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12 Emmanuel Levinas: Judaism and the Primacy of the Ethical

RICHARD A. COHEN

God tells us to be holy, not meaning that we ought to imitate Him, but that we ought to strive to approximate to the unattainable ideal of holiness.

Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (1775–1781)

To every judge who judges truly, even for an hour, the Scripture reckons it as if he had been a partner with God in the work of creation.

B. Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 10a.

LEVINAS' ITINERARY

Emmanuel Levinas was born on January 12, 1906,¹ in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas, known as “Kovno” to both Poles and Jews. In 1923, at the age of sixteen, Levinas left Kovno to study philosophy at the University of Strasbourg in France. During the 1928–29 academic year, he studied in Freiburg under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. In 1930, he moved to Paris; married Raisa Levy, who as a child lived on the same block in Kovno as Levinas; became a French citizen; found employment at the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*; published academic articles on Husserlian phenomenology, his Strasbourg thesis, the prize-winning book *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (1930), and short pieces in Jewish journals on Jewish topics; and otherwise entered into the vibrant intellectual life of Paris. Conscripted into the French army in 1939, Levinas spent the war years in a German prisoner-of-war camp. After the war, he became Director of the *École Normale Israélite Orientale*, and in 1947 published his first two original philosophical books: *Time and the Other*² and *Existence and Existents*.³ After the war, Levinas also began his Talmudic studies under the hidden Talmudic master known only as “Monsieur Shoshoni” or “Professor Shoshoni,” who was also at the same time teaching Elie Wiesel, amongst others.⁴ In 1959, Levinas delivered the first of his many “Talmudic Readings”

at the annual colloquia of French Jewish Intellectuals, a group that had been formed two years earlier.

In 1961, Levinas published his magnum opus, an ethics, *Totality and Infinity*,⁵ which served as his thesis for the French Doctorate in Letters. With the support of Jean Wahl, Levinas obtained his first academic post at the University of Poitiers in 1963. In 1967, he moved to the University of Paris-Nanterre, to join Paul Ricoeur there; and finally, from 1973 to his retirement in 1976, Levinas finished his academic career at the University of Paris-Sorbonne where, as an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, he taught courses until 1979.

In 1974, Levinas published his second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.⁶ In addition to the four philosophical books named earlier, from the 1930s to the 1990s Levinas published many articles both in philosophy and Judaism, almost all of which have by now been collected into various volumes, most of them assembled and prefaced by Levinas, but some also edited by others and published posthumously.

Levinas died at the age of eighty-nine on December 25, 1995 (the eighth day of Chanukah), after a few debilitating years suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

The central message of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy is in fact quite simple, well-known, and ancient, though at the same time notoriously difficult in execution: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Nevertheless, despite the straightforwardness and the near-universal consent to this essential moral teaching, the language Levinas utilizes to set his philosophy in motion and the context to which his philosophy responds, are rather complex and at least initially quite daunting. Many neophyte readers of Levinas complain of the density of his texts, and it is true that Levinas makes little concession to mass opinion or taste. He is writing on the basis of the entirety of Western civilization, from Athens to Jerusalem to Rome, and writing with all of its greatest contributors and interlocutors in mind.

Levinas's thought is not only engaged in philosophy and committed to modernity, fully open to the discoveries of the modern sciences and the phenomenological extensions of science; it is also faithful to a long tradition of Jewish monotheist spirituality and wisdom. Levinas is at once and without compromise both a philosopher and a Jewish thinker. "There is," he once said in an interview, "a communication between faith and philosophy and not the notorious conflict."⁷ In the following, we shall have to see more precisely how Levinas harmonizes, or rather

begins in the continuity of, the thought of Judaism and philosophy, but we can say right away that because he avoids the tempting simplicity of certain all too obvious dichotomies, entrance into his thought is for this reason, too, made more difficult.

It is time to enter into Levinas's thought, which we will do by first grasping the meaning of *monotheism*. Judaism, whatever its specific character, is a monotheism. What then is the essence of monotheism? Furthermore, how does *modernity*, the shift from the ancient and medieval standards of intellection, permanence, and eternity, to those of will, change, and time, mark a difference for monotheism? How is the ethical metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas to be thought in relation to monotheism in general, to the ethical monotheism of Judaism in particular, and, with regard to both, to the intellectual and spiritual shift from a classical to a modern sensibility? These are the questions that guide this chapter.

Levinas's thought is at once philosophical and Jewish, and Judaism is a monotheist religion. "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" – the God of the Jewish people, of Judaism – is a monotheistic God. Nevertheless, beyond Bible stories, rituals, dietary restrictions, holy places and times, beyond everything that constitutes the particularities of the particular monotheist religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), to *comprehend* monotheism is impossible because monotheism, by its very nature, *exceeds* human understanding. But how exactly does *monotheism* exceed human understanding? Let me explore this question by examining what I call the "paradox of monotheism."

THE PARADOX OF MONOTHEISM

The paradox unravels in three steps. All three are necessary, and all three together lie at the core of all monotheist religions. First, the monotheistic God is *perfect* – by definition. It is the basic irrevocable premise of monotheism. If one worships an imperfect God, one is not worshipping the God of monotheism. Moreover, the perfection of God's perfection is absolute. No attributes, qualities, or adjectives can be applied to God's perfection insofar as they all are taken from *our* finite world and can therefore only be applied to God by analogy or negation. God's absolute perfection, what Levinas, citing from Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn's *Nefesh HaChayim* (*The Soul of Life*), refers to as "God on his own side,"⁸ is perfection without duality, multiplicity or contrast. Here the "oneness" (*echud*) of God is not numerical, one among other ones,

but unique, incomparable. Levinas invokes a phrase from *Deuteronomy* 4:39: "there is nothing outside him."⁹ Here is God prior to or without Creation. It is what kabbalists have called *ayin*, literally "nothingness," or "pure spirituality" (if we leave the term "spirit" undefined and indeterminate), in contrast to *yesh*, "existence" or "palpable reality," literally "there is."

Second, the perfect God of monotheism¹⁰ creates an imperfect universe. The process of creation – which is one of the central topics of the Kabbalah, or so, at least, are the opening verses of *Genesis* – is a mystery unto itself. What is important for the paradox, however, is the imperfection of creation (possible, so say certain kabbalists, only through the "withdrawal" of God, whatever this means). It includes, in some sense, ignorance as well as knowledge, evil as well as good, ignoble feelings as well as noble feelings, the profane as well as the holy. Here, then, in "this world," instead of a unique and absolutely perfect One with no other, there is *hierarchy*, the above and the below, the better and the worse. In contrast to absolute perfection, here one has "God on our side," to again invoke the language Levinas takes from Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn's master work. In Judaism, the term "holy" (*kadosh*), according to the classic interpretation given by Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), refers to "separation": of the holy from the profane, the pure from the impure, the noble from the vulgar. Separation refers, on the one hand, to the fundamental difference between Creator and creation and, on the other hand, to the differences within creation, between beings. "Before you could feast your eyes" directly on God, the rabbis have taught in the Midrash, "you fell to earth."¹¹

Regarding the differences within and between the three great monotheistic religions, each determines in what primary sense creation is a diminution, an imperfection of God's original perfection. Each answers the question about the meaning and nature of creation in relation to God. What follows from the answers to this basic question is the very legitimacy and the hierarchy of the religiously sanctioned countermeasures – such as wisdom, faith, prayer, charity, repentance, good works, sacrament, sentiment, righteousness, asceticism, and so on – of which creatures are thought to be capable in order to rectify the imperfection of creation. That is to say, determining the meaning of creation's imperfection specifies the meaning and function of the actual monotheistic religion, Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

So, step one: the perfection of God. Step two: the imperfection of creation.

Third, however, because God is perfect, everything that follows from God is also perfect, completely perfect like its source – including creation! Only the perfect follows from perfection, otherwise perfection would not be perfection. Because all is perfect, nothing is required, no countermeasures are called for, and no legitimation or rectification is needed. From the point of view of this third element, even for a creature to be grateful for perfection is essentially an ungrateful attitude, since grateful or not, all remains perfect. Nothing is required. Perfection cannot require anything without diminishing itself. And perfection, because it is perfection, is undiminished. Here, then, latent in this third element, *taken by itself*, lies the seduction of *nihilism*, a *holy nihilism*, the temptation of *excess*, let us call it, in contrast to *surplus*. “The spiritualism beyond all difference that would come from the creature,” Levinas has written of this excess originating in creation, “means, for man, the indifference of nihilism. All is equal in the omnipresence of God. All is divine. All is permitted.”¹² But so too nothing is permitted because nothing is forbidden . . . whatever is, is – without hierarchy, without orientation, without motivation. *Nihil obstat* [nothing stands in the way], but also *nil admirari* [to admire nothing]. But no less, or, more accurately from the monotheistic perspective, far more: this perfection is nothing less than the pure splendorous glory of God’s perfect holiness. All is God and God is all.

The paradox of monotheism derives from the simultaneous truth of all three elements: God is perfect, and creation is at once both imperfect and completely perfect.¹³ It is precisely *the surplus opened up by this paradox that lies at the root of all monotheism*. It is upon this paradox (metaphorically called a “foundation stone” or “rock”) *and because of this paradox* that actual monotheistic *religions* – not “religion in general” but Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are built, and which they reflect in all their concrete particularity from liturgy to daily activity to theology. It is precisely *this paradox* that cannot be grasped or known, for it exceeds human understanding. This is the specific incomprehension that lies at the root of monotheism.

THE PARADOX BENEATH OR ABOVE

Like any paradox, the paradox of monotheism is fundamentally *non-rational*. It oversteps the two constitutional principles of propositional logic – namely, the principles of non-contradiction and excluded middle. According to the strictures of such logic, nothing can be, and no coherent statement can affirm, both “A” and “not A” at the same time.

Everything, in order to be, and in order to be coherently stated, must be either "A" or "not A." In the case of monotheism, however, as we have just seen, these conditions of logic are not only unmet, they *must* be broken. Hence monotheism "is" *beyond* the logic of being and the "sense" it makes (if it makes sense at all) is *beyond* the logic of rationality. The very language of *being*, as understood by philosophers, is thus inadequate to the paradox of monotheism. Being adheres to itself, subsists in itself, develops from itself, while the God of monotheism is both being (God as the im-perfection of creation) and beyond being (God prior to or without creation) at once – "otherwise than being," to use Levinas's formula. One cannot "think," "feel," or "obey" the God of monotheism without invoking an absolute *transcendence* – God's perfection, with or without the world – whose "content" overflows its "container," whether the latter, the container, is conceived as thought, felt as emotion, or enacted via action. It is not by accident, then, but by necessity that paradox lies at the core of monotheistic religion.

This otherwise-than-rationality does not mean, however, that monotheism is *irrational*. Indeed, the key to the *sense* of monotheism – whether in thought, feeling or action, or somehow otherwise – depends on seeing as precisely as possible how the monotheist religions concretely *express* the extra-logical "relation" between God and creation. While a genuinely atheist nihilism might claim that "because there is no God, everything is permitted," it is nonetheless never the case that for monotheistic religion, everything is permitted. And everything is not permitted precisely *because* there is God. The entire effort of the monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – is to highlight the significance of, without utterly confining, what cannot be contained, to reveal without reducing that which ruptures manifestation. Revelation is thus never *only* a particular "content" – for instance, the specific texts, rituals, declarations, services, saints and sages revered by the three monotheisms. Revelation is also closer to the true essence of monotheistic religion, a *more* in the *less* – the *surplus* of the paradox. It is often pointed out that a sacred text, in contrast to a profane text, is inexhaustible, indeed infinite. This does not mean that it has one "literal" meaning, allegedly God's meaning. Rather this implies that the sacred text has an infinite number of readings, equal only to the infinity, the perfection of the God whose Will it is said to reveal. To determine and make concrete the explosive *sense* of the surplus of the paradox of monotheism, whether primarily it is love, compassion, intellection, command, grace, action, meditation, or something else – this is the task of religion, of the concrete religions, in contrast to philosophy.

There have been two broad and fundamentally opposed responses to the paradox of religion. For those figures such as Spinoza and Western philosophers generally, those who adhere consistently to the logic of rationality, the paradox indicates that monotheistic religious mentality is *less* than rational, is *sub-rational*. The real, as Parmenides first insisted and as Hegel later elaborated, conforms to the rational: "The real is rational and the rational is real." The actuality of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheistic beliefs and practices, based as they are in paradox, would thus be explained away as the psychological-sociological products of ignorance, primitivism, pathology, herd instinct, grand politics, mass delusion, class consciousness, and the like. For all forms of rationalism, the non-rationality of monotheism is merely sub-rational, merely the symptom of a deeper unacknowledged failure.

In contrast, for those persons who adhere to monotheism, the non-rationality of the paradox indicates that religious mentality is *more* than rational, is *supra-rational*. All that is not rational is not therefore illusory, superstitious, mere appearance. Unlike the "either/or" dualism of the rationalist, the monotheist makes a tri-part distinction: irrationality, which one opposes; rationality, which one exceeds; and religion, to which one adheres. *Religion is the making sense of paradox*. The monotheistic religions account for their superior significance as the gift of divine revelation, holy spirit, prophetic inspiration, celestial grace, or other-like elevated sources. The critical objections of the rationalists are met by characterizing rationality, contrary to its own self-serving claims, as narrow, blind to the transcendence of the divine. The basic effort of monotheistic religions is to point towards and approach a "dimension" (what *is* the proper way to speak of this? – *that* is the question) of the *holy* unknown to and unattainable by rationality alone.

REFERENCE, INTENTIONALITY, AND CONSCIENCE

It has often been said that between science and religion there can be no middle ground or term, and hence only conflict without quarter, because they are mutually exclusive. One side exalts the paradox at the expense of rationality, while the other exalts rationality at the expense of the paradox.¹⁴ Leo Strauss, who has done much to propagate this raw dichotomy, has also shown that when it is posed in such an opposition, neither side can convince the other of its errors because each is based on different grounds entirely.¹⁵ But we must take more seriously the notion that science and religion are not mirror images of one another: neither accepts the other's contextualization. In contrast to the

distinction between the rational and the irrational recognized by rationality, religion would offer a third alternative, one based on a positive appreciation of the paradox of monotheism. "This human impossibility of conceiving the Infinite," Levinas writes, "is also a new possibility of signifying."¹⁶

We know that and how rationality rejects religion as a species of the *sub-rational*. The intelligibility of religious persons would be rejected for being stubborn, infantile, deluded, and the like. But our question and Levinas's is neither how rationality rejects religion nor how religion rejects rationality. Rather, the question is how monotheism admits its fundamental paradox without producing the chaos of irrationality. The real may not be rational, but for all that it is not irrational. The answer of religion is that the *sense* of the paradox finds expression in the *symbol*, not the symbol as a corruption of thought, nor the symbol as a mystification of matter, but rather the symbol as the unstable unity – the "singularity," to use the current term – of the proximate and the distant, being and the otherwise than being. Oriented upward, diagonally, it functions as a pointing, a disruption, a challenge. The great originality of Levinas is to argue that the *symbol* – the *sense* of monotheism as a surplus – is at bottom neither an ontological-epistemological structure nor an aesthetic structure, but an ethical one. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), he had already written: "God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men."¹⁷ and: "Everything that cannot be brought back to [*se ramener à*] an [ethical] inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion."¹⁸

The problem, then, is one of establishing a level of sense independent of the rationalist dyadic worldview, and yet generative of rationality. It is a question, beyond the paradox of religion, that has troubled, and whose effort to answer it, has determined most of modern thought. In general, these various "middle term" alternatives to sense and nonsense have relied on what we can call an *aesthetic ontology* – that is to say, an attentiveness to the manifestation of manifestation in its own right taken as a new form of epistemology. One sees this quite clearly in the poetry of Heidegger's "ontological difference," where the source of the significance of beings is not their rational or irrational inter-relations, whether scientific or historical, but their upsurge from the opening of an openness, a "giving" (which is simultaneously a withdrawal) that is the very "be-ing" (verb) of their being. Such would be the pre-rational, but not irrational, structure of the revelation of being. Until Levinas, however, no one had thought this new sense of origination in terms of

ethics, and even less had it been thought in terms of an ethics based in inter-subjectivity. Furthermore, and this is most important, Levinas thinks ethics *ethically*. That is to say, Levinas thinks ethics as the “meta-physics” of the paradox of monotheism, such that its non-coincidence concretely “is” the self morally “put into question” by the other person, in contrast to all the philosophical accounts, which remain based in one form or another of self-positing, self-consciousness, or aesthetic upsurge.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SIGNIFYING

One of the best avenues into Levinas’s thought is to follow his account of the intimate link between the semantic and communicative functions of language. Levinas’s careful study of signification led him to discover a dimension of meaning whose true significance was overlooked by the “intentional” or “noetic-noematic” analyses of meaning laid out by his teacher Husserl as well as by the “revelatory” hermeneutics of Heidegger.

We must remember, first, that Husserl’s great discovery was a turn to consciousness as the source of meaning – as the source of meaning for the true, that is to say, for *science*, the “hard” objective sciences. Hitherto, natural science, in contrast to philosophical idealism, had wrested truth out of meaning by correlating signs to their referents. This was its realism, based on a simple correspondence model of truth. Here is the model:

Correspondence Theory of Truth

Sign/symbol → refers to – Signified/thing itself

What Husserl saw was that a complete understanding of meaning would also require an elucidation of the production of signs by consciousness, a turn to “meaning-bestowing” or constitutive acts. Thus Husserl supplemented the realist sign-referent structure with its “origin” in the signifying acts of consciousness. Here is the model:

Intentional (or “Transcendental”) Analysis of Signification

Signifier/consciousness ⇒ (Sign/symbol → refers to – Signified/thing itself)

Of course this “transcendental” approach opened the door not only to a clarification of the origin in consciousness of scientific or

representational significations, but also to a clarification of the origin in consciousness, broadly interpreted as “intentional” meaning-bestowal, of many more regions of meaning besides those of representational consciousness, such as the significations opened up by perceptual, imaginative, practical, and emotive signifying. Heidegger, for instance, early in *Being and Time* (1927), analyzed the ground of theoretical significations in instrumental significations, in the “worldliness” of the subject’s primordial “being-in-the-world.”¹⁹

What Levinas saw, however, was that in his legitimate concern to provide a broader ground for signification by turning to consciousness, Husserl still favored a representational model of meaning, a model that he had unwittingly borrowed from the objective sciences he aimed to supplement. What struck Levinas’s attention, beyond Husserl’s broader signifying-sign-signified structure (“intentional” consciousness), was the *communicative* dimension of meaning. Not only is realist meaning, the sign-signified correlation, intended or meant through an act of consciousness; meaning is also that which is said *by* someone *to* someone – it has an *accusative* dimension.²⁰ There is not only what is *said*, even adding that what is said is produced by consciousness and thus has an “intentional” structure, there is also the *saying* of the *said to someone*. As I have done before, I will write “Here is the model,” but in a moment we shall see why there can be no model, no outside perspective with which to thematize what it is that Levinas is pointing to in highlighting the accusative dimension of signification. Here is the model:

Inter-Subjective Event of Meaning

Someone/Other

(Sign/symbol → refers to – signified/thing itself) – to



Signifier/Subject

What Levinas saw was not only that the *accusative* dimension of meaning could not be recuperated within the signifying-sign-signified structure of intentionality that Husserl had advanced. What he saw, and here lies one aspect of his originality, was that the recognition of the irreducible accusative dimension of signification meant that signification was a function ultimately neither of correspondence with things nor of an intentional origination in consciousness (which, thinking so, led Husserl back to idealism), but rather it is a function of the inter-subjective relation.

But this is not all. Second, and even more significant, is what comes into play with this recognition of the role of inter-subjectivity. It is precisely because the inter-subjective relation is fundamental to signification that it is an error to understand and interpret the inter-subjective relation in terms of signifying structures that are themselves derivative and not constitutive of it. Rather, then, signification must be interpreted based on the structures of inter-subjectivity. And inter-subjectivity, to say it again, cannot be interpreted in terms of signifying-sign-signified – that is to say, in terms of language as a system of signs (coherent, revealed, deferred, or otherwise) or as a product of consciousness. The proper interpretation of inter-subjectivity, the very essence of inter-subjectivity – such is the second aspect of Levinas's claim and his most profound and original insight – is an *ethical* structure: the moral priority of the other person over the self, the self responsible for the other person. The asymmetrical priority of the other person, the other as infinite moral obligation and the self as moral responsibility in the face of (“accused” by) the other's transcendence – this ethical orientation of the “I” and “You” is what cannot be contained within the signifier-sign-signified structure of language. It is what cannot be “viewed from the outside,” cannot be represented, but nevertheless makes language significant, meaningful, important in the first place.

Unlike for the later structuralists, for Levinas this surplus does not indicate the impact of a larger web of historical-cultural signs. Unlike for the later deconstructionists, for Levinas this surplus does not indicate the impact of a semiotic slippage, which would again occur at the level of signs deferring to signs. Rather, for Levinas, the irrecoverable *accusative* dimension of signification must be “understood” beyond signs, beyond the *said* (*dit*). What it brings to bear is the impact of an inter-subjective or inter-human dimension, a *saying* (*dire*) that is from the first an ethical exigency. The impact of the communicative situation of a self brought in its first person singularity into proximity with another self across discourse cannot properly speaking be “understood,” because as exterior, transcendent, other, it also cannot be captured in a theme or represented. Beyond the structure of signifier-sign-signified, discourse, speaking, expression – what in another context J. L. Austin conceived in terms of “performance” – do not indicate some failure of signifying to be sufficiently precise or the intrusion of larger cultural or semiotic determinations (which would undermine the subject's freedom) relative to the sign. Rather, the necessity of discourse, of communication, is not neutral, and points to an irreducible *priority* deriving from the inter-subjective

relation, a priority that gives meaning to the entire signifying-signified structure without undermining its validity. This *priority* of the inter-subjective dimension can only be accounted for in *ethical* rather than epistemological, ontological, or aesthetic terms. The alterity of the other person to whom one speaks and, even more importantly, the alterity of the other person who speaks and to whom the I responds, even in listening, would have the *moral significance* of an *obligation*. *Responsibility*, then, the responsibility to respond to the other person as other, would be the non-intentional root of the intentional construction of signification. The entirety of Levinas's intellectual career is the effort to articulate as precisely as possible this *overriding social and moral surplus* of meaning and its consequences and ramifications for all the dimensions of human life.

INTER-SUBJECTIVE ETHICS AND MONOTHEISM

Our guiding questions have to do with Levinas and Judaism. Perhaps the connection is now not so difficult to see. The paradox of monotheism can be construed as the irruption of transcendence within immanence, without that transcendence either absorbing immanence into itself or itself being absorbed by immanence. The paradox, in other words, mimics the structure of *saying-said* that for Levinas is the root structure of ethics. But does monotheism only mimic the structure of ethics, or is ethics rather its best articulation, its closest most faithful realization, monotheism's highest and most holy dispensation? Levinas will say yes. "Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision" – at least for a "religion of adults" such as Judaism.²¹ Let us consider the parallels.

Monotheism characterizes transcendence as perfection and immanence as imperfection (and perfection), neither divorcing the two nor identifying them, but holding them in paradoxical relation. What Levinas understood was that the paradox of monotheism could be neither an ontological nor an aesthetic structure, for both of these dimensions of sense, which ultimately reduce away the independence or separation of selfhood, are essentially incapable of maintaining the extraordinary "relation without relation" (*relation sans relation*)²² – transcendence in immanence – characteristic of the monotheistic paradox. Ethics, however, maintains the self in relation to absolute alterity in virtue of responsibilities and obligations. It is the very structure of transcendence in immanence. *Monotheism is an ethical structure*. "Religion," Levinas

writes in *Totality and Infinity*, “where relationship subsists between the same and the other, despite the impossibility of the Whole – the idea of Infinity – is the ultimate structure.”²³ “To know God is to know what must be done.”²⁴

Thus it is not the abstract philosophical omniscience of God, but his concrete personal *benevolence* that is the key to understanding creation. Creation in its relation to God, in the paradoxical conjunction of imperfection and perfection, is constituted by the work of *sanctification as the responsibility of morality* and *redemption as the striving for justice*.²⁵ The paradox of monotheism is ethics as *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world” through a justice tempered by mercy. One could cite many elucidating texts by Levinas to support this claim, and I invite readers to examine the entire subsection entitled “The Metaphysical and the Human,” of Section One of *Totality and Infinity*, from which the following *philosophically* oriented citations are taken.

The proximity of the Other, the proximity of the neighbor, is in being an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence (that is, disengaged from every relation), which expresses itself. . . . God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. . . . The work of justice – the uprightness of the face to face – is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced. . . .

The establishing of this primacy of the ethical, that is, of the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching and justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest (and in particular all those which, in an original way, seem to put us in contact with an impersonal sublime, aesthetic or ontological), is one of the objectives of the present work.²⁶

Morality and justice are not only “like” religion; they are religion. The path to God is not beneath, around or above morality and justice but through them. “The harmony between so much goodness and so much legalism constitutes the original note of Judaism.”²⁷

I have cited from *Totality and Infinity* as much as from Levinas’s so-called “confessional” writings (for my part, the only difference between these two sorts of writings is not in what Levinas says, but in who he says it to). We cannot indulge in the misleading notion that Levinas interprets monotheism *ethically* in his philosophical works alone, as if this manner of speaking were merely the public and acceptable face of what otherwise and more authentically derives from a tribal field of significance

from which non-Jews are forever excluded. This is incorrect. There is nothing exclusionary about Judaism (except that it struggles to exclude and eliminate evil and injustice), and nothing supra-ethical, no faith or blind faith (in the manner of Kierkegaard's Knight of Faith) undergirding Levinas's conception of Judaism. For Levinas, the "highest moment" in Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, to take the apparently most difficult "religious" counter-instance, is not any rejection of morality on Abraham's part, but precisely Abraham's submission to the moral imperative, the "no" of the Angel of God who will not allow murder.²⁸ Murder is not evil because the Angel or because God forbids it; it is evil, and thus God forbids it and we find this affirmed, so Levinas argues against Kierkegaard, shortly after the near-sacrifice story when we learn that Abraham, who has obviously learned the lesson well, argued with God about saving the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah *in the name of the justice that both humans and God must obey*. Such is "covenant" religion, for covenant – "in the name of justice" – is the *political* expression of the paradox of monotheism. Already in 1937, in an article on "The Meaning of Religious Practice,"²⁹ Levinas understood Jewish ritual practices not by reducing them like Aesopian fable to moral lessons, or to a hygiene or symbolism, but by seeing in them an interruption, a pause, a check before the passions of the natural attitude and its absorption in the gathering of things (that so impressed Heidegger), hence a distance-taking from any purely natural or naturalist reality. In his mature thought, this hesitation – taught by religious ritual – will be understood in its deepest sense as shame before the evil of which our vital powers are capable, ultimately the recognition, in the face of the other person, that "Thou shall not murder."

In his philosophical writings, Levinas focuses a great deal of attention, some of which I have tried to indicate, on the disruptive trace of morality as a non-intentional surplus giving meaning to the signifying functions of intentional consciousness.³⁰ In his Jewish writings, too – without in the least reverting to an abstract universalism, hence faithful to the concrete spiritual world of the normative rabbinic tradition – Levinas will no less articulate the "breach" of the absolute in the relative, the disruption of the *said* by *saying*, in terms of morality and justice. The primacy of ethics is articulated and defended throughout Levinas's writings, both philosophical and Jewish.³¹ Insofar as the aim of philosophy is *wisdom* rather than *knowledge*, there is no need and there can be no justification, from the point of view of philosophy itself, for separating philosophical writings from confessional writings. Not surprisingly, however, since the very topic of "monotheism" is a

religious topic, the most explicitly monotheistic readings of the primacy of ethics are found in Levinas's "Jewish" writings. There are several, but I refer now to the concluding pages of two essays published in 1977 (six years after the publication of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, hence in the fullest maturity of his thought): "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" and "*In the Image of God*, according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner."³²

In "*In the Image of God*, according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner," for instance, Levinas recognizes that when Rabbi Hayyim finds the paradox of monotheism in the very syntax of Jewish blessings, which begin by addressing God in the second person and conclude by referring to God in the third person, the coordination of "God on our side," the immanent God who acts in history, and "God on his own side," the transcendent God in his pure perfection, it is *also and no less* a reference to the moral imperative placed upon the I facing a You, on the one hand, and to the demand for a "dis-interested-ness" that, striving for perfection, aims at *justice* for all,³³ on the other hand. "In this radical contradiction [between *God on our side* and *God on his own side*], neither of the two notions could efface itself before the other. . . . And yet this *modality* of the divine is also the perfection of the moral intention that animates religious life as it is lived from the world and its differences, from the top and the bottom, from the pure and the impure."³⁴ In the conjunction of proximity ("You") and distance ("He") enunciated in Jewish prayers, Levinas finds *in a certain sense* precisely what so many previous Jewish commentators had found before him – the conjunction of this world and another, the conjunction of the human and the divine, the conjunction of the God's deeds and His Essence. But in Levinas's hands, these conjunctions rest not on an impossible "knowledge" (or mystification) but on the imperatives of a morality obligated to infinity – a "glory" that "does not belong to the language of contemplation" – yet rectified by justice, a justice serving morality.³⁵

The imperfection-hierarchy of creation is precisely a moral imperative, from and to perfection. When Levinas, continuing in the article on Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin, writes of this as "[a] spiritualization that dismisses the forms whose elevation it perfects, but which it transcends as being incompatible with the Absolute," he means precisely religious life as ethical self-overcoming. Religion, in this holy-ethical sense, is no longer a miraculous or predetermined escape from nothingness, a flight from the utter worthlessness of creation, from its "husks," but rather the perfecting of a creation whose highest sense would be precisely

this movement – not necessary or impossible, but *best* – toward moral perfection. In the order of the face-to-face, this means acts of kindness and compassion. At the social level, this – what Levinas calls “political monotheism”³⁶ – means the struggle for justice, just laws, just courts, just institutions, not only enforcing but promoting and improving fairness in access and distribution of basic goods and services.³⁷ Ethics as the ground of the real, Levinas writes, is “a new possibility: the possibility of thinking of the Infinite and the Law together, the very possibility of their conjunction. Man would not simply be the admission of an antinomy of reason. Beyond the antinomy, he would signify a new image of the Absolute.”³⁸ Man in the “image and likeness of God” would be ethical man. “*His compassion,*” says the Psalmist, “*is upon all His creations.*”³⁹

The concluding pages of Levinas’s article entitled “Revelation in the Jewish Tradition” are even more explicit regarding the height of ethics as the ultimate and irreducible *sense* of the paradox of monotheistic Judaism. Levinas writes:

The path I would be inclined to take in order to solve the paradox of the Revelation is one which claims that this relation, at first glance a paradoxical one, may find a model in the non-indifference toward the other, in a responsibility toward him, and that it is precisely within this relation that man becomes his self: designated without any possibility of escape, chosen, unique, non-interchangeable and, in this sense, free. Ethics is the model worthy of transcendence, and it is as an ethical *kerygma* that the Bible is Revelation.⁴⁰

In another essay, Levinas adds: “the Bible . . . is a book that leads us not toward the mystery of God, but toward the human tasks of man. Monotheism is a humanism. Only simpletons made it into a theological arithmetic.”⁴¹ The paradox of monotheism cannot be thought, but it can be enacted as righteousness. Such, indeed, was the demand of the prophets and the refinement of the rabbis.

In this way, through ethical readings – what I have elsewhere called “ethical exegesis,”⁴² the hollowing out of selfhood as *sacrifice*, as *circumcision of the heart*, as *prayer* – is “brought back” to its sense as infinite obligation to the other person, as “hostage” – “the opposite of repose – anxiety, questioning, seeking, Desire.”⁴³ Such is a selfhood “more awake than the psyche of intentionality and the knowledge adequate to its object” – “a relation with an Other which would be *better*

than self-possession" – "where the ethical relation with the other is a modality of the relation with God."⁴⁴ Levinas continues in the same article: "Rather than being seen in terms of received knowledge, should not the Revelation be thought of as this awakening?"⁴⁵ Levinas is not merely serving up homiletics for what in truth are ontological or aesthetic structures: the real is itself determined by the "messianic" ideality of morality and justice. It is perhaps this more than anything else that monotheism "understands" better than philosophy.

Judaism is based in the paradox of monotheism; it is not a Manichaeism. God transcends the world but "is" also within it. God transcends the world without having separated Himself from it: he has given His Torah, His instructions. For many Jews, the most direct path to God is through Torah study. Levinas gives his assent to this emphasis, but with a twist. Torah study does not mean pure erudition or knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Nor is it the province of the intellectual elite alone. Rather, for Levinas, Torah study means learning to be ethical, and not just "learning" to be ethical. It is the teaching of ethics, a goad to moral behavior and a call to justice. Torah study is thus an ethical activism for Levinas.

Levinas's originality, his interpretation of the paradox of monotheism in ethical rather than epistemological terms, opens up the possibility of a new way to resolve certain conflicts that continue to haunt Jews, Christians, Muslims, and the religious of the world more generally. What Levinas has to contribute is an escape from the hardened and hence inevitable and irresolvable clash of *theologies* for the sake of the shared values of inter-human kindness, the morality of putting the other first, and inter-human fairness, the call for justice for all.

This is not to say that a shift from epistemological grounds, from the clash of theologies and ideologies to an ethical ground, to love of the neighbor and the call to justice, will automatically solve or resolve all human problems. Not at all. But by opening lines of communication between people, rather than simply between ideas, by placing *saying before the said*, Levinas's thought opens up opportunities for discourse, communication, exchange, and inter-human understanding that are lost from the start when one begins with the *said as said*. Levinas took the title of one of his articles from a phrase in a fictional newspaper feature on which he had been asked to comment: "Loving the Torah More than God." What he means, of course, is not that one loves the Torah *more* than God, but that "loving the Torah," – that is, loving your neighbor – is precisely the way, and the only way, one loves God. To love God before or above or without loving one's neighbor is to turn away from God. Such

is the meaning contained in the Hebrew word *shalom*, "peace," which refers not to the peace of conquest, the peace that is really the victor's continual suppression of rebellion, an order Levinas calls "totality," but to the peace of harmony, the peace of respect for and learning from the otherness of the other.

The *sense* of Judaism, as of all genuine humanism (the two are in no way in conflict – Levinas writes of a "biblical humanism" and a "Jewish humanism"), would be to preserve the surplus of the more in the less, the perfect in the imperfect, via the demands of an imperative voice from beyond: the voice of the other person, commanding the self to "its unfulfilable obligation"⁴⁶ to one and all. The perfection of a personal God would be the perfecting of the world. And the perfecting of the world would be to care for the other before oneself, for "the orphan, the widow, the stranger," and from there to care for humanity, for animals, for all sentient life, and finally for all of creation. Not sentimentality but morality, morality requiring justice. "And with justice, judge in your gates" (*Zechariah* 8:16) – upon which Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel comments: "Where justice is wrought, peace and truth are wrought also."⁴⁷

Notes

1. Levinas was born on December 30, 1905, according to the Julian calendar then in effect in Lithuania.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other [and Additional Essays]*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
3. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
4. See Salomon Malka, *Monsieur Chouchani: L'enigme d'un maître du XXe siècle* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattes, 1994).
5. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
6. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).
7. Levinas, "On Jewish Philosophy" (1985), in Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 170.
8. Levinas, "'In the Image of God' According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner" (1978), in Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 162 and *passim*.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
10. Monotheism must be contrasted with monism. Monism, expressed by both Hinduism and Buddhism, represents a form of spirituality fundamentally distinct from monotheism. For monism, the Godhead is the real in its totality; for Hinduism, this ultimate reality is Brahman; for

Buddhism, it is the absolute Void. For monotheism, in contrast, one must distinguish God from His creation.

11. *Sifre Deuteronomy, Berachah*, no. 355, 17.
12. Levinas, "In the Image of God," *Beyond the Verse*, 166.
13. I am deliberately using the dyad "perfect/imperfect" rather than such alternatives as "infinite/finite," "unconditioned/conditioned," or "absolute/relative" because the former *begins* with God while the latter begin with *creation*.
14. Nonetheless, there is a third alternative: to affirm a non-religious irrationality, a sub-rationality that denies rationality, but at the same time also denies the perfection, that is to say, the existence of God. This is the position of sophism, skepticism, or what Levinas calls a "pure humanism" (in contrast to "biblical humanism") that denies truth in the name of *extra-rational* power relations such as habit, good manners, force, equanimity, will, libido, the "nomadic," and the like. Influential and destructive though this third posture has been, and continues to be, it is essentially *pagan* and – except for a few allusions to Heidegger – is not the concern of the present paper.
15. See, for example, Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).
16. Levinas, "In the Image of God," *Beyond the Verse*, 165.
17. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 79 (my translation). Lingis translates "*se ramener à*" as "be reduced to." In this context, this is both wrong and misleading. It is made all the worse because in this sentence, Levinas is articulating one of his most important thoughts. A religious signification can have several meanings and does not need to be *reduced* to only one meaning, even if that one meaning invokes an "inter-subjective relation." Nevertheless, all religious significations, so Levinas teaches, can be and should be *brought back* to their inter-subjective significance, for at this level one discovers their "superior" or highest significance: their ethical sense. This "bringing back" is similar to the way a phenomenologist peels away a term to its most extreme or irreducible sense, from whence all its other related senses borrow their meaning. For instance, in *From Existence to Existents, Time and the Other*, and *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas shows that the term "transcendence," while in a certain sense applicable to death, only gains its full meaning from the absolute alterity of the other person, which is more other, more transcendent than death. Thus, Levinas is saying of religious significations that they gain their full (or "superior" or "adult") sense from the ethical inter-subjective relations they express, and that other levels of meaning are, wittingly or not, derived from or dependent upon these. Other levels of meaning are therefore not to be reduced away in the sense of eliminated, but are (or can be) intensified and infused with transcendence through their ethical sense. (Perhaps they can be eliminated, however, in cases where they cannot be brought to an ethical inter-subjective sense and are therefore purely mythological.) This return of sense is, given

- the limitations Levinas discovered in the phenomenological method's commitment to "intentional analysis," the ultimate function of *ethical exegesis*, as one sees practiced most clearly in all of Levinas's "Talmudic Readings." Many rabbis, in a different context to be sure, have said something quite similar, if not the same. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, for instance, has written (and not in a reductive sense): "The Sanctuary of the Law in particular, and the Law of God in general, strive solely for moral objectives." Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Jewish Symbolism: The Collected Writings, Vol. III*, Paul Forchheimer (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 1995), 60.
19. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); see especially Part One, Division One, sections II and III (78–148).
 20. While one usually associates the "to" of "to someone" with the dative, which refers to an indirect object, it is not always so easily distinguishable from the accusative, which refers to an immediate object. Beyond grammatical niceties, however, what Levinas is emphasizing is that signification originates in communicative speaking, and hence arises from a dimension of provocation or "accusation," of being accused or charged with a responsibility to and for the other person.
 21. Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," in Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 17.
 22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.
 23. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.
 24. Levinas, "Religion for Adults," *Difficult Freedom*, 17.
 25. In a chapter entitled "Monotheism and Ethics" (74–119), from his book *Monotheism: A Philosophic Inquiry into the Foundations of Theology and Ethics* (Totawa, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1981), Professor Lenn Goodman writes (86): "The emulation called for by the very contemplation of the concept of divine perfection – expressed Biblically as the human pursuit of holiness (*Leviticus* 19) and in Plato as the striving to become as like to God as lies in human capacity (*Theaetetus* 176) – means simply the pursuit of the highest conceivable moral standards." See also a later revised version of this chapter in Lenn Goodman, *God of Abraham* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 79–114.
 26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78–79 (with some minor revisions of the Lingis translation).
 27. Levinas, "Religion for Adults," *Difficult Freedom*, p. 19.
 28. Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 74.
 29. Levinas, "The Meaning of Religious Practice," trans. Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco, and Joelle Hansel, in *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 25, no. 3 (2005), 285–289 (with a translators' Introduction).
 30. See, for example, his close analyses of Husserlian phenomenology in Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, ed. and trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Indiana University Press, 1998).

31. The unity of Levinas's philosophical and confessional writings can hardly be better recognized than on the pages of his extraordinary essay of 1973, "God and Philosophy" (trans. Richard A. Cohen), found in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 153–186; found in a second English translation in Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 55–78.
32. These two essays were both reprinted in the 1982 collection entitled *Beyond the Verse*.
33. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 163.
34. *Ibid.*, 165.
35. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas says the following: "In certain very old prayers, fixed by ancient authorities, the faithful one begins by saying to God "Thou" and finishes the proposition thus begun by saying "He," as if, in the course of this approach of the "Thou" its transcendence into a "He" supervened. It is what in my descriptions I have called the "illeity" of the Infinite. Thus, in the "Here I am!" of the approach of the Other [person], the Infinite does not show itself. How then does it take on meaning? I will say that the subject who says "Here I am!" *testifies* to the Infinite. It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs. It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorified *itself*. The term "glory" does not belong to the language of contemplation." Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 106–107. For a better understanding of what Levinas might mean by "a 'He' supervened" in the passage just cited, by means of a concise review of several classic Jewish commentators (Talmud, Abudraham, Riva, Rashba, Ramban, et al.) on the "You" – "He" syntax of Jewish blessings, see B. S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Siddur*, trans. Leonard Oschry (Tel-Aviv: Mtzuda Press, 1966), 61–64.
36. Levinas, "The State of Caesar and the State of David," in *Beyond the Verse*, 186.
37. That justice, *for Levinas* – which operates otherwise than morality – that is, in terms of equality rather than inequality – is required to rectify morality and is also regulated by morality has escaped critics of his politics, including Howard Caygill, Robert Bernasconi, and Asher Horowitz. See, for example, Asher Horowitz, "Beyond Rational Peace," in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 27–47.
38. Levinas, "The State of Caesar and the State of David," in *Beyond the Verse*, 166–167. For a more extended discussion of Levinas's appropriation of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhyn, see Chapter 11, "The Face of Truth and Jewish Mysticism," in Cohen, *Elevations*, 241–273 (especially, 261–273).
39. *Psalms* 145.
40. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 148.

41. Levinas, "For a Jewish Humanism," *Difficult Freedom*, 275.
42. See Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Philosophy and Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
43. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 149.
44. *Ibid.*, 149.
45. *Ibid.*, 150.
46. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 150.
47. *Pesikta D'Rav Kahana*, 140a.