

5 The Greatest Commandment? Religion and/or Ethics in Kierkegaard and Levinas

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Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

—Matthew 22:35–40 (KJV)

Love God and Love Your Neighbor: What Is the Problem?

Rare indeed is a contemporary Continental philosopher of religion who does not have both Søren Kierkegaard and Emmanuel Levinas, however he or she might weight a preference for one over the other, as significant points of reference. I am far from the first to have learned much from both. The critique—shared but unique—that each makes of totality thinking, of “philosophy as comprehension” (and so of “philosophy”), in the name of the other/Other, the totally other, who resists, breaks through, and breaks up comprehension and the whole to which thought tends and aspires, and to whom we are called to answer as singular selves, locates these two thinkers in a shared ethico-religious space in which the self-same is radically decentered by an overwhelming invasion of transcendence that remains recalcitrant to any attempt to reassume or domesticate it, beyond any attempt to bring it within the control, bounds, or predictability of a system.

And yet, despite these evident parallels, these neighbors, for all of their proximity, are far from speaking in a unified voice but are divided by diverse religious sensibilities, or highly diverse sensibilities toward the religious, perhaps irrevocably so. Or so it seems. Indeed, it could be argued that what is most dear to each is—precisely as *most* dear—highly problematic to the other, to the point of creating a perhaps irreparable rift—at least theoretically speaking—between

them. For those of us who love them both, perhaps a lingering reflection on the space of this difference can teach, inspire, and provoke us further still.¹

The point of ostensive contention here is a crucial one, one of transcendence and love, or one of the relative priority of one of these with respect to the other, or the relationship between faith and ethics, between my relationship with the transcendent God and my love of, or responsibility for, my fellow humans. Put succinctly, Kierkegaard is of the opinion that ethics, or at least ethics of the highest kind as love of neighbor, is only possible if it follows from, or has as its condition of possibility, our *prior* love of God; Levinas is of the view that an insistence upon a *prior* responsibility to God precisely blocks the unlimited responsibility for the neighbor which he refers to as ethics. For Kierkegaard, the God relationship is to be prior to and is to govern my relationship to my neighbor, whereas for Levinas it is my ethical relationship to the other that sets the table for anything I might make of my relationship to God.²

These characterizations represent much broader and well-entrenched viewpoints (at least on the surface and in the popular mind, even a well-educated popular mind) and reflect a difference that makes a difference—one with bite, with implications for how we are to live both with God and neighbor in our world. We are all too familiar these days with the specter of the “holy warrior” (of whatever religious persuasion) and with the reaction against it, a specter that divides our race between those who so identify the good with God that anything that God requires is justified,³ and those who fear that the preceding model is the very recipe for violence and who therefore want either to reject God (and with God at least *this* alibi for violence) or, insofar as they are theists, not identify the good with God, but “God” (or at least what will be permitted to pass under that name) with the good. At the extremes we find a fundamentalism in which the good is dissolved in God and, at the other end, either a thoroughgoing laicism or a theological liberalism in which God is dissolved in the good. But even as these positions soften toward a more moderate middle—in which God only demands what we by nature know to be good, for example—it is difficult to see how one could avoid, at least in religious practice, making some kind of call, one way or the other, with respect to this (“theological”)⁴ version of the Euthyphro problem. Either God voluntaristically defines the good along with all else, and for the good we take our lead from God, blindly trusting that when God demands even what appears to be evil it is in fact the good by the very fact of its being demanded by God, or else there is something higher than God from which we take our lead regarding even God, and God is not “God” (at least the one conceived by orthodox theology) after all.⁵

Of course, this is not what we want, at least those of us who cannot (for whatever reasons) give up on God and yet want to be able to give an (ethical) account of ourselves to those who do not share our faith. This is not what we want, those of us who envision the love of God and the love of neighbor as complements, as each an augmentation of the other in a mad (non)economy of love in which love for one does not come at the expense of but breeds the love of the other—like the eros of the couple that engenders the child: from love more love,

more to be loved and to be loving in its turn.⁶ My articulation of this, out of my Christian heritage and commitment, is to attempt to hear in Jesus' version of the greatest commandment a case of parallelism, in which the love of God and love of neighbor are two ways of expressing the same, in which as identical, neither can be the means to or the result of the other. And yet, if to love God and to love neighbor are equivalents, does it follow that the neighbor is God? If so, have we again collapsed God (faith) into the good (ethics)? Still, if we insist on a separate act of "loving God," can we really, given God's renowned jealousy, avoid turning the love of neighbor into a secondary matter, a result? Levinas has certainly been accused of the former, and Kierkegaard boldly claims the latter as an antidote to that.

Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: A Rubric

As a way of approaching these issues, I borrow, as a heuristic rubric for the discussion to follow, a provocative thesis from Merold Westphal, the principal thesis of his book *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*: "What we say about God should have a direct bearing on our own self-transformation. Descriptions of divine being and prescriptions for human becoming are flip sides of the same coin. Within this paradigm, I propose to explore the transcendence of God in strict correlation with human self-transcendence."⁷ This rubric is helpful in that it puts forth a thesis *à propos* the "relation to God—relation to neighbor" relation, and does so in a way that favors Kierkegaard and is critical of Levinas, important here to provide a Kierkegaardian voice critical of Levinas to counter-weigh (1) Levinas's own critical comments on Kierkegaard (which Kierkegaard was himself unable to provide by dint of his untimely death over a century too soon) and (2) my own prejudices for Levinas over against Kierkegaard in this encounter.⁸ I will therefore provide here a brief summary of Westphal's text, to which I will later have recourse.

The text opens with an illuminating analysis of ontotheology in which Westphal argues that Heidegger's charge of ontotheology, contrary to popular employments of the term maligning anything "theological," does not apply to theism per se, does not simply correlate with any ontology that includes God as (a) Being, but only to a theism for which God functions as a term by means of which reality is comprehended and therefore dominated by the human agents availing themselves of such a God, or a theism that is false to itself in making human being the center rather than God, who here is reduced to humanity's tool.⁹

Westphal then moves on to describe three kinds of transcendence, each in turn a building on and a developing of its predecessor: cosmological transcendence, epistemological transcendence, and religious-ethical transcendence. Cosmological transcendence holds that God exists beyond the world (although is also involved in it), or, that while the being of the world depends for its existence on God, God does not depend for his existence on the being of the world. In this section, Westphal attempts to illustrate (rather than demonstrate,

it seems to me)¹⁰ his thesis negatively by providing a reading of two thinkers, Spinoza and Hegel, who deny a transcendent God and correlatively (causally?) deny self-transcendence, deny a self whose center is outside of itself, and one that would permit an ethics of the other, or a love of the other that is not grounded in self love.

The next kind of transcendence, epistemological transcendence, in addition to affirming the cosmological transcendence of God, and as a hedge against the temptations of ontotheology, affirms in addition the resistance of God to human knowledge. God cannot be brought under the auspices of human comprehension and control, and we humans remain oriented to a God who is always beyond our reach. Here Westphal shows how the teachings of Pseudo-Dionysus, Aquinas, and Karl Barth on the epistemological transcendence of God correlates in these thinkers with a movement toward a self-decentering, self-transcending ethics.

Ethical self-transcendence reaches its fullest expression when Westphal articulates religious-ethical transcendence—the third and highest level of transcendence—as the act, the practice over against the theory, of self-transcending, as the site at which the self is called on to respond to—even to make itself in response to—an inbreaking of transcendence that radically moves it off its own center and orients it toward the other/Other, making the self what it is in this very movement. It is here, at the apogee of the study, that Levinas and Kierkegaard are put forth as representatives, respectively, of ethical and religious (or, collectively, ethical-religious) transcendence, and where the crucial differences between them—despite their similarities—come to the fore. For while Westphal clearly has a deep appreciation for Levinas (and includes him as one of the two figures in this culminating section of his study), in the end he wonders whether Levinas really has a place in this study on transcendence and self-transcendence, as Westphal suspects that “Levinas may well be an atheist” (i.e., someone who denies cosmological transcendence). The “hero” of the study is Kierkegaard, whose affirmation of the transcendence of God—not only in theory but in active faith¹¹—is the very foundation of his ethics, of his self-transcendence or decentering with respect to the neighbor, or love.

Westphal’s work deserves further attention in its own right¹² (and will surface again both tacitly and explicitly in what follows), but I wish to employ it here mainly as a launching pad into a discussion of some of the issues around transcendence and love that surface in a Kierkegaard-Levinas encounter. For while Kierkegaard would, it seems, strongly endorse Westphal’s thesis, Levinas would deny it (at least in its stronger, causal form, I will argue)—which is why, of course, Kierkegaard stands as the *dénouement* of Westphal’s study, while Levinas is, in the end, abandoned by it. Indeed, more than merely denying it, Levinas claims that Transcendence as employed by Kierkegaard not only does not lead to ethical self-transcendence (to the ethical de-centering of the self over against the human other), but is precisely an impediment to it. As Levinas might put it, What one does *not* say about God (or at least does not say in the

first instance, prior to the encounter with the human other) is in direct correlation with self-transcendence. How so?

Transcendence and Love: An Impediment?

Levinas's direct comments on Kierkegaard, occupying only a few pages,¹³ are at once appreciative and critical. On the plus side, Levinas credits Kierkegaard with two genuine, philosophical innovations: (1) the strong notion of a separated subject and (2) the articulation of a new view of the truth as a persecuted truth (as opposed to triumphant truth). Against the dominant, Hegelian thought of his day (and perhaps thereby against the predominant tendency of the philosophical tradition as a whole), in which the subject was absorbed in the universality of the System, the product and in the service of an impersonal logos, Kierkegaard, according to Levinas, rehabilitated with incomparable force the unicity and singularity of the subject. The subject "has a secret," an inexpressible interiority recalcitrant to an all-consuming exteriority, which Kierkegaard, on Levinas's view, identifies with the burning of sin which no rational or universal discourse is able to recover or extinguish. Kierkegaard's subject is an "existence tensed over itself, open to the outside in an attitude of impatience and of waiting—an impatience that the outer world (of people and things), wrapped in a relaxed, impassive thought, cannot satisfy. And beyond that thirst for salvation, there is an older tension of the human soul (perhaps for this reason 'naturally' Christian) that consumes itself with desires."¹⁴ This tension on itself, this anxiety, is the very subject, the egoism, me.

But if the notion of a separated subject protects interiority against absorption in exteriority, Kierkegaard's second innovation, the idea of a persecuted truth, protects the transcendent from being absorbed by the immanent. On Levinas's reading, Kierkegaard's persecuted truth is not built on the desire to overcome doubt, that drive which animates triumphant truth, but takes in "the ever recurring inner rending of doubt" as a constitutive element, as "part of the evidence itself."¹⁵ The faith/belief (*la croyance*) that corresponds to this persecuted truth is thus not a lesser form of knowledge, one to be surpassed, for example, in absolute knowledge. Faith/belief does not take the part of the uncertain over against the certainty of knowledge; it introduces an alternative form of truth, namely, a truth that does not deliver itself as phenomena: "Here with Kierkegaard something is manifested, yet one may wonder whether there was any manifestation. . . . Truth is played out on a double register: at the same time something essential has been said, and, if you like, nothing has been said."¹⁶ This persecuted truth, operating as it does under a "permanent rending," "allows us, perhaps, to put an end to the game of disclosure, in which immanence always wins out over transcendence; for once being has been disclosed, even partially, even in Mystery, it becomes immanent."¹⁷ A separated subject in relation to a non-assumable exteriority: no reader of Levinas can fail to recognize the resonance with his own thinking that Levinas finds in Kierkegaard, and the

reason for his appreciation of it. And yet there is also that in Kierkegaard which troubles Levinas.

Levinas's criticism of Kierkegaard comes down to his being shocked by the violence he finds in the latter, reflected, he thinks, in the immodesty of the Kierkegaardian subject (presumably because this subject need not answer for itself to the other, as we shall see), and in the Kierkegaardian style that has infected post-Kierkegaardian philosophy, even that of Kierkegaard's detractors.¹⁸ "The manner of the strong and the violent, who fear neither scandal nor destruction, has become, since Kierkegaard and before Nietzsche, a manner of philosophy. One philosophises with a hammer."¹⁹ And so, while Levinas applauds Kierkegaard's opposition to the violence of totality, he hears and fears in Kierkegaard the introduction of "another violence." And this other violence that Levinas finds in Kierkegaard, takes hold, Levinas posits (and this is especially significant for what is at stake in this essay), "at the precise moment where he [Kierkegaard] 'bypasses the ethical'"²⁰ for the religious stage. What Levinas certainly has in mind here (one can scarcely imagine otherwise) is the famous "teleological suspension of the ethical" that faith demands, as outlined in *Fear and Trembling*. Indeed, here the hero of faith, Abraham, harkens to the voice of God alone, turning a deaf ear (as torturous as it is for him to harden himself to do so) to the human other and others—in this case his own familial flesh. In this move into the religious stage that describes the movement of faith, which is clearly the highest and greatest, the ethical—the stage of the universalities of reason and of communal obligations—is "bracketed" in favor of something higher: the absolute command of God, the absolute relation (the relation that is "absolved" of every other concern) with the Absolute. So when God commands that Isaac be put to the knife by Abraham's own hand, faith obeys. Abraham in faith, as the hero of faith, is willing to sacrifice, must sacrifice, along with Isaac, ethics. It is not that the ethical here is negated exactly, since from the perspective of ethics Abraham's intended act is still murder (and all of his fatherly obligations remain in place), but it is suspended, "put out of play" by a higher calling that, from the point of view the religious, at least, transforms the act of murder into an act of sacrifice. Here, then, what Levinas might be taken as criticizing in Kierkegaard is the reversal of Dostoyevsky's often quoted dictum: "If God is dead, then all is permitted," now rendered as, "If God (as the Absolute into which I enter into an absolute relation in faith) is *alive*, then all (which God commands, however irrational, however unethical) is permitted, nay, required." So, if God commands you, then head for the hill (Moriah). But if God commands someone else, then head for the hills (and with any luck, not Moriah).

There is a strong sense in which Levinas *is*, and perhaps justifiably, concerned here with the break with reason and with the communal bonds that faith represents over against the universality of ethics, a faith that in the face of ethics cannot but appear as purely individual, arbitrary, even *selfish* (and Kierkegaard has Johannes de Silentio illustrate that from the outside the Knight of Faith is indistinguishable from a tax collector). The Knight of Faith, having

suspended the general (the presupposition of language and shared communication), *cannot* explain himself, and thus need not (to the point where the very attempt to do so is a temptation). The section of *Fear and Trembling* whose title is the query: “Is there a teleological suspension of the ethical?” is followed by another: “Is there an absolute duty to God?” and yet another: “Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eleazar, and from Isaac?” The nay to the latter follows from the yea to the former two. It was ethically indefensible because cut off from ethics, “the universal as such.” Ethically indefensible but religiously necessary. Any accountability to the human other is rendered, in the turn away from the universality of terms that would permit it, precisely impossible. For Levinas, on the contrary, the moment of “apology,” answering not only for but to the other, giving an account of myself, is constitutive of ethics. Ethics has, for Levinas, as an essential moment, an explaining of myself to the other who lies outside of myself, and a seeking for his “investiture” (TI, 84–90), and this requires recourse to the reasons that will function within a universal/communal context.²¹

But Levinas is neither advocating for a mere return to the ethical of which Kierkegaard’s religion is the suspension, nor arguing that any movement beyond the universal is either illusory or evil (i.e., bad violence). Levinas is not going Hegelian. On the contrary, Levinas is at least as fearful of the violence of the universal (his word for this is “totality”) as is Kierkegaard. Indeed, in advocating for ethics against the (at least perceived) violence of the religious, Levinas proposes a shift in the definition of ethics. For, “it is not at all certain that ethics is where he [Kierkegaard] sees it.”²² Ethics is, in its deepest moment, for Levinas (as is well-known), not at all a matter of universal imperatives (rational or communal), but my obligation to respond to the face/call of the other in his/her vulnerability that precisely interrupts any recourse I might have to a general system that would allow me to determine, in advance, what I owe and do not owe to the neighbor. To the other’s need I am obligated to respond, without excuse or deflection: *hineni, me voici*, “here I am,” the same response Abraham makes to the call of God in Genesis 22:1 and 22:11 (and, significantly, also to Isaac at 22:7), as Levinas is well aware. And for Levinas, this “ethics as consciousness of a responsibility toward others . . . far from losing you in generality, singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as I.”²³ And elsewhere: “To be myself means, then, to be unable to escape responsibility.”²⁴ Levinas is arguing that the encounter with the human other performs as well as that with the divine Other (as in Kierkegaard) the breakup of the totality,²⁵ but without the violence of isolating the self from the neighbor in a personal (i.e., purely individual) relationship with God.

But if “ethics is not,” for Levinas, “where he [Kierkegaard] sees it,” a case could be made that for Kierkegaard “ethics [in its most profound sense] is not where he [Kierkegaard himself] sees it [at first]” either, or at least not where he in the guise of Johannes de Silentio²⁶ leaves it in *Fear and Trembling*. For Kierkegaard, there is ethics, and then there is ethics.²⁷ Taking up Kierkegaard’s cause here against Levinas’s charge that Kierkegaard “exceeds” or “oversteps”

[*dépasse*] ethics for faith, Westphal imagines Kierkegaard's response as being: "Wait 'til I'm finished," meaning that while it may well be the case that *Fear and Trembling* is devoid of an ethics, that does not mean that there is not an ethics to be had, and *Fear and Trembling* was neither the only nor the last book that Kierkegaard would write. Westphal further complains that Levinas "writes as if he had never heard of this book [*Works of Love*],"²⁸ Kierkegaard's passionate and compelling ethical tome, suggesting, of course, that *Works of Love* supplies (at least in part, and perhaps preeminently among the works that make a contribution to this) the ethics that Levinas believes to be missing. It is true that Levinas does write as if he had never heard of *Works of Love*, and perhaps he had not (I cannot say one way or the other). The question is whether that makes any difference to his point. On the one hand, it would certainly seem to, since faced with the text of *Works of Love* it would be absurd in the extreme to claim that Kierkegaard has no ethics, to accuse him of leaving ethics behind for religion (or at least teleologically suspending it in a way that did not allow it to return to the center stage of his concerns), to claim that neighbor love for him is not of the highest importance (or of the second highest importance if we keep *Fear and Trembling* in mind). Indeed, neighbor love is—and this is a point as central to *Works of Love* as any—an absolute command!

Still, it is important to remember that this Kierkegaardian ethics is no mere return to the ethical order of reasoned and reasonable universal obligation that would take hold once again after the abatement of the terrible call of God to faith by which it had been suspended. Kierkegaard's ethics is not a return to the ethical order *on this side of faith*, but emerges out of faith *on the other side*, as it were, as that which does not precede but is the result of loving God. The move from faith to ethics is not a stepping back down into the ethical (as universal), but a horizontal movement—the extension/continuation of the God-relation (the love of God) into an ethical relation (the love of neighbor). For the *Works of Love* are not a universal ethics but a specifically and self-consciously Christian ethics. An ethics of self-sacrificial love makes no more sense from the perspective of rational universality than do any of the commands of God addressed to the Knight of Faith, and this because this ethics is not the ethics teleologically suspended in faith, but an ethics that *follows* from the God-relation that is the *result* of faith and its obedience. And how could it be otherwise, for we have learned from Kierkegaard, across the teachings of Climacus in *Philosophical Fragments*, that the self cannot but remain ensnared in the self-focus of sin—except by the giving of the condition for faith, along with faith itself, by God. Without the giving of the condition for love along with love, the self could be no more decentered toward the other than toward God. The God-relation precedes, as the very condition of possibility for, ethics. *Works of Love* is neither the rational derivation of a universal ethics (*Moralität*) nor a communally grounded ethics²⁹ (*Sittlichkeit*), but an ethics of love, in which my obligation is not to a rule valid for all, but God's command to *me* to love my neighbor to the point of self-sacrifice, with or without my neighbor's reciprocation—an ethics of agape. Despite Levinas's allergy to the term "love"

(especially in the earlier works), one cannot but notice a certain confluence between the descriptions of the works of love for the neighbor and Levinas's stress on my responsibility—before myself—to the neighbor. Whatever specific similarities and dissimilarities a careful study might turn up—and the respective contexts out of which the works of these authors emerged are both near (both are biblical) and far (Jewish over against Christian)—it seems to me, at least, that their respective notions of ethics as an anarchic self-giving to the neighbor are at least in the same neighborhood.

But the *source* of these ethics are all important, both to Kierkegaard and to Levinas. The *source* of the ethics/works of love is, as Kierkegaard stresses time and again, the love of God; my love of the neighbor is the command of God, is my obedience to God.³⁰ My first love/obligation is for/to God, and my love/obligation of/to the neighbor is a side effect of that, a love of others commanded by the Other, who is to be the first “object” of my love, and a necessary condition of my love of neighbor. In the words of *Works of Love*: “Ultimately, love for God is the decisive factor; from this originates love for the neighbor . . . the Christian love commandment commands loving God above all else, and then loving the neighbor” (WOL, 140).³¹

It is this necessary interjection (this mediation—ironic given Kierkegaard's consistent mockery of mediation)³² of “God” between me and my neighbor—which, for Kierkegaard, is the very condition of possibility for an ethics, a Christian ethics of agape, to which Levinas objects, that he fears, in which he sees an impediment to ethics (as infinite responsibility to the other), and the threat of “another violence,” however edifying these reflections³³ on my responsibilities to the neighbor offered in *Works of Love*. But how so, given that in Kierkegaard's ethics I am decentered toward the other, turned toward the other in the service of love, as I am, *mutatis mutandis*, decentered by, and called to responsibility for, the other in Levinas?

One of Levinas's prevailing concerns is that the other be respected as “other,” that is, allowed to speak for himself (*kath'auto*) and not reduced to “the same,” that is, to another version of myself, able to be treated as another me, or as I myself would like to be treated, wherein I would “love my neighbor as myself.”³⁴ To treat the other as the same, to reduce the other to another (like) myself, is the very violence that ethics overcomes. My suspicion is that Levinas's concerns regarding Kierkegaard, and the violence he finds in him, stem not so much from a perceived lack of ethics in Kierkegaard but from an ethics that, precisely by insisting on God as its fulcrum, in effect reduces the other to the same.

One gets the feeling in reading Kierkegaard (or should I speak here only for myself?) that while God is Totally Other, the neighbor is presumed to be mostly like me. We human beings are all pretty much the same, all pretty much in the same position, over against the Mystery of the utterly transcendent God. Entranced by the blazing glory of the heavens, we human beings stand together, shoulder to shoulder (and not face-to-face), on the earth. Indeed, how could God as Totally Other, as the object of my faith/belief, not overwhelm and negate any other other, not reduce to all but zero the *relative otherness* (and for Levi-

nas there can be no such thing in ethics, and so this is an ethical if not strictly logical oxymoron) of any other in comparison to the infinite otherness of God, and, correlatively, reduce to all but zero the weight of demand placed on me by a neighbor next to the infinite command of the Infinite? And is this not exactly what happens in Kierkegaard/Silentio's reading of the Abraham and Isaac story? Here any ethical call that might issue from the human other is suspended by the demands of faith, by this teleology that trumps any and everything else. Do we not here feel the very stiffening of resolve and the onset of the pious myopia that are the germ of religious violence? For God may well turn me toward the other in love (as in the *Works of Love*, and thank God) . . . but he may also call me to Moriah, and the paradoxical love/hate transacted there (as in *Fear and Trembling*, and thank God here too, I guess). For when it is God who is the Other *par excellence*, and the human other is only a little bit other (*par impossible* for Levinas), when ethics finds its bearings in a theonomy, rather than in the face, that is perhaps the risk we run.

But if, in relation to the absolute otherness of God, in relation to the Absolute, the human other appears as largely the same, that I need to ethically relate to the human other by means of God produces (or so I am positing Levinas's concerns might lead us to believe) a correlative reduction of this human other to the same. Recall how Levinas sums up the main trajectory of the philosophical tradition (and it would require a blithe spirit indeed to think that the theological tradition deviated much from it): "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (TI, 43). And on the previous page we find: "This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term, which itself is not a being; in it the shock of the encounter of the same with the other is deadened" (TI, 42). He then goes on to list "a concept thought," "sensation," and "Being" as candidates that have, in the tradition at different times, played the role of this third term. Now, Levinas is speaking here of cognition, not ethics (or of a cognition that dominates ethics), but my suspicion is that Levinas would see Kierkegaard's "God" or "Christian ethics/works of love" as plausible candidates to play the role of this "neutral third term" within the ethical sphere. The power of the third term is that it purports to govern both terms (me and the other) as independent of either (and so neutrally), but in such a way that my access to it (which I discover across its governance of me, and so which "I find in myself" (TI, 44)) gives me a certain comprehension of (both understanding of and power over) the other, and this *prior* to my actual encounter with him/her. Here the other is "given" to me prior to being "given" to me. And is this not the role that God, and the ethics that come at the command of God, play *à propos* the human other in Kierkegaard? Is not God a neutral third (governing me and the other), who is found "in myself" (across my personal relationship with him), and whose commands for works of love delineate in advance (prior to the actual encounter with the other) what my responsibility to the other is, namely, love?³⁵ Here the other demands of me

only that which, even prior to his arrival, I already find in myself (i.e., in my own relationship with God, which is closed to the other). And does this not precisely deaden the shock of the actual encounter with the other insofar as I am not here obligated by the other to respond to the other, but obligated to God for the other (or by God to the other), already equipped with my obligations before the encounter? And is this not precisely the reduction of the other to the same as Levinas envisions it? Here, paradoxically, it is not the lack of an ethics that is an impediment to “ethics,” but precisely the presence of an ethics (i.e., a set of commands [or even a single one] that prescribes *in advance* what one’s obligations to the other will be, meaning that the encounter with the other will in fact always be an encounter with a same).

And this is why it is important to understand that for Levinas too, as for Kierkegaard, there is ethics, and then there is ethics, and to try and sort out the relations between a number of things all here moving about under the same name. For if Kierkegaard distinguishes Christian ethics from universal ethics, Levinas too distinguishes his ethics of absolute responsibility for the other from universal ethics, or what he also refers to as justice. In each case, there is an ethics that transcends ethics as a rationally derived, communally shared set of moral prescriptions. But unlike for Kierkegaard, where Christian ethics (whose condition is the love of God) is contrasted with the rules for humans generally (universal ethics) as the higher to the lower, for Levinas ethics as my singular responsibility for the other is contrasted with universal ethics as the condition to the conditioned. That is, for Levinas, “ethics” proper is not a positive command at all, but something more like a susceptibility to being commanded. And that is why, however much Levinas’s ethics of responsibility might appear to parallel (or at least resonate with) Kierkegaard’s ethics of agape in terms of “content” (the non-reciprocal service of the neighbor, etc.), the nearer “parallel” remains that between Levinas’s ethics and Kierkegaard’s religion³⁶ as each an openness to the other/Other. Kierkegaard’s Christian ethics is already a beginning filling out of the commands for which openness to the Other is the preparation; Levinas’s ethics is that openness itself. And this has deep implications for the relationship that “ethics” (Christian ethics, or the ethics of responsibility to the neighbor) in each case has to ethics as universal obligation. For Kierkegaard Christian ethics, following from the God-relation, cannot be for everyone, but are commanded of the faithful in a manner that remains transcendent (like the faith it follows) above any universalizable ethics (even if all those failing to follow them are at fault). But for Levinas, (the) ethics (of responsibility) are the calling of all qua human (even if they fall first and hardest upon “me”),³⁷ and rather than being elevated above universal ethics as a higher order of orders, is rather that which both undergirds and undermines universal ethics itself—for my responsibility to the neighbor is simultaneous with my responsibility to my neighbors, and thus the “measures” of justice take hold (the reason for reason), and thus the need to (continually re)constitute a “universal” ethics in community with all others.³⁸ This move back to the universal appears no where in Kierkegaard. Unlike in Kierkegaard, where religion

suspends universal ethics, and universal ethics are “replaced” by Christian ethics for those who love God, in Levinas ethics as responsibility both suspends (calls into question in response to the face as singular) and supports (calls for the constitution of justice as a response to the others) universal ethics, as law. And this is why Levinas chides Kierkegaard’s “suspension” of the ethical order despite the fact that Levinas’s “ethics” are not there either, and why he reads the Abraham drama of Genesis 22 against Kierkegaard, not as God’s call to transcend the ethical order but as God’s call to return to it:

In his [Kierkegaard’s] evocation of Abraham, he describes the encounter with God at the point where subjectivity rises to the level of the religious, that is to say, above ethics. But one could think the opposite: Abraham’s attentiveness to the voice that led him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, is the highest point in the drama. That he obeyed the first voice is astonishing: that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second voice—that is the essential.³⁹

Does Ethics Harbor Transcendence After All?

How could love be rightly discussed if You were forgotten, O God of Love, source of all love in heaven and on earth, You who spared nothing but gave all in love, You who are love, so that one who loves is what he is only by being in You! How could love properly be discussed if You were forgotten, You who made manifest what love is, You, our Saviour and Redeemer, who gave Yourself to save all! How could love be rightly discussed if You were forgotten, O Spirit of Love, You who take nothing for Your own but remind us of that sacrifice of love, remind the believer to love as he is loved, and his neighbor as himself! (WOL, 20)⁴⁰

Kierkegaard insists that the love of God is a prerequisite for a love ethic, that if God is left out of the picture, there is in fact no love at all (even if there is an illusion of love).

Worldly wisdom thinks that love is a relationship between man and man. Christianity teaches that love is a relationship between: man—God—man, that is, that God is the middle term. However beautiful the love relationship has been between two or more people, however complete all their enjoyment and all their bliss in mutual devotion and affection have been for them, even if all men have praised this relationship—if God and the relationship to God have been left out, then, Christianly understood, this has not been love but a mutual and enchanting illusion of love. For to love God is to love oneself in truth; to help another human being to love God is to love another man; to be helped by another human being to love God is to be loved. (WOL, 112–13)

One might then expect Kierkegaard to say that Levinas’s rejection of God as the necessary “middle term” for ethics—on which Kierkegaard insists⁴¹—would have to translate into the conclusion that Levinas does not, and in principle could not, despite any illusions, have ethics, or at least not an ethics of agape, although what Kierkegaard would in fact say in this situation can only be a matter of educated speculation. In lieu of Kierkegaard’s own contributions to a direct discussion with Levinas, I am—as I have already indicated—grateful

for the contributions of Merold Westphal, who (while still generous to Levinas) clearly takes Kierkegaard's side in this encounter, and to whose work I have recourse here as an aid and spur to my discussions. For it seems to me that Kierkegaard would indeed affirm, with Westphal (which is not surprising given that Westphal's reading of Kierkegaard would have contributed to its formation in the first place), the central thesis of Westphal's *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* introduced earlier: "What we say about God has a direct bearing upon our ethical self-transcendence." For if "what we say about God" can be taken as basically equivalent to "not forgetting the God of love," and "our ethical self-transcendence" can be taken as basically equivalent to "rightly discussing love" (which presumably has something to do with actual loving), then Kierkegaard's opening prayer to *Works of Love* as quoted (in part) above can be taken as another way of saying what Westphal is saying in *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* (and indeed, the latter is perhaps naught but a more propositional paraphrase of the former).⁴²

Let us look, then, at how Westphal approaches Levinas in light of this implication. For after acknowledging that Levinas provides a "splendid heuristic" for what will follow as the culmination of the study (Kierkegaard as the paradigm of the work's central thesis), Westphal worries that "Levinas is not a leading candidate for consideration in an essay about the transcendence of *God*,"⁴³ one whose thesis posits a correlation between the transcendence of God and self-transcendence, in that for Levinas "God does not appear as an independent agent . . . [and so] is of no direct help in our inquiry into the nature of divine transcendence."⁴⁴ He elaborates:

The transcendence with which Levinas concerns himself is that of the human other (*Autrui*), the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, the neighbor whose face I see and not God whose face I do not. There is plenty of God talk in Levinas's writings, but apart from its secondary role, it may well be that he is an atheist. He regularly transfers such terms as absolute, infinite, revelation, height, and glory from their usual theological home to serve as descriptions of the human other, and it is far from clear that he affirms a personal God, who, distinct from the world and its human inhabitants, is a creator, lawgiver, and redeemer. It often sounds as if 'God' is a name for the depth dimension in my neighbor which puts me in question with a summons to justice and even, in later writings, love.⁴⁵

And then with the question, "But what if the other were God?"⁴⁶ Westphal closes his chapter on Levinas and moves on to his analysis of Kierkegaard, for to "try to think God as the voice that addresses us from on high" is, Westphal maintains, "exactly what we find in Kierkegaard."⁴⁷

On the one hand, Levinas does little to contest, and a lot to confirm, these Kierkegaardian fears about forgetting God, speaking in *Totality and Infinity* about the "separated subject" necessary to ethics as naturally "atheist" (TI, 58),⁴⁸ denying in *Otherwise Than Being and Beyond Essence* that God is an "alleged interlocutor" (OTB, 158), and strongly suggesting the priority of ethics to the God-relation in the very title of one of his Talmudic readings, "Loving the

Torah More Than God” (in DF). Westphal’s characterization of Levinas in the preceding does indeed ring true, both in letter and in tone. And yet—curious thing!—if the God-relation is the necessary condition for an ethics that would decenter me toward the other, if the love of God is required for the love of neighbor, and Levinas lacks the former, he should not have the latter either. If it is ridiculous to argue that Kierkegaard does not have an ethics, it would be at least as ridiculous to argue that Levinas does not have ethics, and one that is not precisely the decentering of the self toward the other. Levinas’s thought is not just a “splendid heuristic,” but probably the single most passionate philosophy of irremissible responsibility for the other in the Occidental tradition. So, either the thesis that the God-relation is the very condition of possibility for an other-oriented ethics, an ethics of agape, is wrong, or else Levinas does, in his ethics, despite appearances perhaps, rely on the God-relation after all. While a case could, and perhaps even should, be made for the first possibility, this is not what we find in Levinas. I propose that what we do find, despite Levinas’s protestations against Kierkegaard, is something rather closer to what Kierkegaard is saying about the necessary relationship between God and ethics than it first appears—provided that we come to “think” God not as at the other end from us of an “intentional” relationship (as we find in Kierkegaard), be that an “inverse intentionality,”⁴⁹ but as prior to *any* intentionality.

For indeed, if the Kierkegaardian/Westphalian thesis is correct and there is a positive relationship (causal—a necessary condition!—in Kierkegaard, sometimes causal and sometimes more of a correlation in Westphal) between the transcendence of God and the decentering of the self toward the neighbor, then should not the decentering of the self in Levinas lead us to suspect, not the lack of a transcendent God but a correlatively transcendent God? As is well known, the self in Levinas is described in terms (often criticized) denoting a hyperbolic self-transcendence, an openness to the other called by Levinas a “passivity more passive than all passivity,” referred to as “fission,” to the point of being “hostage” to the other. If the passivity of the self in Christianity is described as being a slave to Christ (Paul’s *doulos christou*), Levinas’s self is even more slave in being assigned (by God, I am arguing) to be hostage to every human other, unable even to gather itself in its identity as servant of an identifiable and unified other from which its assignation to others flows. Levinas’s “me” (*moi*, in the accusative!) is sold into slavery to each and every other by a God who can only be traced across a transaction completed before its birth and against which it has no appeal. Here the self does not lose itself to find itself in the face of God; it loses itself to find itself always again at a loss. If self-transcendence is found in hyperbolic form, should this not, on the argument that ties ethical self-transcendence to our relation with God, correlate with a relationship to a hyperbolically transcendent God?

This is indeed, I suggest, what we find in Levinas. God, in Levinas, is the name for that which binds me irremissibly to the other human being, or is this binding itself, in a binding that is one of the core meanings of religion. “God” is, moreover, *required* here—for without God turning me toward the other, the

“good violence” (OTB, 43) of the other’s interruption of my egoism would simply be “violence,” to be avoided and not, as Levinas describes it, “desired.”⁵⁰ But, as that which turns me toward the other, God withdraws from my focus and turns my focus to the ones, my neighbors, to whom I am assigned. “The Infinite is not in front of its witness, but as it were outside, or on the ‘other side’ of presence, already past, out of reach, a thought behind thoughts which is too lofty to push itself up front” (OTB, 149). Here God transcends, and hyperbolically so, the situation in which God is at work. Indeed, in Levinas one does not speak of (or to) God directly, as if God were, in Levinas’s phrase, “an alleged interlocutor,” but only indirectly. It is not here that God does not speak, and not that God does not speak to me personally, but does so always across my obligations to the others to whom God binds me, such that it is only across this having been bound that God, as Levinas says, “comes to the idea.”⁵¹ On this view, the theological language in Levinas is not ornamental, but an acknowledgment of God as an appropriate theological designation for the “ethical fact” of my being bound irremissibly to my neighbor in responsibility, even if the word “God” itself is late on the scene, even if, as Levinas says, “the word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time involved in words” (OTB, 149),⁵² and even if God only becomes an object of thought “after the fact.”⁵³

Such a schema differs radically from that of “the-ism” (and a reader sensitized by Levinas cannot but suspect in every “ism” a totalizing gesture), which I am defining here as any thinking, or living, that has God as its thematic focus (Kierkegaard’s “not forgetting,” Westphal’s “what we say about God”) in relation to which everything else (e.g., our relations to human others) takes on the meaning—derivative and thus secondary—that it does, and as “thematic” rests on, in the broadest sense of the term of a *logos* about the *theos*, “theo-logy.” For Levinas, I am suggesting, does not offer us an atheism in theological language, but an a/theism that respects the transcendence of God—and the correlative decentering of the self—so thoroughly that theists, like Kierkegaard and Westphal, whose entire way of thinking requires an existing God to anchor all of its other terms (including and especially that of the thinker him- or herself), cannot but suspect in it an atheism. For the God who addresses me indirectly is not necessarily no God, but (as per Westphal’s own trajectory) perhaps an even more transcendent God than that of theism, more Wholly Other than the God who can be relied on to center the picture, more “God” than the God who is, more “the divine God,” to borrow Heidegger’s phrase, or, in Levinas’s own phrase, “a God not contaminated by Being” (OTB, xliii) than the God of theism.

By why do theists not recognize this God, one that the logic of correlation between a God-relation and ethics (given Levinas’s ethics of responsibility) should suggest? It is, I propose, because in theism, which rests on the presupposition of a cosmologically transcendent God (to return to Westphal’s rubric), the indicative (the being of God) is prioritized over the imperative (the call of God), and that Levinas reverses this priority. Let us remind ourselves of the opening and governing gesture of Westphal’s text, of the claim that “what

we say about God [what Westphal refers to as the indicative] should have a direct bearing on our own self-transformation [what Westphal refers to as the imperative],” which I am taking as a restatement of Kierkegaard’s claim that not forgetting God is a precondition for love of neighbor, even if Kierkegaard speaks of loving God here rather than speaking of God (even while he has a lot to say about God). Here the “strict correlation” between (divine) transcendence and (human) self-transcendence, between the indicative and the imperative, is given a “causal” force: the indicative has a “direct bearing” on the imperative. For theism (as I am defining it here), it is God as transcendent (to which we respond in faith), as Wholly Other, that is the precipitating cause of self-transcendence (ethics), and Westphal offers us here, as the organizing principle of his book, three models of transcendence and their implications for the possibility of self-transcendence, not a phenomenology of self-transcendence, and its implications for our ideas about divine transcendence. Levinas is closer to the latter, I would argue, offering us a quasi-phenomenology of the otherwise-than-being across which God comes to the idea. Which comes first, the indicative or the imperative? Theism gives a certain priority to the indicative. Levinas gives us an imperative that does not presuppose any indicative.

Clearly this precedence of the imperative over the indicative—where, as Levinas puts it variously, “ethics is first philosophy,” “ethics precedes ontology,” and “truth presupposes justice”—has profound consequences for the meaning of both cosmological and epistemological transcendence, for here every claim that we make about God, including any claim we make about the being (or non-being) of God (as of anything else), answers to, has as the test of its truthfulness, my ethical relationship with the neighbor. Remember that for Levinas (as already mentioned) the ethical relation is neither *beyond* the limits of knowledge (although from the perspective of knowledge it is that too) nor beyond—in the sense of higher than—being, but *foundational* for knowledge, as for everything that *is*. For instance, “the given,” the object of ontological and epistemological focus, is, for Levinas, tied to “giving,” to the offering of what is mine to the other creating a common object, creating, in fact, any object and objectivity at all. So for Levinas, unlike for theism, our idea of Transcendence does not affect our capacities for self-transcendence, our self-transcending affects (I would say even *effects*) our ideas of Transcendence.

Since for “theism” (I am speaking here more to Westphal’s schema than of Kierkegaard per se, although I am arguing that Kierkegaard does not differ on these points substantially) a cosmologically transcendent God is foundational to epistemological transcendence, which is in turn foundational for ethical/religious transcendence, on this way of thinking one cannot quite get one’s head around Levinas’s precedence, giving it full rein. Westphal states the obvious: if there is a call, there must *be* a caller, there must *be* something, in the case of theism someone, who calls, and if we are going to make any sense of this situation, we need to be able to say something, however humbly and inadequately, about this caller (and there appears to me little doubt that in Kierkegaard it is the *revealed* God of Christianity who is this caller). Granted, for both

Westphal and Kierkegaard, the personalness of the call should, and does, transform what we should say, and Westphal informs us that, having passed through ethical/religious transcendence, we realize that “while recognizing that they point to an important truth,” the impersonal metaphysical categories for God must “point beyond themselves to personal (‘moral’) categories *that are more nearly adequate to their intended referent.*”⁵⁴ So “King” and “Father” are more nearly adequate than “Prime Mover” when we are speaking of God, for example. But adequacy to its object (even if that object turns out to be a subject), the adequacy of our representations of the object to the object, still governs this epistemology, even if (as in Kierkegaard) this “knowledge” remains at the level of faith/belief, even if the “persecuted truth” produced requires subjective commitment as integral to the process. It is true that for theism ethical/religious transcendence (that calls us to action and not only knowledge) transforms, even radically, the *content* of our knowledge of God, but does not fundamentally change the model that conceives of God as a *noema* of our “intentions” (be they “knowledge” or “belief”); faith/belief still *aims at* an “object” (it is faith/belief *in God*).

It is as a challenge to this model, a challenge to the “obvious” claim that behind the call there must be a caller, that I read what might be called Levinas’s epistemological transcendence, wherein ethics precedes, and does not simply supplement, cosmological transcendence. If Levinas can be said to retain the idea of adequation for knowledge, the ultimate test of a truth claim’s adequacy is not its correspondence to an object, but whether or not it is an ethically adequate offering in the face of the need of the other, in the face of the face, and this goes also for theistic/theological truth claims. But theology, God talk, presents us with an additional challenge on Levinas’s scheme, because God (the God who is already at work before the word God is pronounced, and God becomes an object of belief) is not an object, a thing, a Being about which one could make truth claims, not even the Highest Being of theism. Neither, of course, is the human other in Levinas. It is in the face of, or face-to-face with, the human other that objects are constituted, and knowledge about them becomes possible; we never properly have knowledge of the human other qua ethical subject. And God for Levinas, we recall, at least on my reading, is the name for that which binds me to the other. Perhaps we could say here that ethical responsibility for the other is the condition of possibility for my/our knowledge of objects, for the very constitution of objects, and God is the condition of possibility for my ethical responsibility. If the human other already transcends knowledge in being foundational for it, then so much more does God, who is yet another step removed—*behind*—the relationship of knowledge conceived of as adequation, or any intentional act that would be the co-ordination—given or achieved—of an aim and an aimed at. Epistemological transcendence, in the sense of God’s transcending of our epistemological categories, is not for Levinas, as it is for theism, the “too far, too much” of a real but inadequate knowledge of God, but a recognition that God, as the condition of possibility for the condition of possibility for knowledge, as prior to knowledge, is not the sort of thing—not a

thing at all—that is subject to being known, but functions in an entirely different, and non-comparable, modality. God on Levinas’s scheme is Wholly Other not in “permanently *exceeding*” and surprising my expectations,⁵⁵ yet still being subject to my experience, but Wholly Other in *preceding*, in evoking or invoking, my experience itself (not as a puppet master manipulating the scene—for Levinas there is no “world behind the world”—but as the spirit that animates the scene itself.

For Levinas, God has always already withdrawn behind my having been assigned to the other. This does not remove God’s mystery, for what could be more mysterious than a God who is not an object for knowledge (or one who is not an object of knowledge until very late in the game, and then only across a certain “betrayal,” OTB, 151), nor does it remove revelation, even if it is not God here who is revealed. This does not mean, either, that we cannot “know” God, but we must carefully distinguish (Westphal too refers to these terms) between believing-in/knowing-about (an epistemological concern) and biblical knowing (a spiritual, intimate familiarity), as a participation in the life of God, in the Life that is God (as Michel Henry might put it).⁵⁶ And this does not mean that we need not worry about being faithful to God, but we must carefully distinguish between belief-about (an epistemological concern) and faith as faithfulness, wherein we understand that we are most faithful to God not by focusing on God, but by setting our focus on that to which God turns us.

The Love of God

My guess, in conclusion, is that we misconstrue the argument as one between Kierkegaard and the priority of the love of God on the one side, and Levinas’s rejecting God to emphasize responsibility to the neighbor on the other. For Levinas affirms, with theism, I am claiming, the necessity of God for ethics, but this God is not the God of theism (perhaps “is not” *tout court*), not the “object” of faith/belief, and not the necessary “middle term” in human relationships. Levinas’s argument is not with God, but with the God of theism, the God of whom we can and must think and/or speak before we can ethically encounter the human other, the God who becomes my first obligation rather than the God who obligates me, first and foremost, to the other. Indeed, Levinas’s argument with Kierkegaard may be first of all an argument with a schema in which God is thought in such a way that God could be in potential competition with the neighbor for my attentions in the first place. Indeed, as removed from my intentional focus, as that which—prior to any intentional act, and always behind my back—rather turns my focus to the other, Levinas removes God from being a competitor for my focus, my devotion, my love. Here, then, is a response to the problem of the “greatest commandment” being segmented into two commandments whose both/and tempts us toward, ultimately and in practice, an either/or, or a one before the other. For perhaps to love the other in God’s love does not require being in love with God, with the concomitant risk of the latter relationship’s dangerous clandestinity. But this Levinasian “solu-

tion,” or this “solution” inspired by Levinas, comes at a price: we are no longer able to be blindly responsible *to* the God of our theism but must be responsible (to our fellows) *for* the God of our theism—and *that* requires fear and trembling of the highest order.

Notes

1. As Kierkegaard and Levinas are both thinkers of “difference,” perhaps the difference between them should not ultimately trouble us. Perhaps each “needs” the difference that, with respect to his own thought, the “other” represents. I am, despite the investigations that follow, open to taking their differences *à propos* each other as finally productive.

2. This is a live issue for me in my own religious life. I was raised an evangelical Quaker (generally more theologically conservative and biblically oriented), but for the past twenty years have worshiped with non-programmed Friends (generally more theologically liberal, and more peace and justice oriented). I am equally comfortable in either community and have a concern to work toward reconciliation, both in myself and in the larger Quaker community, between these two emphases, which represent an issue that goes well beyond my own faith tradition.

3. This makes for some strange political bedfellows, a complicity without cooperation between, for example, the Taliban and certain American fundamentalists, who share more with each other than what divides them, even if on their own view the thing that divides them is the only important thing.

4. Of course the Euthyphro problem is already “theological” in Plato’s version, but takes on a different aspect in monotheism, when Plato’s theology becomes Judeo-Christian theology.

5. Accepting the latter as a good thing rather than as something over which we despair and probing its implications seems to me to be *a part* of what Caputo is up to in *The Weakness of God*, although the text has layers that go beyond just that. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

6. Compare the sections entitled “Phenomenology of Eros,” “Fecundity,” and “The Subjectivity in Eros” in TI, 256–73.

7. Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2. Although I will focus on only this work here, it contains a small part of what Westphal has to say about the Kierkegaard-Levinas relationship. Michael R. Paradiso-Michau has compiled a list of thirteen articles or books, already published or forthcoming, in which Westphal has dealt with this relationship, beginning in 1992.

8. This prejudice is best stated up front and is evident in my article: Jeffrey Dudiak, “Religion with an Impure Heart? Kierkegaard and Levinas on God and Other Others,” in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, ed. J. K. A. Smith and H. Venema (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2004), 185–96.

9. This analysis is not, moreover, irrelevant to what Westphal will say about the relationship between Kierkegaard and Levinas, as it will function as one of his main apologies for Kierkegaard over against the concerns of Levinas—an attempt to defend an ontologically conceived God against the charge of ontotheology, or over against Levinas in particular, to defend a cosmologically transcendent God (who exists) against the charge

of a “God contaminated by Being,” against the charge that a conception of a cosmologically transcendent God is necessarily totalizing.

10. Even if it is the case (and I am not doubting this here) that a number of thinkers (in this case two) who deny (the) transcendence (of God) also deny ethical self-transcendence, this does not demonstrate a *necessary* link between the two denials, and especially not a causal one. This would not even be demonstrated should *every* thinker who denies the transcendence of God also deny ethical self-transcendence, unless the mechanism of the connection were revealed.

11. Or at least his theory of active faith, so the matter remains unstraightforward, retaining the ambiguities and aporias that accompany any philosophy critical of philosophy.

12. I tried to provide some of that in an unpublished paper presented at the Institute for Christian Studies on March 16, 2005, entitled, “Transcending God with Levinas: Reading Westphal’s *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence* Back-words,” an invited paper to a conference on “Intelligibility of the Transcendent: Thinking with Levinas about God, Philosophy, and Education.” Some of the structural problems with the current essay stem from the fact that it is an attempt to rewrite this earlier essay that examined Westphal’s readings of Levinas in light of Kierkegaard as an essay examining the Kierkegaard-Levinas relationship more directly, rather than starting from scratch.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* (Fata Morgana, 1976). “Existence et éthique,” 77–87; “A propos de ‘Kierkegaard vivant,’” 88–92. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. M. B. Smith (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996). The quotations from these short pieces that appear in my text are my own translations from the French texts. There is also the odd reference to Kierkegaard in other works, for example, the claim, “It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other,” in Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 40. I have provided a fuller exposition of Levinas’s comments on Kierkegaard in Dudiak, “Religion with an Impure Heart,” 185–89. I will not speculate here on the degree to which Levinas may have encountered and/or been influenced by Kierkegaard outside of his explicit comments, a question that is being actively pursued by others.

14. Levinas, “Existence et éthique,” 67.

15. Levinas, “A propos de ‘Kierkegaard vivant,’” 77.

16. *Ibid.*, 78.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Levinas is not immune to hyperbole, whether intentional or not, and his attribution of the stylistic harshness of modern thought (from Nietzsche to the neo-Hegelians to Heidegger, even National Socialism) to Kierkegaardian origin may well fall under this category. There is, moreover, a double irony here in Levinas’s shock at Kierkegaard’s violence, insofar as (1) Levinas appreciates Kierkegaard’s refusal of the violence of totalities that is the motivation for the structures of thought in Kierkegaard in which Levinas will identify a “new violence,” and (2) Levinas himself is appreciative of at least a certain kind of violence, which he terms a “good violence” (i.e., the assault of the other upon my egoism) and many a commentator has been shocked by this, Levinas’s violence, in turn.

19. Levinas, “A propos de ‘Kierkegaard vivant,’” 76.

20. *Ibid.*, 89.

21. Or, better, the very constitution of the universal/communal across my answering to the other, as we shall shortly see.

22. Levinas, “A propos de ‘Kierkegaard vivant,’” 90.

23. *Ibid.*, 76.

24. Levinas, "Existence et éthique," 73.

25. One might more precisely say "the same" here rather than "the totality," but "the same" may be taken in a rough and ready way as "the totality" as it is embodied in me.

26. I must confess that trying to sort through the game of three-dimensional chess (and one in which moves are made by one player only to be taken back or taken again differently by another: four-dimensional chess?) that is the play of pseudonyms in Kierkegaard's authorship is beyond me, and I will leave that task to more accomplished readers. For my purposes, I am allowing the major themes of the major pseudonyms to pass under the name of Kierkegaard, even while I understand that by doing so I run the very real risk of playing the fool to Kierkegaard's irony. But aside from engaging in the often comical if highly sophisticated exercise of speaking of several authors in discussing the works of Kierkegaard (and I suspect that Kierkegaard might have taken some bemused pleasure in hearing that too!), I am not sure how else to proceed. I learn as I go.

27. This may correspond roughly to the Kierkegaardian distinction between Religiousness A and Religiousness B insofar as the former is something closer to a general human structure (guilt) and the latter to a specifically Christian/faith version of the same (sin).

28. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 219–20.

29. Strange thing here, in that the Knight of Faith is excluded from all community (there is no community of Knights of Faith; each must "do" faith for himself), and yet the ethics that follows from faith is apparently "shared" by all those of faith. So Christian ethics is not faith alone but a step "beyond." And yet this "beyond" does not seem to be a "higher still," but a "consequence of."

30. Even if, as in the case of the John the apostle, it is perfected by being lived more as an indicative than as an imperative. See the translators' introduction, 15–17, and conclusion, 344–53, in Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the form of Discourses*, trans. H. Hong and E. Hong (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962).

31. Westphal quotes this too, at *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 220.

32. Though also not so ironic really, since for Kierkegaard *only* the relationship with God resists mediation, not any of my other relationships.

33. I am leaving aside here as inconsequential to the present point the perhaps otherwise important distinction that Kierkegaard makes in his journals between "edifying discourses" and "reflections" in comparing the *Works of Love* to other works. Compare the translator's introduction to WOL, 11.

34. Kierkegaard devotes all of section 2, the first major section of *Works of Love* (34–98), to an exegesis and exposition of Matthew 22:39: "And a second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

35. "Love!" is a peculiar command, because of its open-endedness and because it seems to imply an attentiveness to the specific needs of the other that most commands regarding conduct toward others, given *a priori*, lack. Although Kierkegaard does "fill it in" in some detail in *Works of Love*, I am struck by the possibility that the content of this command is no more given *in advance* of the encounter with the other than is Levinas's own "responsibility," and if so it would fail to function well as a "neutral third." Still, there are times in Kierkegaard's writings where openness to the expressed need of the other seems to be precluded by the help that one is to provide to him by, for example, "suspending him over 60,000 fathoms of water," so that he may, despite himself, be put in a position where he will turn to God.

36. In fact, the *structure* of Levinas's ethics is not dissimilar to the structure of Silentio's religion, resisting the temptation of a universal ethics in favor of an exposure

to, and responsibility for (although for Kierkegaard this latter “for” is more properly a “to”), the singular other/Other who in interrupting my security in the universal calls for a singular response—one not pre-programmed according to a pre-given standard. It is this parallel that leads Westphal to include Levinas as a leading figure, even if ultimately put aside, in his *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*. I have also dealt with this correlation, the similarities and differences, in my “Religion with an Impure Heart,” 189–94. What most distinguishes Levinas and Kierkegaard at this point is that while for Kierkegaard the singular Other who calls for an absolute response is God, turning me away at least in the interim from the human other and ethics, for Levinas the other is the human other whose call for an absolute response from me is ethics itself, even if always already the singular other is one among many and the ethical moment is converted into a concern for justice and its universality.

37. In this context Levinas is fond of Zossima’s claim in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everything, and I more than the others,” at, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, OTB, 146.

38. I lay out this argument in considerable detail throughout my book: Jeffrey Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 224–47.

39. Kierkegaard, “A propos de ‘Kierkegaard vivant,’” 77.

40. From the prayer that opens the text.

41. “Middle term” is explicitly used by Kierkegaard in this context at least three times in *Works of Love*, 78, 87, 113.

42. I have not always attempted here to sort out Westphal’s readings and employments of Kierkegaard from Kierkegaard himself (and given the pseudonymous authorship the very phrase “Kierkegaard himself” is problematic), partly because of the in principle barriers to/impossibility of such distinctions (the impossibility of separating an author from his/her readers, as Gadamer has convincingly taught), and partly because I am not a Kierkegaard specialist. So I concede, in advance, to those who would take me to task for “getting Kierkegaard wrong.” I am interested in the broader trajectory of thinking that Kierkegaard represents, and represents over against the broad trajectory of Levinas’s thought, and *that* I hope to have not entirely missed.

43. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 179.

44. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 201.

45. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 179. Westphal is hardly alone in this judgment. Some of Levinas’s most outstanding interpreters and advocates also read him as an atheist, Robert Gibbs among them. But Levinas’s personal beliefs are, even on the judgment of his own works, not really so important here.

46. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 200.

47. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 202.

48. Albeit an atheism “required by idea of Infinity” (TI, 60).

49. Westphal rightly points out that the “intentionality” at play both in Kierkegaard and Levinas with respect to the Other/other is an inverse intentionality. “*Inverse intentionality is the key to ethical transcendence*. By contrast with the intentionality of possession, it will be one of ‘dispossession’” (Westphal, 192). I am arguing that while this does characterize our relationship to God in Kierkegaard (and our relationship to the human other in Levinas), it is inadequate, along with a more conventional intentionality, to describe the God-relation in Levinas.

50. Cf. The opening section of the main body of *Totality and Infinity*, “Desire for the invisible,” 33–35.

51. Cf. GWCM.

52. In reference to the witness to God in the “here I am.”

53. Cf. OTB, 151: “I can indeed state the meaning borne witness to as a said. It is an extraordinary word, the only one that does not extinguish or absorb its saying, but it cannot remain a simple word. The word God is an overwhelming semantic event that subdues the subversion worked by illeity. The glory of the Infinite shuts itself up in a word and becomes a being. But it already undoes its dwelling and unsays itself without vanishing into nothingness.”

54. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 231, my emphasis.

55. Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 3.

56. Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. S. Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Part Three.

*Time, Alterity,
and Eschatology*