

## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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# The Third Wave of Levinas Scholarship

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Today Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy enjoys unprecedented popularity. During the recent (2006) centennial celebrations, a staggering thirty-two conferences were held in thirteen countries over five continents honoring Levinas's work. But Levinas's influence extends far beyond the academy. His ethics of the face, the contours of which were shaped by both his Jewish heritage and his early training in phenomenology under Husserl and Heidegger, has served as an inspiration for religious leaders, writers, dissidents, statesmen, and artists the world over. Pope John Paul II, giving a private account of his thoughts and beliefs in his 1994 book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, spoke of how "the human face and the commandment 'Do not kill' are ingeniously joined in Lévinas, and thus become a testimony for our age."<sup>1</sup> Writer, dramatist, and first president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, was able to find in Levinas's work succor during his (Havel's) many years of imprisonment for his involvement in the Czechoslovak human rights movement (VONS).<sup>2</sup> Rubens Ricuperio, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, reaffirming in 2000 UNCTAD's commitment to the ethical and human dimensions of development that would lift the world's masses out of poverty, gave a lecture in which he invoked the name of Emmanuel Levinas, in particular his claim that democracies around the world have suffered a heavy *loss* by the demise of socialism and the utopian vision.<sup>3</sup> The avant-garde French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard too has increasingly drawn on Levinas's work. One of the characters in the movie *Notre Musique* (2004), for example, which deals with the themes of violence, morality, colonialism, and the current Israel-Palestine conflict, visits Mostar's Stari Most (Old Bridge), a four-centuries-old symbol of ethnic division, and reads from Levinas's book *Entre Nous*.<sup>4</sup>

One way to describe the reception of Levinas's work is to speak of it in terms of three waves. The first wave of scholarship was concerned predominantly with commentary and exposition, and focused mostly on *Totality and Infinity*. The sheer originality of *Totality and Infinity* caught many philosophers trained in the traditional ethics of Kant and Mill completely unawares, so much so that the first task lay in understanding what this new ethics was saying. Thus books and essays began to appear in the 1970s and 1980s discussing the meaning of central themes in Levinas's philosophy, his use of the phenomenological method, the basis of his criticisms of Heidegger's ontology, and so forth.

The exception to this tendency was Jacques Derrida, who not only assimilated *Totality and Infinity* and the works prior to it before most philosophers had even heard of Levinas, but was single-handedly responsible for inaugurating what would become a second wave of Levinas scholarship. In 1964, just three years after *Totality and Infinity* was published, Derrida wrote the long, two-part essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." The importance of this seminal text for the subsequent reception of Levinas can hardly be exaggerated. Ambiguously situated between traditional philosophical commentary and the type of deconstructionist double-reading for which Derrida would become famous several years later, it not only put Levinas on the philosophical map (Derrida being the more famous of the two philosophers), it set the course for much Levinas research to follow. A substantial portion of what was written on Levinas during the 1980s and 1990s was written in direct response to the questions Derrida raised concerning Levinas's indebtedness to the philosophical tradition, and, in particular, his use of ontological language and conceptualization to speak about that which purportedly lies beyond ontology. This wave featured an intense bout of navel gazing in which Levinas scholarship turned inward on itself, focusing on Levinas's catachrestical language in, for example, his second magnum opus *Otherwise than Being* (1974), which was itself interpreted as a response in part to Derrida's essay. Throughout all of this the wider practical and applied dimensions of Levinas's work, including its possible significance for progressive moral and political thought, were mostly ignored or eclipsed.

The aim of this volume is to help usher in a new, third wave of Levinas scholarship concerned primarily with exploring progressive sociopolitical issues, both as they derive (positively) from Levinas's thought and lead (critically) to a confrontation and interrogation of his work. If the first wave of scholarship was aimed primarily at commentary and exposition, and the second wave was focused on situating Levinas within the context of poststructuralism and deconstruction, the third wave is an explicit attempt to situate and explore Levinas's work within the context of the most pressing sociopolitical issues of our time. The goal of this anthology is to provide the English-speaking

reader with some of the fruits of that labor, while encouraging further research along the same lines. A certain sense of urgency governs its appearance. As we write these words, confidence in the authority of the face looks shaken. It is as though Levinas's characterization of "a world in pieces" (*EE* 1), written during his captivity in a German prisoner of war camp (1940–1945), is as disquietingly true today as it was then. We are currently witnessing a world torn apart by conflict in the Middle East, ethnic cleansing in Sudan, terrorism, suicide bombings, technological and nuclear mayhem, and religious fundamentalism. Alongside these evils are school shootings, global warming, widespread famine, immeasurable animal suffering, environmental decay, and increasing social and personal disorganization. What do Levinasians have to say about such things? Can Levinas's ethics help us make sense of any of it? Do these events amount to a refutation of what Levinas says about the face? Or does the duty to respond to them recognized by many academics and nonacademics alike represent a confirmation?

The chapters we have solicited from leading scholars in the field address social and political questions about which Levinas himself was mostly silent, but which are arguably the most important questions facing philosophers today. These include questions concerning animal liberation, environmentalism, feminism, global justice, postcolonialism, post-Marxism, radical democracy, technology and cybernetics, and psychoanalysis.

Judith Butler's chapter, "Precarious Life," not only seeks to use Levinas's work toward radical political ends, but it marks a turn and rupture in Butler's own work with respect to questions concerning ethics. While initially skeptical of the role ethical discourse might play in radical political theory in many of her early writings, Butler has recently and increasingly argued for the importance of placing a distinctively ethical moment at the very center of political and critical theory. This turn toward ethics is particularly evident in the chapter, where she argues that the chief critical task of the humanities today is to recall us to the ethical imperative arising from the "face" of the human, a term that she borrows from Levinas. Butler suggests that being alert to and responding to the face "means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself." She argues that contemporary media coverage of events such as the Iraq war has not recalled us to the face of the human but has instead dissimulated it to such an extent that many of us have become insensitive to human suffering and finitude. If the humanities are to regain a place in radical political theory, Butler believes it is to be found precisely here, in helping us catch a glimpse, however fleeting and unrepresentable it might be, of a distinctively human frailty that is so easily overlooked in modern political life.

In chapter 2, "Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics," Diane Perpich takes up one of the more vexed political questions in Levinas studies:

the question of the relation between Levinas's work and the concerns of feminists. Two main reasons exist why one might think that Levinas is of little use to feminists. On the one hand, as feminist philosophers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray have argued, Levinas's ethical thought seems to grant full subjectivity only to men, leaving women in the classical metaphysical position of being the "other" of men. While the general spirit of Levinas's thought is certainly compatible with a broad humanism that would include viewing women as full subjects, much of Levinas's rhetoric undoubtedly opens him to the kind of critical reading he has received from feminists on this issue. On the other hand, Levinas's attempt to strip the Other of all "alterity content" seems to undercut the foundation of feminist politics and other forms of identity politics that are grounded on specific modalities and sites of alterity (sex, gender, race, class, and so on). As a result of these and other such limitations, many feminists have argued that we should bid farewell to Levinas's philosophy in favor of a philosophy with more political promise. Against this background Perpich makes a bold argument for a new alliance between Levinas's project and feminist politics. Perpich suggests that we should read Levinas's notion of the Other as making reference to the singular, irreplaceable existence of the Other. In placing the accent on "singularity" rather than (as some feminist readers of Levinas have done) on mere "difference" (from men), Perpich believes that Levinas can be seen as helping us capture the central insights of identity politics and the new social movements. In brief, Levinas's notion of alterity allows us "to do justice both to the uniqueness of individual lives and to the ways in which those lives are embedded, for better and worse, within social, cultural, and religious communities."

Chapter 3, Simon Critchley's "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them," tracks some of the conservative political limits of Levinas's writings. In particular, Critchley takes issue with Levinas's leanings toward a fraternal model of friendship, monotheism, androcentrism, and patriarchal and fraternal familial structures, and how all of these themes figure in the privileged place of Israel in Levinas's texts. Critchley employs Derrida's *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* to demonstrate that the relation between ethics and politics in Levinas's work should be read as deeply aporetic. As such, the passage from ethics to politics calls for a *creative* use of concepts and strategies, rather than the traditional and conservative political positions found throughout many of Levinas's writings. In line with this hybrid Levinasian-Derridean position, Critchley outlines the basic contours of what he calls an "anarchist metapolitics" that seeks to understand politics as a responsible response to the demands of singular others.

Among the various radical social and political movements examined in this volume, postcolonial theory and politics has been perhaps the most

influential in modern Continental philosophy. From Frantz Fanon's and Jean-Paul Sartre's early critical analyses of racism and colonialism to Homi Bhabha's and Gayatri Spivak's more recent developments of postcolonial theory, issues surrounding racial and cultural identity and alterity have consistently been at the center of Continental political philosophy. For some, Levinas's thought—which arose in the context of and sought to respond to rampant racism and anti-Semitism—might be seen as an important reference point for theorists working on these issues. However, despite having some importance for theorists such as Bhabha, postcolonial thinkers have criticized Levinas for his racially insensitive remarks about non-European and non-Western cultures. In his chapter, "Postcolonial Thought and Levinas's Double Vision," Robert Eaglestone examines several of his more controversial statements and, while concurring with the generally critical reception of Levinas's work in postcolonial circles, argues that Levinas's positive potential for postcolonial theory has not been fully tapped. In particular, Eaglestone argues that postcolonial theory would benefit from an engagement with the "doubleness" of Levinas's thought (specifically the two registers of ethics and politics) and his critique of the alterity-consuming nature of the Western metaphysical and political traditions.

Chapter 5, Robert Bernasconi's "Globalization and World Hunger: Kant and Levinas," seeks to show how Levinas's ethical thinking helps meet the challenge that globalization represents to the legalistic model of ethics inherited from Kant. Drawing on Levinas's discussion of technology as secularization in the 1976 essay "Secularization and Hunger," Bernasconi shows how the global media in particular concretizes transcendence of the totality through putting me directly in touch with the faces of hunger from the most distant and inaccessible places. Insofar as globalization causes me to feel implicated in the suffering of the hungry without my being "accountable" in a legalistic sense, it reveals my responsibility for the neighbor in a manner that is preeminently Levinasian. Bernasconi further argues that my ethical responsibility that is apparent in my response to suffering and poverty independently of any legal obligation also "passes into all the institutions with which I am involved." These include nation-states and multinational corporations. If each is answerable to all in the era of globalization, then no longer are government institutions merely answerable to their citizens and corporate institutions merely answerable to their shareholders. Globalization thus provides an opportunity to reexamine the overly restrictive limits we habitually place on the obligations of nations and transnational corporations who are very often in the best position economically to make a sizable impact on the situation of poverty around the globe.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers a rich and evocative phenomenology of things, nature, and the elements as they relate to the I of enjoyment.

Levinas stops short, however, of concluding that the nonhuman world might confront the I with any ethical force or have any capacity for challenging the egoism of the I. Thus, despite (or, perhaps, because of) the abundance of joy and enjoyment the nonhuman world brings the egoist I, it is unable fundamentally to disrupt the I's machinations. For Levinas, it is as if the entire nonhuman world, lacking the interruptive force of the human face, can be appropriated by human consciousness and its projects. In this context Levinas makes the bold claim that "only man could be absolutely foreign to me" (*TI* 73), which is to say, that only the *other human being* could confront me with any disruptive ethical force. Chapter 6, John Sallis's "Levinas and the Elemental," challenges this prioritizing of human strangeness and concomitant reductive understanding of the nonhuman world. Against Levinas, Sallis suggests that the natural world, too, is capable of striking us as "absolutely strange." Thus, with nature we encounter not just mere things to be appropriated but instead "the question of another alterity," the question of the various ways in which the nonhuman world might also resist appropriation. What would be the implications for ethics were we to take these other kinds of nonhuman resistance and alterity into account?

John Llewelyn's wide-ranging chapter, "Pursuing Levinas and Ferry toward a Newer and More Democratic Ecological Order," takes as its point of departure a reflection on Luc Ferry's influential and acerbic critique of the version of environmentalism that has emerged in recent Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. In arguing against the holism of deep ecologists and the radically egalitarian extensionism of animal liberationists, Ferry seeks to return to and further develop the Promethean and Enlightenment humanism he finds in thinkers as varied as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Paul Sartre. On his way to constructing this humanist alternative to radical environmentalism, Ferry also enlists Emmanuel Levinas in his cause, citing the essay "A Religion for Adults" in which Levinas argues that the "Jewish man discovers man before discovering landscapes and towns. He is at home in a society before being so in a house. He understands the world on the basis of the Other rather than the whole of being functioning in relation to the earth" (*DF* 22). Ferry wants to secure this priority of the human and interhuman sociality over all other forms of existence and relation, and much in Levinas's writings suggest Ferry is right to find an ally in Levinas for this project. Llewelyn believes, however, that an entirely different reading of Levinas is possible, one that is more amenable to the concerns of radical environmentalists of various stripes (animal liberationists, deep ecologists, and even ecofeminists). Llewelyn argues for the point that even if human beings alone are capable of ethical kindness and giving (as Ferry and Levinas want to suggest), nothing Levinas writes would imply that the recipients of kindness should be confined to members of humankind. Con-

sequently, we are not justified in inferring straightforwardly from Levinas's work that human beings have absolute ethical priority over all other forms of existence. Llewelyn concludes his chapter by asking his readers to consider the possibility of ethics extending outward to encompass *existence as such* and to consider the possibility of encountering and responding to vulnerability in forms of existence that extend well beyond human beings and that include "animals, trees and rocks."

Chapter 8, Matthew Calarco's, "Faced by Animals," takes up the issues of Levinas's anthropocentrism and whether his ethical philosophy can be limited to human beings. After contesting the dominant thrust of Levinas's remarks on nonhuman animals (which seem to suggest that nonhuman animals are incapable both of engaging in genuinely ethical acts and of initiating a genuinely ethical encounter), Calarco goes on to argue that the underlying logic of Levinas's philosophy does not permit any a priori restriction—whether human or otherwise—on the scope of whom the Other might be. This rigorous ethical agnosticism, Calarco maintains, is best understood as giving rise to an ethics of universal consideration, in which the scope of moral consideration is held permanently and generously open. He concludes with a discussion of how an animal ethics might fit within the context of an ethics grounded in universal consideration.

In her groundbreaking chapter, "Levinas's Other and the Culture of the Copy," Edith Wyschogrod examines the destabilizing effects that current gene replication theory and Artificial life ("Alife") studies have had on Levinas's ethics. On the one hand, Levinas's description of ipseity—and ipso facto alterity, inasmuch as the latter is only thinkable from the first personal standpoint of the former—appears to be undermined by both a gene-centered viewpoint (Richard Dawkins) and a "bottom up" view of life as a computational process that can be abstracted away from any particular medium (Christopher Langton). Yet both of these views, which redefine life in terms of the iterability of code rather than the identity of matter or substance, would seem to imply a duality within the same that is reminiscent of the distinction Levinas draws between the image and the represented object in the work of art in the 1948 essay "Reality and Its Shadow," as well as the account of fecundity given in *Totality and Infinity*, according to which I *both* am and am not my son. According to Wyschogrod, a thoroughly "naturalized" account of Levinas's ethics would appear to accommodate the "culture of the copy," where the message is decidedly *not* the medium, precisely because the same is self-constituted or constituted by its own activity qua separated being. Wyschogrod also finds this "recursiveness," in which the self paradoxically results from a procedure whose outcome already presupposes it, in Kierkegaard's account of repetition, and Maturana and Varela's "autopoietic" school of biology in the twentieth century.

Richard A. Cohen's chapter "Ethics and Cybernetics: Levinasian Reflections" brings Levinas's work into dialogue raising several pressing questions about modern technology: Do modern technological developments pose novel moral questions? Are recent technological developments inherently bad or inherently good—or perhaps neither? In what ways do communications and other technologies enhance and/or limit ethical responsibility? Taking issue both with the neo-Heideggerian position that denounces the nihilistic effects of modern technology (which he finds in Lucas Introna's work) and the neodeconstructive position that celebrates the liberationist, posthumanist potential of technology (which he locates in Sherry Turkle's writings), Cohen offers a neutralist thesis intended to demonstrate that technology has no inherent positive or negative value at an ontological level. The implication of this thesis at the ethical level is that technology can be used toward both positive and negative ends. If we view ethics in the Levinasian sense as a face-to-face relation between people, then modern technology can be seen as having the potential both to effect and block this relation. From this Levinasian perspective we can, Cohen argues, decide on which technological developments to pursue and eschew: pursuing those that enrich our moral sensitivity and eschewing those that block ethical responsibilities.

In "Education East of Eden: Levinas, the Psychopath, and the Paradox of Responsibility," Claire Katz provides a Levinasian analysis of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre that occurred near Denver, Colorado. Using Levinas's discussion of the biblical figure of Cain as an illustration of someone—"the psychopath"—who is paradoxically responsible for the neighbor despite apparently being "incapable of seeing the face of the other," Katz argues that the boys who killed their classmates at Columbine High School were responsible for their victims notwithstanding that they appeared to be socially disconnected and lack what is commonly called a "conscience." What the boys in effect lacked was not responsibility but a developed capacity to respond to this original responsibility. Katz's point is that to develop that capacity is possible only through a moral *education*, "whose aim is to cultivate an openness to the other and a readiness to respond." Thus, without excusing the psychopath, Katz emphasizes "we"—especially parents and teachers—have a fundamental responsibility to cultivate responsibility in others, even in the psychopath, whose moral culpability is thus in some sense our own.

Peter Atterton's concluding chapter, "The Talking Cure': The Ethics of Psychoanalysis" uses Levinas's ethics to help explain the therapeutic efficacy of clinical psychoanalysis. It is psychoanalytic lore that for symptom remission to occur there must be dialogue between analyst and analysand in which both participants are fully present to each other. This requires absolute candor on the part of the analysand, and also respect, sympathy, trust, and patience on the part of the analyst. Yet psychoanalysis itself appears unable to give an



explanation as to why *talking* and *being listened to* under these conditions can help resolve problems in living, which turn out to be as much existential as psychological in origin. Recasting the dialogue that takes place in a clinical setting in terms of the “saying” and “the said,” Atterton argues that Levinas’s ethical thinking provides a resource for explaining not only why talking to someone might help alleviate suffering, but also why the psychoanalytical practitioner might be ethically motivated to listen to someone and try to help him or her in the first place, frequently without knowing what to do, and with no guarantee of success.

### Notes

1. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Knopf, 1994), 210–211.
2. Václav Havel, Letter dated May 8, 1982, in *Letters to Olga: June 1979–September 1982*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1988), 311–312.
3. Address by Mr. Rubens Ricupero, Secretary-General of UNCTAD, February 12, 2000.
4. The editors are grateful to Michael Witt for bringing this reference to their attention.