretion of each call to responsibility.”⁴⁷

Now Levinas certainly does underscore the uniqueness of the individual; I am singled out by the appeal of the other here and now. Accompanying my sense of uniqueness in the face of the other’s mute appeal is a sense of chosenness. He talks of a “responsibility which is also an election”⁴⁸ and he writes:

I substitute myself for every man and no one can substitute for me, and in that sense I am chosen . . . I have always thought that election is definitely not a privilege: it is the fundamental characteristic of the human person as morally responsible.⁴⁹

Yet the question of how, transcending generalized duty in a manner corresponding to the radical service of the other, I am to

⁴⁵“Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other” in *EN*, 203.

⁴⁶“Philosophy, Justice, and Love” *EN*, 108.

⁴⁷Jeffrey Bloechl, “Ethics and First Philosophy and Religion,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, ed. Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 145.

⁴⁸“Dying For...,” in *EN*, 211.

⁴⁹“Philosophy, Justice and Love,” in *EN*, 108.

recognize *my sick, my poor*, is still not answered. What appears to be needed here is a theology of personal mission. As Balthasar has indicated, the development of the notion that each individual is called, in Christ, to perform a specific task that only he or she can do, a work so deep and extensive that it can be entered into fully only in eternity, is a primary task for theology in our time.⁵⁰ We can only indicate its importance here, and remark that only the certainty that one is on one's mission could keep one afloat under the intensity of what "keeping the law" means for Levinas.⁵¹

It is important for Christian understanding that Levinas understands the law as radically as he does. It has never meant merely a net of ritual precepts, which in themselves can be a holy and life-affirming dance, as practiced by the Hasidim. Torah in its adequate understanding, as Jesus taught and contemporary teachers knew, always demanded unlimited service on behalf of the stranger become neighbor.⁵² However, Christianity has always taught that while John the Baptist is the greatest born of woman, the least in the kingdom is greater than he, and that the law in the final analysis condemns and kills. The only escape from the condemnation of an impossible service is participation in the very divine nature that alone can render that service, which participation in turn demands an analogy of being. Now Judaism in its actual practice may know this elevation without, from the Christian point of view, knowing clearly its source. Granting this anticipation, Levinas presents a philosophy that can sustain only a partial Judaism, yet he does an inestimable service in stripping the philosophical picture down to its ethical and pre-theoretical base, for he reveals the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. In this sense the Law may be, must be, transcended by grace, but it is never, in its essence, simply canceled.

6. *The Philosophy and Theology of Being*

⁵⁰Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama. V. The Last Act* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 392–394.

⁵¹How far it would be possible to hold such a notion without the concept of inclusion *in Christo* will be an interesting question for Jewish-Christian dialogue. See Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, I, 645.

⁵²See, for instance, "Enigma and Phenomenon," in *BPW*, 76.

Levinas shares with Heidegger the claim that a focus on being as *presence* has dominated Western philosophy, that such a philosophy harbors a contraction of the field of our knowing to the conditions of the subject, and that this motif achieved its latest and most radical form in Husserl's phenomenology. Heidegger's response was ontological in the broadest sense: to cultivate a notion of being transcending presence and the visual metaphor. Levinas takes an alternate route that may be labeled ethical. According to this alternative it must be allowed that being is intrinsically related to presence, or at least to a totalizing subject. The new thinking demanded as the price of this insight takes shape as an inquiry, "beyond being," into response to the O/other in the form of ethical awakening. Levinas then works out the nature of this responsibility in terms of its absolute priority, its intimations of Transcendence and its demand of unlimited service in obedience to the majesty and the dereliction of the other. Philosophy becomes the articulation of absolute ethical/religious sensitivity. It moves in a dimension "otherwise than being."

Along the way, as I have been urging, Levinas contributes insights, refinements, namings of great value to the philosophy of the *analogia entis*. His profound sense of the peculiarity of Glory as the milieu of sacrifice and substitution in the service of the O/other may be integrated into a theology which makes the analogy (essential likeness and essential difference) between beauty and Glory a *prima via* in the mind's journey to God. His understanding of the "denucleated" self may serve a more ontologically confident philosophy's elaboration of the notion of the person away from one-sidedly Aristotelian substance toward an imaging of the Trinitarian persons. His radical reading of ethical responsibility can be integrated with a theological concretization in terms of individual mission undergirded by a philosophical sense of the possibility of participation in higher orders of being. He contributes to a renewed appreciation of the presence of God in the face of the other. And he develops a notion of desire as distinct from need which can be integrated into the *analogia entis'* hierarchy of being—the higher we go the more desire escapes need into integral complementarity and creativity, until in the Divine, *mutatis mutandis*, complementarity and creativity find their maximal expression.

Is this to betray Levinas? I think not, but only because any equivocal thought already contains the seeds of enlargement. Levinas leaves ambiguous his answer to the question of whether there is any

place for the map of being we try to achieve in metaphysics. On the one hand, theoretical thought, including “philosophy,” arises inevitably in the same way that justice does, and for the same reason.⁵³ The entrance of a third party, which is not accidental but implicit in the very relation to the single other, relaxes the pressure of the face-to-face only to call for a no less rigorous work of ordering. Just so, within the saying there is already the said as its content, pressing forward into the light of objectivization and being, the beginning of ontology. The philosophical map, then, Levinas’ as well as any one else’s, sacrifices the anarchic milieu of the O/other for a dimmer truth based on an assembling of the temporally separated into a present.⁵⁴ Though this drift is inevitable, Levinas chooses to stay outside, so to speak, in the thin air of the “otherwise than being,” working thereby to isolate and promote the ethical. However, this attempt brings with it its own problems, not the least of which is the need to avoid using the verb “to be” while telling us how it is.⁵⁵ His own intransigence in this prophetic stance does not excuse us from the work of integrating his message into a larger tissue of understanding.

This will mean accepting some form of the *analogia entis*, recognizing at a new pitch the radical difference of the being of transcendence from what seems to come to mind when we say “is.”⁵⁶ Thinking in this way, and knowing the inevitable limitations of the “straw” we are building with, we will recognize how the two standpoints Levinas has rent asunder in fact bleed into each other. To put it in Levinasian terms, the intrinsic ordination of the saying to the said will mean that the former has to continually give over to the latter, while continually informing and guiding it.

Even if it is called to thought by justice, [philosophy] still synchronizes in the said the diachrony of the difference between the one and the other, and remains the servant of the saying that signifies the difference between the one and the other as the one for the other, as non-indifference to the

⁵³OB 158.

⁵⁴Levinas’ indebtedness to Bergson is evident here.

⁵⁵OB, Translator’s Introduction, xlv.

⁵⁶For instance, we may want to abandon all talk of an “eternal present.” Heidegger’s “ontological difference” plays an important part in this discussion.

other. Philosophy is the wisdom of love at the service of love.⁵⁷

What is more, sensitivity to the saying and its context will affect the very content of the said. While it is true that as soon as there is any content held between the one and the other in the saying it will have to do with being, *the legitimated discourse about being will continually attempt to capture the elusive relational dimensions of the saying*. As a result, our philosophy and theology may look more like the traditional ontological article than anything Levinas had a taste for, yet it will look different in a number of salient ways.

First, having been taught once again to distinguish between the moon and finger pointing at the moon, we will be more sensitive to the relativity, and thus the complementary incommensurability, of our philosophical “systems.” For the Catholic thinker, dogma’s transcendence comes into view at this point. Theology however will not dispense with “being” language, since it needs it in order to stay above, rather than sink below, the philosophical level.⁵⁸ Therefore theology, unlike the dogma it serves, will participate in the irreducible plurality of philosophical perspectives. “Truth is symphonic.”

Secondly, philosophy and theology will be distinguished relatively. More precisely, realms of reason and of faith will differ according to a historically shifting pattern. Levinas himself realized this more and more profoundly as his philosophy more and more admitted revelation-based concepts, and his mature view finds expression in the quote above—phenomenology makes its own what revelation has unveiled. *Fides et Ratio* makes the same point in the observation that the notion of “person,” which is now common property, makes its entrance into Western discourse through the pressure of theological distinction.⁵⁹ The point is that an abstract reason, like an abstract “seeing,” operates only in relation to a prior “naming” sedimented in language. The intellectual work of naming, in turn, takes place in the context of human response to revelation as much as in any other.

Thirdly, philosophy and theology will limit more precisely the application of the law of non-contradiction, a movement begun by

⁵⁷ *OB*, 162.

⁵⁸ Otherwise it becomes positivistic or mythological.

⁵⁹ *Fides et Ratio*, 76.

Aristotle when he pointed out that being has more than one (analogically related) meaning. They will do this not in order to be able to say just anything at all, but in order to submit more rigorously to the demands of phenomenological disclosure and dogmatic truth. The problem has already begun to emerge in the above pages. What is needed is a way to speak of being from the height of Trinitarian *perichoresis* as that is reflected in all of creation via the *analogia entis*. Everything that is, in its identity and its relationality, is “in” everything else. In explaining how the self is only itself when it leaves itself, Levinas is teaching us to transcend the either/or of the logic of discrete things when we are talking about the person.⁶⁰

These points obviously require much greater development. That is true *a fortiori* of the final point which can only be adumbrated here but which is so essential to Levinas’ philosophical project.⁶¹ According to Levinas, as we have noted above, theoretical thought, including classical metaphysics and contemporary phenomenology, distorts its object through an inescapable “presencing,” in which time is flattened to a visually modeled synchrony. Insofar as we recognize the need to overcome this onto-theological naiveté, our philosophy of being, accomplished in fear and trembling, will have to follow Heidegger’s lead and re-open the question of the relationship between being and time. □

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⁶⁰The work of Pavel Florensky is particularly important here. See his discussion of the principle of identity, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, 14–36.

⁶¹In answer to a question on his “major preoccupation today” Levinas replied, “The essential theme of my research is the deformalization of the notion of time” (“The Other, Utopia, and Justice,” in *EN*, 232).