

Introduction

Levinas's work has achieved near canonical status in European philosophy today. The best evidence for this claim perhaps lies in the sheer quantity of extent scholarly treatments of his texts. His ethics of alterity has inspired constructive and critical work in nearly every craggy nook of the humanities and social sciences. The literature is vast, spanning from familiar treatments in philosophy and religious studies, to more specialized applied fields, such as nursing and organizational management.¹ His popularity moreover bursts the bounds of the academy. As Atterton and Calarco have noted, Levinas's work has "inspired religious leaders, writers, dissidents, statesmen, and artists the world over."² When the breadth of influence encompasses such disparate regions of culture glossed by Pope John Paul II, Vaclav Havel, and Jean-Luc Godard, we certainly do seem to be approaching a wide signature. Yet with this expanding influence, a cluster of relatively *stable* philosophical questions and problems has also attended his work; "stable" because they recur across widely diverse thematic and disciplinary treatments of his phenomenology. The problems can be roughly specified as (1) *methodological* (the transcendental/empirical question), (2) *political* (the ambiguity of Levinasian justice), (3) *theological* (the ambiguity of the religion/philosophy relation), and (4) *intercultural* (the problem of his alleged Eurocentrism). In this book I take up the last of these problems in a fresh, critical approach to evaluating his core philosophical position.³ In the process of getting a critical grip on the problem of his intercultural judgments, I moreover propose a general explanation for these four long-standing problems in his work.

Levinas's big idea is that our lived sense of moral obligation occurs in an immediate experience of the otherness of the Other person. Moral meaning is grounded in alterity rather than identity. Yet he also held what

seems an inconsiderate—or Eurocentric—view of *other* cultural traditions. For example,

Europe, that's the Bible and the Greeks. It has come closer to the Bible and to its true fate. Everything else in the world must be included in this. I don't have any nostalgia for the exotic. For me Europe is central.⁴

The yellow peril! It is not racial but spiritual. Not about inferior values but about a radical strangeness, strange to all the density of its past, where no voice with a familiar inflection comes through: a lunar, a Martian past.⁵

Can we fairly describe these statements as *chauvinist*? As Drabinski has noted, informal discussion of these statements among specialists often resembles a kind of gossip.⁶ How can Levinas—the philosopher of the Other and of unconditioned giving—have failed so miserably? Worse than gossip, the question itself is perhaps loaded.⁷ In conventional usage, the term *chauvinist* connotes unfair and often assumed privilege given to the *same*. Whether this unfair privilege is granted to *my* gender, *my* nation, *my* culture, or *my* *x*, in each case it involves what I most *identify* with by comparison to negatively judged *others*. As such, it seems we are justified in asking: what are we to make of Levinas's above statements in light of the explicit meaning his philosophy stakes out?

As far as I've been able to ascertain, Robert Bernasconi was the first to broach this problem in the scholarship. In "Who is My Neighbor? Who Is the Other? Questioning 'the Generosity of Western Thought,'" Bernasconi performs a nuanced analysis of the problems that emerge in relating Levinas's ethics to his dismissive references to other cultures. Bernasconi ultimately concludes that "[i]f there is an answer in Levinas to the question of what judges cultures, it remains the classical Enlightenment answer, the idea of the West."⁸ Critchley concurs and hints that Eurocentrism "looms large" in the overall problems of Levinas's politics.⁹ Sikka, too, insists that Levinas "privileges a particular culture in an insufficiently critical, and therefore irresponsible, manner."¹⁰ Finally, Ma, following McGettigan, asserts: ". . . Levinas's ethics cannot be accepted as a neutral philosophical construction."¹¹ But is there such a thing as a *neutral* philosophical construction? And what is responsibility such that Levinas fails at it here? Can we propose answers to these questions without straightaway performing prejudice? If we are irreducibly

“cultural” beings, and if one persistent problem with European philosophy is *its very claims* to cultural-transcending truth, it is not clear that “neutral philosophical constructions” exist. One cannot, of course, retreat to some willy-nilly relativism or abstractly reject all context-transcendence to avoid the problem at hand. Indeed, will-to-power, the *Seinsfrage*, *différance*, “care of the self,” and so forth *all* make specific claims for what it means *to mean* (and not mean), claims that are potentially universal in scope (Is Hinduism a species of the “metaphysics of presence”? Buddhism a life-denying nihilism? Islam a biopolitical terror? etc.). Or take more self-consciously particularist traditions: if Confucianism “is a rather typical non-universalism, even though it does believe that its own doctrines are indeed the ultimate truth,” then how do we interpret these truths in relation to the *Yi* (夷), or “barbarian”?¹² What does it mean to be a *typical* “non-universalism”? Such questions suggest that the problem of prejudice in intercultural relations is more difficult than we normally assume. If we are to evaluate Levinas fairly, we must have some sense of what it means to be *unprejudiced* in an irreducibly intercultural world. Levinas in fact mounts an account of how this is possible, and this makes the question of his apparent chauvinism all the more pressing.

Levinas scholarship has presented three strategies for interpreting his apparently chauvinist statements. The first strategy holds that such statements present a failure of *the man*, not his philosophy. Here, Levinas fails to live up to his own best insights, as we all, philosophers especially, sometimes do. This position emphasizes the obvious fact that failing to live up to a norm does not “disprove” the norm itself, and hence we can correct Levinas the man with Levinas’s philosophy. Richard Cohen and Oona Eisenstadt are good representatives of this position.¹³ The second strategy holds that such statements are a failure of *both* the man *and* the philosophy. This position holds that Levinas’s take on other cultures thwarts the overall integrity of his philosophical position, and we should look elsewhere for a better account. Sonia Sikka and Rudi Visker are good representatives of this position.¹⁴ Finally, the third strategy holds that such statements are a failure of the man and a *problem* for the philosophy, a problem that does not undermine the overall integrity of Levinas’s position, but does require its augmentation. Robert Bernasconi and Enrique Dussel are good representatives of this position.¹⁵ All the positions I’ve sampled on this question seem to agree that statements of the above sort constitute a failure of Levinas the man, and this I do not dispute. My aim in this book is to explore the overall integrity of Levinas’s position in light of his alleged Eurocentrism.

In what follows, I analyze Levinas's major philosophical works and seek to evaluate them from the perspective of his own account of what it means to be *disinterested*. This strategy seems promising for three reasons. First, to evaluate Levinas's philosophy on Levinas's own terms is to do him the justice of not performing external criticism. I seek to avoid at all costs importing another normative perspective in order to dismiss Levinas's through contrast. Next, Levinas's account of disinterest constitutes the absolute core of his ethics. As such, if it can be shown that his account is defective in some irremediable way, we will have to fundamentally rethink his approach. Finally, Levinas's take on disinterest is in part a response to Husserl and Heidegger's respective accounts of the phenomenological reduction.¹⁶ Given the problem of chauvinism and disinterest, this is perhaps the most interesting aspect of my approach. For phenomenology, the reduction is the methodological technique—or existential/ethical event—said to yield a non-distortive perspective *on the world as it is*. In other words, it's held to yield a *true, authentic, or just*—and as such, *self-justifying*—form of context-transcending universality. My method, therefore, can be most aptly characterized as what I call *immanent critique*.

As a critical methodology, what I have chosen to call “immanent critique” must be distinguished from other various and useful methodologies popular in contemporary criticism. For example, I do not do immanent critique in the form of a materialist expressivism, or by reading Levinas's work to express some allegedly more basic logic or economy of desire, whether thought in terms of will-to-power, libidinal drives, the “play of the trace,” or class struggle.¹⁷ Moreover, I have chosen not to treat Levinas's work as merely a particular species of phenomenology, to be assessed in light of more generic questions that allegedly unite and differentiate Levinas, Heidegger, and Husserl. This has been fruitfully done elsewhere. Insofar as Levinas utilizes his own methodological innovations *against* Husserl and Heidegger, and wields them *against* the entire tradition, his method must be evaluated on its own terms. The immanent critique I propose to practice most closely resembles what Derrida has termed “deconstruction.” Yet I have chosen to call my method “immanent critique” rather than “deconstruction” for a variety of reasons.

First, I am methodologically setting aside or “suspending” nearly *all* presuppositions, including particular claims for the conditions for meaning in general. In other words, I am not assuming the accuracy, validity, or usefulness of a critical concept or norm external to Levinas's own work, including what Derrida calls “the metaphysics of presence.” This is not a

criticism of Derrida's approach, but rather a choice premised on my own considered judgment that methodologically presuppositionless criticism might better assess a philosophical proposal through probing its internal coherence, on the basis of the proposal's own terms. Whether Levinas succumbs to the "metaphysics of presence" is of little interest to me. That his view is relatively consistent on its own terms is what I propose to ascertain. This allows, therefore, Levinas's proposal to potentially withstand immanent critique, if it can be shown to pass the very minimal test of internal consistency. This approach clearly does *not* require Levinas to satisfy a more specific set of epistemic or ethical tests imported from alien philosophical assumptions. Nor does it mandate total or absolutely systematic transparency from his texts. As I'm proposing, an alleged instance of structural inconsistency or substantive contradiction is fatal if and only if (a) it imperils the entire analytic structure of the proposal in question, or the overall web of concepts, categories, or relations a proposal utilizes to achieve its specific results; (b) it violates a proposal's own posited norms, on its own stipulated terms; and (c) the consequences of (a) and (b) undermine the proposal's general conclusions on the proposal's own methodological terms. The first (a) is a logical test that probes the overall descriptive integrity of the proposal on offer. The second (b) is a logical test that probes the congruence between a proposal's stipulated norms and its actual practice at a methodologically basic level. Does a text do what it claims to do, in the way it claims to get this doing done? If inconsistencies are to be found in ways unanticipated by the proposal, and if those inconsistencies can be shown to render the position self-undermining, the proposal succumbs to immanent critique. As should be clear, my approach does not impose alien norms or an alien account of meaning on a proposal under consideration. My *only* assumption here is that a specific proposal must, at the very minimum, be relatively self-consistent.

Performing immanent critique in the way I've proposed subjects me to some constraints, and also entitles me to certain disciplined liberties. First, the proper practice of critique requires a thorough and charitable reconstruction of Levinas's actual descriptions. Ideally, my reconstruction should attempt to read Levinas according to his own intentions. Moreover, my reading should also reflect what appears to be the prevailing scholarly consensus on the interpretation of Levinas's texts. Insofar as Levinas's allegedly Eurocentric statements are motivating my inquiry, and insofar as these statements are puzzling in light of Levinas's self-interpretation and the prevailing scholarly treatments of his work, I must keep these interpretations in view in my own reconstruction. Once these charitable reconstructions are performed, I

can then turn to critical analysis. The liberty critique affords me ultimately consists in no longer being solely guided by Levinas's apparent intentions, or by conventional scholarly opinions on what he may have wished to mean or to do, and instead performing an evaluation of what he actually does, solely guided by Levinas's own proposals and the norm of internal consistency. As should be clear, the liberty of my critical practice is not arbitrary for two reasons: Because (1) I am motivated by what seems the genuine moral problem of Levinas's allegedly chauvinist statements, and (2) subjecting Levinas to the very minimal discipline of internal consistency *in light* of his own performed method and proposed meaning, renders my critical liberty normatively oriented and practically constrained.

Because a rigorously performed immanent critique necessitates a close textual reading and analysis before larger conclusions can be drawn, my writing is constrained by both the protocols of my method and the particularities of Levinas's oeuvre. Levinas's core proposals and central arguments are performed in his major philosophical works: *Totality and Infinity (TI)* and *Otherwise than Being (OB)*. As such, I first conduct immanent-critical readings of these works before explicitly turning to a diagnosis of his Eurocentric statements. Moreover, insofar as there are explicit differences between *TI* and *OB*, I have chosen to read each by turns, and as independent philosophical proposals. My philosophical aim is not to present a philological interpretation of the trajectory of Levinas's development, but rather to ascertain what he means by "the Other," "responsibility," "disinterest," and so forth; how he achieves these meanings; and then to evaluate his allegedly chauvinist statements in their light. To this end, chapters 1, 2, and 4 conduct immanent-critical readings of Levinas's major works, and chapters 3 and 5 perform a general diagnosis of his proposals based on the results of my immanent critique.

One final preparatory word is in order on the problem style. Because immanent critique requires me to thoroughly and charitably reconstruct a text's central proposals and to analyze the text on its own terms, I am presented with a difficult challenge. Levinas's texts are notoriously difficult, so much so that Bernasconi calls them among "the most difficult . . . in the history of philosophy."¹⁸ On the one hand, if my reconstruction and critical analysis stray too far from Levinas's explicit descriptions, for example, by crisply translating them, say, into ordinary language or into the terms set by an alternate methodological program, I might be accused of "failing to read Levinas closely," or perhaps of "misunderstanding" him by distorting his meaning through alien linguistic or conceptual resources. On the other hand, if my reconstruction and critical analysis stick too close to Levinas's explicit

descriptions, for example, by steadfast employment of his own rhetoric and descriptive terms, I might be accused of “reading too closely,” or perhaps of “misunderstanding” him by distorting his meaning through failing to achieve a sufficiently holistic interpretation. I have tried to steer a middle course through this gauntlet. In chapters that conduct immanent critique, I stick as close to the text as possible, while interposing what I hope is clarifying commentary in my reconstructive phase, and while presenting what I hope are clear arguments during the critical phase. Though chapters 1, 2, and 4 proceed by textually privileged reconstruction and critique, I have still endeavored to write them as clearly as possible. If they remain stylistically dense, this is because Levinas’s texts are stylistically dense. When I move from textually privileged immanent criticism to present a general diagnosis of its results, I cease to grant the text deference, and instead privilege my reader by giving deference to stylistic clarity. Because I am ultimately criticizing Levinas, I have chosen to stylistically err on the side of the text in chapters 1, 2, and 4. Because I owe my reader clear arguments, I have chosen to err on the side of my reader in the general diagnoses I perform. With these qualifications on the style and structure of my presentation in mind, my first two chapters perform an immanent critique of *TI*, focusing on Levinas’s (i) ego-analysis (chapter 1) and (ii) other-analysis (chapter 2). Chapter 3 performs a comprehensive diagnosis of Levinas’s method based on the results of chapters 1 and 2. In chapter 4, I perform an immanent critique of *OB*, performing a comprehensive assessment of Levinas mature approach. Chapter 5 verifies the results yielded in preceding chapters, by brief analysis of Levinas’s political and religious writings. Chapters 6 and 7 conclude my procedure by locating my results in biographical and historical contexts, empowering a precise specification of the normative legacies and potentials that remain in Levinas’s work for the problems and possibilities of our day.