

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php

Face-to-face with Levinas: (Ev)angelical hospitality *and* (de)constructive ethics?

Ronald T. Michener

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der jüdische Philosoph Emmanuel Levinas muss auf dem Hintergrund des furchtbaren Elends des Holocausts und Zweiten Weltkriegs verstanden werden. Levinas erklärt sich gegen die Vorherrschaft der Ontologie in der westlichen Philosophie, welche die moderne Ethik geprägt hat. Ethik und nicht Ontologie macht zuallererst Philosophie aus. Levinas spricht sich für eine Verpflichtung gegenüber dem „Antlitz des anderen“ aus angesichts einer postmodernen Auflösung von Wertesystemen.

* * * *

RÉSUMÉ

La pensée du philosophe juif Emmanuel Levinas doit être considérée sur l'arrière-fond de la seconde guerre mondiale et de la Shoah. Levinas s'oppose à la primauté de l'ontologie dans la philosophie occidentale, qui a orienté l'éthique moderne. L'éthique, et non l'ontologie, doit former la base de la philosophie. Levinas affirme une obligation envers autrui, au regard de la déconstruction postmoderne des systèmes moraux. On ne peut réduire autrui à notre compréhension ou à notre savoir.

* * * *

SUMMARY

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas must be understood against the backdrop of the horrific despair of the Holocaust and the Second World War. Levinas speaks out against the primacy of ontology in Western philosophy that characterized modern ethics. Ethics, not ontology, is first philosophy. Levinas affirms an obligation to the “face of other” in view of the postmodern deconstruction of moral systems. The face of the other cannot

* * * *

Introduction

The Jewish religious philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is perhaps the most important Continental ethical thinker of the last century. Unfortunately, he is seldom considered by Evangelicals. This paper will suggest that an Evangelical engagement with Levi-

nas offers resources pertinent to the development of personal and social ethics in our postmodern climate. It will first consider Levinas's post-foundational call to the obligation to the “face of other” in view of the postmodern deconstruction of moral systems. Secondly, it will reflect on his proposal of

Als Botschafter in Wort und Tat, die das Evangelium der Erlösung und Gerechtigkeit zu „einem dieser Geringsten“ tragen, gibt es viel, was Evangelikale von Levinas lernen können. Genau in „einem dieser Geringsten“ lässt sich Gottes Spur verfolgen. Der andere (seine Person) ist von transzendenter Art, nichtsdestoweniger veranlasst er mich zu einer Beziehung. Darüber hinaus wirbt Levinas' Werk für eine asymmetrische Agapeliebe zum anderen durch verbale Äusserungen und Werke der Gastfreundschaft, und dies innerhalb und ausserhalb bestimmter Glaubensgemeinschaften.

* * * *

Les évangéliques qui sont porteurs en parole et en actes de l'Évangile de la rédemption et de la justice pour « le plus petit d'entre eux » peuvent apprendre beaucoup de Levinas. C'est dans « ces plus petits d'entre eux » que se manifeste la trace de Dieu. L'autre personne est transcendante et m'appelle en même temps à la relation. En outre, l'œuvre de Levinas recommande un amour asymétrique pour autrui par la proclamation et une attitude d'hospitalité à l'intérieur et au-delà des communautés de la foi particulières.

* * * *

be contained in or reduced to our comprehension or knowledge. As message-bearers in word and deed, of the gospel of redemption and justice to the “least of these”, there is much that Evangelicals can learn from Levinas. It is in the “least of these” that the trace of God is revealed. The other (person) is transcendent, yet compels me to relationship. Moreover, Levinas's work promotes an asymmetrical, agapeic love for the other in proclamation and hospitable action within and beyond particular faith communities.

* * * *

nas offers resources pertinent to the development of personal and social ethics in our postmodern climate. It will first consider Levinas's post-foundational call to the obligation to the “face of other” in view of the postmodern deconstruction of moral systems. Secondly, it will reflect on his proposal of

ethics as “first philosophy” in view of an Evangelical commitment to be message bearers of God’s redemption and justice in both proclamation and hospitable action within and beyond particular faith communities.

1. Brief biography

Biographical details are often brushed aside when considering the ideas of various philosophers and theologians. However, it would be unthinkable to do this with Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas must be understood against the backdrop of the horrific despair of the Holocaust and the historic scars it left on Europe after the Second World War. These traumatic events deeply touched this man’s life and perspectives.

Levinas was born to Jewish parents in Lithuania in 1906, educated in both the Bible and the Talmud, and experienced the rich legacy of Russian culture and literature. His first reading language was Hebrew but his mother tongue was Russian. During the First World War, Levinas’s family moved as refugees to the Ukraine. As a young teen, Levinas witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution in February and October of 1917. Several years later, he moved to France and studied at the University of Strasbourg, where he was introduced to the phenomenological method of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas then studied under both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg before finally settling in Paris, his home for the remainder of his life. He became a French citizen in 1930. He began working on a book on Heidegger, but stopped with it when Heidegger joined the Nazi party.¹ This was obviously devastating for Levinas, as Heidegger had deeply impacted his philosophical formation. As he would write later (in 1963): “One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is difficult to forgive Heidegger.”²

The wounds of World War Two ran deep with Levinas, who was haunted by the atrocities done to his people, his family and himself. As a French citizen, he was drafted into the French army in 1939, but shortly afterwards he was taken prisoner of war and put into a work camp in Northern Germany. During this period, many of Levinas’s extended family members were apparently murdered by the Nazis in Lithuania. Levinas’s life, however, was protected as a French prisoner of war. In 1945, after five years in the work camp, he was finally able to return to his wife and daughter in Paris,

where they had remained safe and under protection in a monastery.³ Levinas vowed never to set foot in Germany again – an oath he kept for the remainder of his life.⁴ In spite of this promise, he would, ironically, forever be intellectually indebted to these Germans under whom he studied in terms of his philosophical phenomenological method.

Phenomenologists such as Levinas attempt to awaken us to the shared features that are part of our everyday experience, but that are nevertheless commonly ignored in our everyday life.⁵ Phenomenology concerns itself with our descriptions and experiences of appearances in our consciousness, by observing the reality before us, rather than with predetermined rational theories that we project on reality. Of course, how one constitutes phenomena is always relative to one’s horizon and various conditions of perception.⁶

Although Levinas became an important spokesman for Husserl’s philosophy in France, he was most notably impacted by Martin Heidegger’s fundamental ontology in the groundbreaking work, *Being and time*.⁷ However, he switched the priority of Heidegger’s ontology to that of ethics – a move which is paramount for understanding Levinas.

2. Ethics as first philosophy

Deconstructing modern ethics

Before I go further, allow me to offer a couple of introductory comments about “deconstruction”, due to its importance for understanding Levinas’s position. Deconstructionism is often unfortunately seen as the monster of postmodernity – the nihilism of Jacques Derrida. But deconstruction is not ultimately about destruction or annihilation of meaning. Rather, it is primarily about what happens to texts, ideas and intellectual systems when they are examined with detailed scrutiny, uncovering that which has been lost, neglected or forgotten in ordinary discourse or social practice. It is not about the negation of reality but about reconstituting the reality in which we live and speaking in the name of justice. Stated positively, James K.A. Smith puts it this way:

Deconstruction is a deeply affirmative mode of critique attentive to the way in which texts, structures and institutions marginalize and exclude ‘the other’, with a view to reconstructing and reconstituting institutions and practices to be more just (i.e., to respond to the call of the other).⁸

It is this sense of deconstruction with which we should seek to understand Levinas.

In the wake of the deconstruction of modernist ethics, Levinas declared the “essential problem” in the form of a question: “Can we speak of an absolute command after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?” It is as if to say, “reason had its heyday, so what now?” This was the century, according to Levinas, when “suffering and evil are deliberately imposed, yet no reason sets limits to the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.” Modernist systems of totality resulted in war and genocide. The Holocaust was the “paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, where evil appears in its diabolical horror”.¹⁰ This haunting memory is what motivated the intensity of Levinas’s writings. What is it, after Auschwitz, that will transcend the mess made of modernity’s idolatry of reason and the totalizing schemes of Western thought?¹¹ At first it would seem that the massacres of yesterday would provide a fail safe protection against such atrocities today, but unfortunately historical memories are like cards, according to Zygmunt Bauman, “reshuffled to suit new hands”.¹² For example, Bauman points out, people can now be killed from afar by using electronic surveillance equipment and smart missiles. The killer remains distant and the victims remain faceless. Now, the victims themselves may not be morally superior; they simply did not have the opportunity to be first to push the button. Bauman claims that the superior morality is the “morality of the superior” – the guardians of morality.¹³

The rational foundations of morality conveniently entered the scene on the Enlightenment coattails of Kant. Justified moral actions must be expressed through the universal quality of human reason – a moral imperative – not through the whimsical nature of emotions. Kant’s rule-guided deontological ethic and its mistrust of feelings developed into a morality that became a detached “proceduralism”. It was assumed that rational modern ethics, if rigorously applied and freed from the impulses of subjective desires, should be able to settle the moral dilemmas we face in the world.¹⁴ Again, Bauman aptly states:

De-substantiation of the moral argument in favor of proceduralism does a lot for the subordination of the moral agent to the external legislating agency, yet little or nothing at all for the increase of the sum total of good; in the final

account it disarms the forces of moral resistance to immoral commands – very nearly the only protection the moral self might have against being a part to inhumanity.¹⁵

The abstract totalizing and rational universality of Enlightenment ethics tended to remove the rules of morality from the persons to whom they should be attached.

Levinas spoke out against this primacy of ontology in Western philosophy that characterized modern ethics. Ontology forces pre-determined categories, it attempts to unify at the expense of difference. Reality must be seen as one rather than multifarious. Everything is understood as an entire comprehensible reality, “reducing the other by the same”.¹⁶ In fact, Levinas saw this pernicious influence of Hellenistic ontology as laying the foundation for the entire Nazi agenda and the Holocaust. Since Jewish people were “outside” the classifications of the determined identity markers of the powerful, they would not be included. In Levinas’ view, ontology assigns a place for everything, making everything equal, leaving no room for the Other. That which is different must be assimilated and comprehended. There must be control. This type of absolutist thinking is devastating to ethics. Western philosophy’s preoccupation with the understanding and classification of being and reality, then organising that reality by means of technology and economy, is fundamentally *egological* (*think “ego”*) – suppressing the uniqueness of the other, and hence excluding the voice of God bidding us to love our neighbour.¹⁷

So the starting point for philosophy for Levinas is not found in ontology (i.e. the question of Being, *pace* Heidegger) or in epistemology (the question of knowledge) but in ethics. Ethics is first philosophy. Although the autonomous self had assumed the centre stage with Descartes; with Heidegger, the self, *Dasein* became subsumed under the grand umbrella of *Das Man*: the One, the “They” collective, an ontology which ultimately leads to tyranny.¹⁸ Levinas expels this full-fledged centred self of the Enlightenment and moves beyond the impersonal collective mass of Heidegger by placing the “Other” at the centre, not as some impersonal, anomalous horde, but as a personal face with whom I must converse. So he reverses the direction of philosophical thinking from the “metaphysical to the commonplace”, from the opaque question of Being, to the question of human being.¹⁹

Levinas’s move is not simply some theoretical

philosophical ideal. For him it was first and foremost experiential. As he writes: “My critique of the totality has come in fact after a political experience that we have not yet forgotten.”²⁰ The epigraph to his book, *Otherwise Than Being*, expresses this clearly:

To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.²¹

Levinas scholar Simon Critchley wisely points out that Levinas was not some shallow, liberal pacifist. He had experienced first-hand the horrors of war, suffered its consequences and understood the ethical demand from the other in the struggle of life and death. The conflict of war placed him before others where the brutality of death was all around him, where the Biblical injunction of “thou shalt not murder” was agonizingly put to the test.²² This is a theme to which Levinas consistently returns. As Levinas puts it:

To approach the Other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a “moving force”, this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder. The “You shall not commit murder” which delineates the face in which the Other is produced submits my freedom to judgment.²³

It is exactly this confrontation with the face of the other, looking the other in the eyes in the engagement of conversation, that confronts us with an exteriority beyond our pre-determined concepts of being and knowledge. It is a confrontation of the radical exteriority of the other that completely ruptures our knowledge paradigm. It cannot be mastered or controlled.²⁴

The face of the other cannot be reduced to knowledge

The “big idea” of Levinas is that the other before us cannot be contained or reduced to our comprehension or knowledge. Simon Critchley elucidates Levinas’s point through a memorable illustration by the American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, with reference to the philosophical problem of other minds. The question framed by Cavell is: “How can I know if someone is truly in pain?” Let us say that I was an incompetent dentist drilling away on someone’s tooth and my patient suddenly

screams in what seems to me to be obvious torment. I immediately apologise (and perhaps offer more novocaine?). The patient, however, instantly changes composure and replies: “Oh no, I am not in pain at all, I was simply calling my hamsters!”²⁵ How ridiculous! But how can I know if the patient is telling the truth? The point is that we really cannot *know* for sure whether this person was in pain or calling his hamsters, unless we see his hamsters start scurrying into the dentist’s examination room.

The gist of what Critchley is pointing out in this somewhat silly example, via Cavell, is that for Levinas there is an interiority of the other, an infinite separateness (what Levinas calls “alterity”) or distinctness, that always escapes my comprehension and cannot be reduced to mere knowledge.²⁶ Our engagement with another person is a unique experience, involving a certain level of engagement that extends beyond our knowledge of objects. Levinas describes it this way:

Our relation with the other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension. Not only because knowledge of the other (*autrui*) requires, outside of all curiosity, also sympathy or love, ways of being distinct from impassible contemplation, but because in our relation with the other (*autrui*), he does not affect us in terms of a concept. He is a being (*étant*) and counts as such.²⁷

An encounter with the other cannot be reduced to my own analysis, nor assimilated into my understanding or reasoning. The other with whom I am standing face to face beckons me to moral obligation. The call of the other precedes my own will and initiative. It ruptures my own ordered life of *being* (ontology) and morally obliges me to radical “corporeal” responsibility with sensitivity to embodied persons who become weary, experience pain and have physical and emotional needs.²⁸ Levinas puts it this way with phenomenological clarity: “Only a subject that eats can be-for-the-other, or can signify. Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.”²⁹

The face of the other is transcendent

This acknowledgement of and respect for the other whom we cannot conceptually subsume is what Levinas calls transcendence. He submits that it is only our relation with the Other that provides a

“dimension of transcendence” which is a relation completely different than our relative egoism typical of the sensible.³⁰ It is a *this*-worldly transcendence, not one lying beyond us in the heavens or akin to the noumenal realm of Kant. Rather it is the *other person* who exceeds myself and obligates me in an ethical relation. It is the distinctness, the “beyondness”, of the other that is transcendent and confronts me with infinite responsibility. The face of the Other who lays claim on me through his transcendence “is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated”.³¹

Although transcendent, the face of the other also displays the personal; it is where the realm of humanity is revealed, and it is through the face of humanity that we see the trace of the invisible God.³² In the face of the other I become aware of the idea of the Infinite. Levinas contends that the “dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face” and, he continues, there “can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God.”³³

But how does Levinas avoid an idolatry of the human person? How does he (or we) avoid confusion of the infinite Other with *the* Infinite Other of God?³⁴ Levinas does make a distinction. He claims that the Other “is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.”³⁵ Noted Levinas scholar Roger Burggraeve points out that God and the other are not identical. It is not that the face of the other who is the Infinite ONE, but through the face I “hear the Word of God” who calls me to ethical responsibility and points the way to God.³⁶ The ethical call is rooted in the Divine. It does not deny the self but drives the self from the “myself” to neighbour centred responsibility.³⁷ God is always beyond me, but the trace of God is manifested through the face and the voice of another human being who calls me to ethical responsibility.³⁸ My understanding of the other will consequently always remain inadequate and incomplete in an asymmetrical relationship.³⁹

The face of the other is asymmetrical

Levinas’s ethic is a radical call to the other in responsibility that does not assume reciprocity or symmetry in any form. As Levinas submits: “I am responsible for the other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair.... The I always has one responsibility more

than all the others.”⁴⁰ Unlike the horizontal symmetry of the I-Thou dialogical exchange of Martin Buber, Levinas calls for a *disinterested*, unconditional, asymmetrical relationship without mutuality or the expectation of equal exchange.⁴¹

Certainly, Christians are summoned to follow Christ’s example in nurturing an agapeic love for the other without the expectation of reciprocity (see Luke 6:35). One may ask if Levinas is too extreme in this regard. James Olthuis is concerned that such radical insistence on the ethical obligation may end up causing more damage than good due to its excessive moralism. If one’s personal needs are forfeited, they may reappear in a passive aggressive manner that may be emotionally destructive.⁴² Typically, of course, neglecting one’s personal needs is not a problem. As I have suggested elsewhere in this regard, it is better to read Levinas as a postmodern ethical prophet who summons us away from the selfish complacency that generally typifies our everyday lives and challenges us to authentic neighbour love.⁴³ Indeed, this seems impossible, but such impossibility must remain the focus of our moral efforts as Christians. Stephen Webb aptly states that in our world of “calculative exchange based on self-interest and self-promotion” our “language of ethics, then, must be couched in the rhetoric of hyperbole”.⁴⁴ Levinas’ use of hyperbole in this regard is not simply a rhetorical device used for emphasis, but it is a pointer to the depth of Levinas’ call to a radical self-less obligation that will deface my self love to respectfully face the other.⁴⁵

Philip Rolnick makes some perceptive comments in this regard in his recent *Person, Grace and God*. Rolnick suggests, and I agree, that if we read Levinas in a charitable fashion, his hyperbole is “a performance to protect against the sinfully strong tendency to curve back upon the self, not unlike Martin Luther’s *incurvatus in se*.”⁴⁶ Rolnick points out that Luther also made use of hyperbole, illustrating this with a quote from Luther’s *Lectures on Romans*:

Therefore I believe that with this commandment ‘as yourself’ man is not commanded to love himself but rather is shown the sinful love with which he does in fact love himself, as if to say: ‘You are completely curved in upon yourself and pointed toward love of yourself, a condition from which you will not be delivered unless you altogether cease loving yourself and, forgetting yourself, love your neighbour.’⁴⁷

In a similar vein, Rolnick submits, Levinas is attempting a reversal of this curvature by focusing exclusively on non-reciprocity in our relation with the other. Transcendence is always exterior, infinite, beyond my possession and tendency to totalise and control.⁴⁸

I do not wish to disparage Olthuis' uneasiness. Certainly one should not think and act in an excessive agapeic manner that would ignore personal needs altogether and create an abnormal focus on guilt rather than the embrace of God's forgiveness. We are to recognise the other unconditionally in appreciation for God's radically gracious forgiveness and love for us through the atonement of Christ. Hence, our call to the other is to be a natural response of gratitude rather than psychologically induced guilt-laden obligation.⁴⁹ But for Levinas, a radical forfeiting of the self was ironically a liberation of the self from it-self by which it was imprisoned. For this is where the "for-the-other" is free from the oppression of ontology and is now open to the transcendence of the other.⁵⁰

Rolnick points out, ironically, that giving of ourselves for the other is not to be seen as a burden in life, but as a blessing. Our times of greatest enjoyment and love are not manifested in moments of self-conscious reflection, but in those times where we have poured ourselves out into the activity at hand. Those who attempt to save their own life will lose it, but those who give their life for the gospel, Jesus, and for the Other, will experience a renewed life.⁵¹

The face of the other and (Ev)angelical hospitality

I highly commend Levinas's postmodern criticism of the imperious ontological structures characteristic of Western thought. His ethic rightly retreats "from the blind alleys into which radically pursued ambitions of modernity have led" and "readmits the Other as a neighbor, as the close-to-hand-and-mind, into the hard core of the moral self..."⁵² To truly act as followers of Christ, we must gaze into the face of the downtrodden, the poor and the widows among us, seeking justice and righting wrongs. This is the true religion to which the Epistle of James speaks (1:26). For whatever is done for the "least of these" is also done to the Lord (Matthew 25:40).⁵³

A key idea here from Levinas is expressed in French as "*Après vous, Monsieur.*" "After you, sir." (By implication of course: "*After you my dear lady or sir.*") "Please, you go first, before me." God is

not found in the ontological and theoretical sky of abstract Greek metaphysics but he is found in the concreteness of the person right before us in flesh, through "everyday and quite banal acts of civility, hospitality, kindness and politeness that have perhaps received too little attention from philosophers".⁵⁴ This is the wisdom expressed in Jesus' radical call to discipleship, representing the qualities manifested as the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22). How easy it is to forget or simply neglect to live our theology by consistently manifesting hospitality in the everydayness of life.

Our (Ev)angelical message in word

As angels are message bearers of God, so this is our call, our purpose and our identity as Ev-angelicals. We are "*angelical*" message-bearers of the *euangelion*: God's gospel of redemption and justice found in Jesus, in word and deed. We speak in conversation before the face of others and we act according to their needs impressed upon us. As the Samaritan was confronted with the wounds and bruises of the robbed Jewish traveller, so the orphan and the widow beckon us, obligate us to engage them as they manifest the traces of the face of the divine, a face that cannot be seen, yet is made visible, an impossible possibility afforded us only by the *imago Dei* manifested in the Other. This is an obligation, indeed a responsibility, but ultimately it is a magnificent privilege to witness the unveiling of God before us and to participate in divine action towards others in Christian hospitality.

Our (Ev)angelical hospitality in deed

This hospitality must be expressed among the poor, the downtrodden, the outcast and all who are strangers, in prison and mistreated. By such hospitality, the writer of Hebrews (13:2-3) instructs us, we may have tended to "angels unaware":

Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Our practice of hospitality in the margins, to the "least of these", is where the strongest trace of the divine may be found. As angels display a trace of the divine, yet must not be worshipped as divine or equated with God (Revelation 19:10; 22:9), so we serve the other, where the trace of God is manifest

– angels we serve unaware, unknowing, completely eluding our comprehension or knowledge.⁵⁵

‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ (Matthew 25:37-40)

Yet these common, “banal acts” as Critchley calls them, cannot be totalized into some simple moral system according to Levinas’s way of thinking. Rather, the moral conscience must remain alive, in-fleshed and fully aware of the unpredictability of life and its many complexities. By no means does Levinas’s deconstruction of the moral structures of modernity lead to some kind of moral paralysis or ethical anarchism. Instead, we learn from Levinas to re-personalise our ethics in the context of authentic relationships.⁵⁶ His call to us, if I may put it this way, is a call to radical ethical responsibility – looking not to some overarching system, but to look into the eyes of the other standing before us. We do not abandon the Law, as John Caputo notes, for the Law must stand strong against injustice. But the Law is blind, universal and unable to see the particular flesh of the withered hand on the Sabbath.⁵⁷ This is not some wild antinomian protest against rules and commands but a plea to infuse them with personality before the face of others – as Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount. As Evangelicals, as bearers of Jesus’ gospel, this is our mission as well.

James Olthuis notes that we ought to thank Levinas for keeping the face of the widow, orphan and stranger before us “in a world where compassion is too often in exile”.⁵⁸ This is the familiar call to incarnate an (Ev)angelical theology of the everyday. Many confessing Evangelicals have actively applied these essential aspects of our faith through strategic organisations.⁵⁹ Indeed, we are called to actively seek justice for the poor and oppressed in our midst, using whatever resources the Lord has provided. But we must remember this is not about simply throwing money at systems and organisations that can take care of this for us, so we can check off the box. Ultimately, Levinas is calling us away from structures and back to the face of the person.⁶⁰ We must stop, pause and look into the face of the one before us, realising we are seeing a

trace of the face of the God who calls us to himself. This may and certainly should be expressed by helping in homeless shelters, speaking out against racial prejudice and by intentionally developing cross-cultural friendships.

Hospitality in the academy?

As Evangelical thinkers, *sola scriptura* has often morphed into *sola text* (to put it in the words of Stanley Hauerwas).⁶¹ We can be so text centred and defensively postured that we forgot that there are real persons behind our internal and external disputes. Do I pause to look with compassion into the face of the other looking into mine with whom I disagree? Or is the person now seen as an inconvenient interruption standing in the way of my progress and rightness, reduced to a “position” to be overcome? This embodied person has strong feelings and emotions. She or he is one who has particular reasons and fears for thinking the way he or she does about life, God and whatever theological issue upon which we happen to disagree. Behind the arguments are people with hurts and cares and desires for a deep relationship with God just as I.⁶²

How can we show theological hospitality and academic charity to the other in view of this? We often argue for grand schemes of social justice and mercy, but in our posturing and dialogue in academics the lion’s share of pride often reigns. David Buschart has provided some helpful insights in this regard in his *Exploring Protestant traditions*. He submits, drawing from Augustine, that those “moved by the love of God that issues in hospitality recognize that they themselves are strangers”.⁶³ Hence, those brothers and sisters with whom I disagree, or those from other traditions, are not my opponents but fellow strangers and pilgrims from whom I have much to learn.⁶⁴ Levinas proposes the following that appears to be in sympathy with this notion:

It may even be that a less naive conception of the inspired Word than the one expiring beneath critical pens allows the true message to come through widely scattered human witnesses, but all miraculously confluent in the Book.⁶⁵

I submit that Buschart’s work has broader implications than only those pertaining to cross-denominational dialogue. Such insights should also filter down into character traits in our academic dialogue and posturing. How do we treat our students and colleagues? Are we trying to prove ourselves and

subsume others under our categories of exclusion or acceptance? Or do we genuinely recognise the other as other, understanding, as Buschart notes, that the historical and incarnational character of Christianity entails that it will be marked by particularity, reflecting a “particular people’s encounter with Christ and their particular understanding of how one is to live as a Christian”?⁶⁶

Conclusion

Levinas’s deconstructive ethics does not lead us to the destruction of meaning and of ethics. It rather challenges us to deconstruct ourselves, to re-prioritise our ethics and (as Bauman puts it) to “re-personalise” our ethics both within and outside our communities. As (Ev)angelical message bearers, we indeed have a particular message to proclaim with doctrinal purity. Yet with equal passion we are called to show charity, compassion and humility, and to engage in seemingly banal acts of simple kindness in the midst of the complexities of ethical decision-making. But this only comes as we take the time and make the concerted effort to look into the face of the other before us: the widow, the orphan, the stranger – whether in the soup kitchen or the academy, and to say with Levinas: “*Après vous, monsieur.*”

Dr Ronald T. Michener is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Systematic Theology at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Heverlee, Leuven, Belgium

Notes

- 1 Simon Critchley, “Introduction” in Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) xv-xviii.
- 2 Critchley, “Introduction”, xviii.
- 3 Critchley submits that this may have been why Levinas was never hostile toward Catholicism. Simon Critchley, *Can the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas change your life?* (New York: New York society for ethical culture and Levinas ethical legacy foundation), audio lecture. This is not to say that Levinas overtly advocated Christianity or broke away from his traditional Jewish perspectives. For an explanation on the difference between the Christian Messiah, Jesus and Levinas’ notion of Jewish messianism, see Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds.), *Re-reading Levinas* (London: Athlone Press, 1991) 99. Nevertheless, as Howard Caygill astutely observes, National Socialism’s “murderous

- rigour” brought an end to modernism’s “project of assimilation” and “made possible a rethinking of the significance of the diaspora and a regeneration between Judaism and Christianity”; Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the political: thinking the political* (Routledge: London and New York, 2002) 47. Caygill also references (p. 48) Levinas’ article prior to the Second World War, “The Spiritual Essence of Anti-Semitism (according to Jacques Maritain)” in *Paix et droit* 5 (1938), where Levinas emphasizes shared qualities of Judaism and Christianity.
- 4 Critchley, “Introduction”, xix-xx. Cf. Critchley, *The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, audio lecture.
- 5 Simon Critchley, *The ethics of deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (2nd ed., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) 283. Critchley provides a lucid description of the phenomenological method, especially as it relates to Levinas.
- 6 Yair Sheleg, *Significant Other: who would have believed that Emmanuel Levinas would become an Israeli cultural hero?* at The Department for Jewish Zionist Education, accessed May 19, 2003, available from <http://www.jajz-ed.org.il/culture/levinas.html>; Kelly James Clark, Richard Lints and James K.A. Smith, *101 key terms in philosophy and their importance for theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004) 66; Edward Moore, “Phenomenology”, in Victor E. Taylor and Charles E. Winquist (eds.), *Encyclopedia of postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- 7 Critchley, “Introduction”, 10-13.
- 8 James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: live theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005) 12, see also 8-11.
- 9 Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainsley, “The paradox of morality: an interview with Emmanuel Levinas” in R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (eds.), *The provocation of Levinas: rethinking the other* (London: Routledge, 1988) 176 as cited in James H. Olthuis, “Face-to-face: ethical asymmetry or the symmetry of mutuality” in James K.A. Smith and Henry I. Venema (eds.), *The hermeneutics of charity: interpretation, selfhood, and postmodern faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004) 135.
- 10 Emmanuel Levinas, “Useless suffering”, trans. Richard Cohen, in Bernasconi and Wood, *The provocation of Levinas*, 162.
- 11 Gary A. Philips, “Levinas” in A.K.M. Adam (ed.), *Handbook of postmodern biblical interpretation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000) 154.
- 12 Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern ethics* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993) 227.
- 13 Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 227-229.
- 14 Although this may not have been Kant’s intention, it is my contention that his thinking greatly influenced this type of detachment to which I am referring. Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 67, 68; and Olthuis, “Face-to-face”, 137-138.

- 15 Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 69.
- 16 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 42, see also 43, 77-78.
- 17 For Levinas “egology” is seeking to dominate the other through understanding and comprehension. Ontology is an advanced form of egology, as all being is reduced to a totalising system with no room for difference. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 44. See also Merold Westphal, *Overcoming onto-theology: toward a postmodern Christian faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) 265-266.
- 18 Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 46-47.
- 19 Critchley, *The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, audio lecture; Critchley, *Ethics of deconstruction*, 284-285.
- 20 Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and infinity: conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1982) 78-79.
- 21 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998) epigraph.
- 22 Critchley, *The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, audio lecture.
- 23 Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 303.
- 24 Philips, “Levinas”, 157.
- 25 Critchley, “Introduction”, 25-26. He refers to Stanley Cavell, *The claim of reason* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) 89; cf. also Critchley, *The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, audio lecture.
- 26 Critchley, “Introduction”, 26.
- 27 Emmanuel Levinas, “Is ontology fundamental?” in Adrian T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (eds.), *Emmanuel Levinas: basic philosophical writings* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) 6.
- 28 Olthuis, “Face-to-Face”, 142.
- 29 Levinas, *Otherwise than being*, 74. Levinas continues these insights on this same page as he discusses “the immediacy of the sensibility” toward the proximate other. It is the giving of bread from one’s own mouth to the hungry, opening up one’s home to the “wretched other” (he refers to Isaiah 58). See also Olthuis, “Face-to-Face”, 141.
- 30 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193; see also Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 286; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193, 194.
- 31 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 215.
- 32 Jens Zimmerman, *Recovering theological hermeneutics: an incarnational-trinitarian theory of interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004) 232.
- 33 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78-79.
- 34 Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on modern idolatry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002) 120.
- 35 Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 79.
- 36 Roger Burggraeve, “No one can save oneself without others’: an ethic of liberation in the footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas” in Roger Burggraeve (ed.), *The awakening of the Other: a provocative dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).
- 37 Burggraeve, “No one can save oneself”, 63-65.
- 38 Zimmerman, *Recovering theological hermeneutics*, 221.
- 39 Benson, *Graven Ideologies*, 116.
- 40 Levinas, *Ethics and infinity*, 98-99; cf. Olthuis, “Face-to-face”, 144.
- 41 Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 49, 48, 74.
- 42 Olthuis, “Face-to-face”, 143 and 143 n.31.
- 43 See Patrick Nullens and Ronald T. Michener, *The matrix of Christian ethics* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2010 forthcoming) chapter 6.
- 44 Stephen H. Webb, “The rhetoric of ethics as excess: a Christian theological response to Emmanuel Levinas”, *Modern theology* 15.1 (1999) 1.
- 45 I express my thanks to an anonymous referee for this insight. See John D. Caputo, *Against ethics: contributions to a poetics of obligation with constant reference to deconstruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993) 82; cf. Webb, “The rhetoric of ethics”, 9; see also Olthuis’ reference to Caputo in Olthuis, “Face-to-Face”, 142, 143; see also James K.A. Smith’s insights on Olthuis’ critique of Levinas in “The call as gift: the subject’s donation in Marion and Levinas” in Smith and Venema, *Hermeneutics of charity*, 226-227; and see also Nullens and Michener, *The matrix*, chapter 6.
- 46 Philip A. Rolnick, *Person, grace, and God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 178.
- 47 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans, glosses and scholia in Luther’s works*, vol. 25, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972) 513 as quoted in Rolnick, *Person, grace, and God*, 178.
- 48 Rolnick, *Person, grace, and God*, 178.
- 49 Cf. Nullens and Michener, *The matrix*, chapter 6.
- 50 Abigail Doukhan, email message to author, 14 January 2010. See Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 282. I am grateful to Abigail Doukhan for reading a previous draft of this paper and providing specific insights in this regard.
- 51 Rolnick, *Person, grace, and God*, 180.
- 52 Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 84.
- 53 Cf. Nullens and Michener, *The matrix*, chapter 6.
- 54 Critchley, “Introduction”, 27.
- 55 David Buschart also points out, referring to Heb. 13:2, that those who extend theological hospitality realise that, as one stranger serving another, they may be serving a messenger of God. W. David Buschart, *Exploring Protestant traditions: an invitation to theological hospitality* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006) 270. Although I fully agree, my point, via Levinas, is that we can never know, nor should we know about “angelic visitors”. Rather,

- the face of the other is already and always where we anticipate the trace of the divine. We do not simply serve the other because he or she may be an angel, but because the other is where the trace of the divine is already made manifest in the privilege of ethical obligation.
- 56 Frank M. Yamada, "Ethics" in Adam, *Handbook of postmodern biblical interpretation*, 82, 84. See also Bauman, *Postmodern ethics*, 34.
- 57 Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 149; see also Olthuis, "Face-to-face", 142.
- 58 Olthuis, "Face-to-Face", 156.
- 59 For example, we have Evangelicals for Social Action, Compassion International, World Vision, Barnabas Fund and Samaritan's Purse, just to name a few.
- 60 "Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism." Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, 306, cited in George Drazenovich, "Towards a Levinasian understanding of Christian ethics: Emmanuel Levinas and the phenomenology of the other" in *Cross currents* (Winter 2005) 52.
- 61 Stanley Hauerwas, "Pharoah's hardened heart: some Christian readings" in *The journal of scriptural reasoning* 2.2 (2002) at <http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume2/number2/ssr02-02-e02.html>
- 62 This is not to say that disagreement will be absent from our discussions or that duplicitous motives should not be uncovered in the course of academic dialogue. However, this should be done without de-personalising the face of the other.
- 63 Buschart, *Exploring Protestant traditions*, 268.
- 64 This is not to say that all boundaries or particular identifications with communities are eradicated. In response to this Buschart draws upon the resources of Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). Differentiation seeks boundaries, but exclusion removes the other from hospitality through separation or binding. See Buschart, *Exploring Protestant traditions*, 265. Buschart claims that boundaries and expressions of particularity, however, help sustain and even make the conditions of hospitality possible. Yet one's particular faith community or tradition should not be a "fortress" but a place from which others may be served. Buschart, 265-269.
- 65 Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 126. This is from his chapter titled "The strings and the wood: on the Jewish reading of the Bible." Levinas likens Scripture to a text that is "stretched over a tradition like the strings on the wood of a violin!" (p. 127) I am once again grateful to Abigail Doukhan for pointing this out to me and suggesting the reference.
- 66 Buschart, *Exploring Protestant traditions*, 259.