Levinas and the Invisibility God

Jeffrey Dudiak

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol113/iss1/2
LEVINAS AND THE INVISIBILITY OF GOD

JEFFREY DUDIAK

The thought of Emmanuel Levinas is notoriously difficult, and nowhere more so than in his comments à propos God. This is evinced, among other things, in that many theistic readers find in Levinas an advocate and companion, a voice crying in the largely Godless contemporary, intellectual wilderness, while other equally credible readers insist that Levinas was, and must be read as, an atheist. I will illustrate that this ambiguity arises in large measure from the fact that for Levinas the question of theism and atheism, of the existence or non-existence of God, is neither the first nor the most important question; rather, the invisibility of God, the structurally necessary temptation of atheism, is central to the efficacy of God’s work in the world. That is, the “absence” of God is, for Levinas, constitutive of God’s genuine “presence” amongst us.

A. SUFFERING ETHICS

Because of the severity of the climb for a non-specialist audience, I will take some paragraphs to introduce (in an admittedly inadequate way, and one plagued by the prejudices of my own reading) the thought of Levinas, and to provide a context for my later comments on Levinas’s take on God and theology.

As Quakers, we are sympathetic to the claim that our teachings need be grounded in experience; thus I begin with a few brief biographical comments. Born a Lithuanian Jew in 1906, Levinas’s family moved, under ethnic pressure, to Ukraine while he was still a boy. His father was the proprietor of a bookshop. While yet a teenager Levinas set off to the University of Strasbourg, also traveling to Freiburg to study phenomenology with Edmund Husserl. There he encountered Husserl’s most brilliant student, the soon to be famous Martin Heidegger, who would remain a lifelong foil for Levinas’s own work. Early in his career Levinas became something of a potential star himself, publishing the book on Husserl and Heidegger that was discovered by J.-P. Sartre, and launched the latter’s existentialist project of Being
and Nothingness. Levinas’s early career was interrupted, however, by the outbreak of World War II; Levinas joined the French army, was taken prisoner, and spent most of the war years in a work camp. Though Levinas’s wife and young child were secreted away during the war in a French monastery, virtually the whole of his family back in Eastern Europe fell victim to the Shoah. The Nazi horror became, for Levinas, and not surprisingly, the focus of the rest of his life and work. In a sort of parallel to Adorno’s claim that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz, the fulcrum of Levinas’s thinking after the war became: Can there be ethics after Auschwitz? Indeed, one of the ways he described for his own work was as an extended meditation on the Holocaust. A twentieth century European philosopher, his audience was, for the most part, comprised of highly cultivated despisers of religion and morality, for whom, as he once put it, the only blasphemy was to gainsay Nietzsche. It is into this impoverished culture, the inheritor of Greek philosophical thought, that Levinas spoke, at whose most learned and humanistic heart—early twentieth century Germany—erupted the most atrocious inhumanity. Something had gone tragically amiss, which Levinas’s work seeks to both analyze and address. And while Levinas found inspiration also in some of the high points of Western philosophy, his principal inspiration was the Talmud, such that, under another auto-description, Levinas claimed to be translating Jewish wisdom into Greek.

A Critique of Ethics

Levinas thus embarks upon what might be called “a critique of ethics,” a critique of the ethics, such as they were, which had so miserably and scandalously failed European culture. Of course, the stance of the critic over against that which is the subject of “critique” is not merely negative. A movie critic, for example, does not generally take up a negative stance toward movies per se, but, most of the time, loves movies, and reflects on what is good and bad, of worth or not of worth, in film. The more philosophical precedent is Kant, with his “critiques” of reason, who does not criticize reason, but seeks to understand it—to trace out its conditions. Likewise Levinas with ethics; he seeks to provide a critique of universal ethical laws, of rules, of justice, of “ethical systems.” What are they? How are they possible? What do they mean? How do and should they function?
LEVINAS AND THE INVISIBILITY OF GOD • 7

How are we to think this? Imagine that you are carrying on with your life as usual—listening to a lecture perhaps. You are focused on the material, trying to understand, thinking critically about the claims being made while in the course of critically appropriating them, when all of a sudden, someone—it doesn’t matter who, someone you know and love or a complete stranger—begins to cough, and then cough more violently, interrupting your concentration, and the lecture itself. This cough degenerates into gasping; the person’s eyes roll back into his head, and he collapses onto the floor. What do you do?

Of course, you help. After a moment of disorientation, you rush to the sufferer’s assistance. You may not know quite what to do, but you know you must do something. But how do you know this? You do not have to ask a friend. You do not need to consult a set of holy writings. And you certainly do not seek advice from a philosopher (you’d be so confused you wouldn’t know what to do)! No, you know that you must respond because, in Levinas’s phrasing, the suffering face of the other demands it. Nothing more can, or need, be said—and, in fact, if more is said, so much the worse, as we shall see.

Now, “the face” in Levinas does not mean simply the face physiologically speaking, the eyes, ears, nose and mouth, but it is rather a trope for the vulnerability of the person: his very susceptibility to violence and outrage. It is, indeed, and perhaps most often, in the contorted expressions of one’s physiognomy, in the blotching that testifies the ravages of age or ill-health, in the lines and scars—physical or emotional—left upon it by a life lived in an unsympathetic world, that this vulnerability to suffering is most vividly displayed. Indeed, for Levinas, the slouching of the shoulders, the crookedness of limbs, the crippling swelling of arthritic hands, are equally one’s “face” in this sense.

Faced with the face, Levinas claims, I am “guilty.” By guilty, he does not mean that the guilty one has “caused” the suffering; you, hopefully, have played no role in precipitating the suffering of the one whose face you encounter. Coming across an automobile accident victim, I need not have been driving the car to be obligated to help. Playing on the fact that in some languages the word for “guilt” and the word for “debt” (for example: Schuld in German) are the same word. Levinas thus argues that, even if my actions did not precipitate the suffering, I am still in the debt of the suffering one. I owe him something, namely: my best attempts at curative aid. I am “responsible to” the suffering one whether or not I am “responsible for” the
suffering. I may have had nothing to do with his suffering; yet his suffering has everything to do with me. In this sense, I am “guilty.”

This severing of my responsibility from any action I have committed evinces my absolute “passivity” in the encounter with the face, and the irrecusability of the obligation it imposes. Faced with the suffering other, I must respond; I am responsible independently of any decision I might make regarding the situation or of any obligations I have chosen to contract. Even though I often—perhaps even most often—do not respond as I must, this has no bearing on the fact that I am obligated to do so: despite myself! Being “subject to” rather than the “subject of” the ethical experience of the face, I am in no position to dictate whether or not I am responsible to it. For Levinas, Cain’s query, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”, can only be rhetorical subterfuge, an attempt to evade a responsibility already assigned and recognized.

This allows us, crucially, to have a profoundly different understanding of ourselves as human subjects than the one propagated across philosophical/Occidental thought and culture whereby we think of ourselves in terms of being agents, actively relating to our world (and the fact that we think of it as “our” world is already evidence of this) and to others. Think here of the “subject” of a sentence: that which acts across the verb upon the “object,” which latter merely receives the action of the former. The Western, philosophical subject is a power, an “I can” (je peux), grammatically in the nominative case (i.e., in the position of the active agent), an “I.” Harkening back to the Hebrew hineni, the “here I am,” uttered by Abraham and Moses and Samuel in response to God’s call, Levinas presents us with an alternative way of thinking the essence of the human subject. His French translation of hineni is “me voici,” literally meaning “see me here,” but is the most common way of saying “here I am.” Of note here is that the “me” in me voici is not in the position of the active subject (the “I”), but is already the object of a call that comes to it from outside. It does not first act, but is acted upon; the face obligates me before I have agreed to any social contract, without my consent. Grammatically, this human subject is in the “accusative” (as opposed to nominative) case; I am accused, “called out” to be who I am; I am who I am when the finger is pointed at me. Before I am an active agent, I am the passive recipient of a call that comes to me from beyond myself, independent of my will, despite myself. I do not, in the first instance—and contrary to the whole freedom motif that dominates modern thought—get to choose who I am. I am not, in the first instance, an active agent. I am
who I am as subject to my obligations. I am myself, as opposed to being someone else, or just anybody at all, as respondent to the call upon my life, as responsible for what only I can do. Only I can be the father to my son, only I can be the husband of my wife, there are things that, given my experience and background, only I can offer to my students, there are contributions that only I can make to my meeting. And I am who I am as so called. “I” am not an origin, but a response, and thus—from the first and from before the first—responsible. As Levinas is fond of putting it, “to be or not to be is not the question.” I do not exist first, and then become responsible (or not); I exist as responsible, as responsibility. Or, as Levinas also summarily puts it: “Ethics precedes ontology.”

This reverting of the active “subject of ...” into the primordial self as “subject to ...” reverses the vectors of meaning that, in both transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutics, typically run from the interpreting subject—pre-equipped with the categories in terms of which everything experienced is taken as this or as that—to the interpreted object. Imposing the meanings I find in me upon the other is, for Levinas, an act of violence. For Levinas, the face of the other cuts back across any interpretative categories I would apply to her; faced with the suffering of the other, it is my interpretive categories that are “interpreted,” called into question, insofar as they would provide any alibi for avoiding my responsibility to and for the other. And this is why for Levinas the other is genuinely other—not because she is entirely different from me, ontologically or anthropologically, but because the other qua other is refractory to my pre-understandings; I do not get to decide to whom or whether I am responsible. The face leaves me no such latitude. The categories in terms of which I interpret the situation need be responsive to, rather than determinative of, my obligations to the face. In Levinas’s terms, “the other” de-centers “the same” (me with my prejudices and expectations); the other as “infinity” exceeds the “totality” (my attempt to subsume all including the other into the world as I know it) and is—prior to any meanings I would bring to the situation—meaningfulness itself.

Ethics as traditionally conceived within our tradition (qua philosophical or theological science), on Levinas’s reading, has been overwhelmingly an attempt to determine a priori the obligations I do, and do not, have toward the other. Ethics in this sense is the aspiration to have a rule for every situation (whether given by God, arrived at by pure reason, indexed to pleasure, or what have you), to
have ethics as a “neutral third” besides myself and the other, a set of regulations that applies equally to both of us, to all of us. Two things follow: first, ethics so conceived participates in the attempt to reduce the other to the same, to interpret the other as another me, an alter ego (i.e., another I). Consequently, I need not focus on the other to determine what I owe her, but can determine this solely on the basis of what I myself need, since we are, after all, the same. Against this, Levinas posits an essential asymmetry in the ethical relationship: what I owe the other is not correlative with what the other owes me. I am responsible for him whether or not he is responsible for me. Whether he is or not, as Levinas abruptly puts it, “is his business.” Secondly, ethics qua this system of rules or law thus interposes itself between me and the face, dictating what to do, for whom, when, and for how long—thus limiting my responsibility. My focus here is upon the rules, and not on the other, and my fidelity is to the former, since it is this that dictates what I owe to the latter. As such, ethics is, in a paradoxical reversal, an impediment to responsibility for the other, rather than its guarantee.

And, after Auschwitz, any impediment to my responsibility to the face, any system or rationalization or excuse that justifies or accepts or resigns itself to such suffering on any grounds, is not only suspect, but the scandalous itself.3

Just Ethics

So I am called (we are called) to attend to the face—which Levinas, replacing the earlier and more traditional sense, now calls “ethics”—prior to any systematization or codification (and thus limitation!) of that responsibility, which as such is asymmetrical and infinite, to the point of taking “the bread from one’s own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one’s own fasting.”4 Yet, if only this impossible demand were so easy! For in our world, where the obligation to the face of the other “holds” (or has a hold on me), it is also always already “disturbed.”

Recall that you are attending to the suffering one, the one whose eyes rolled back in his head and who collapsed on the floor in a seizure. All of a sudden, and as unexpectedly, another person, across the room, likewise doubles over in pain, and collapses on the floor with a haunting thud. Now what? The face of the second sufferer imposes itself with
all of the force of obligation as the first. The infinite responsibility for the first is interrupted by another infinite responsibility; I must respond to both, to each, with the same selfless abandon, and at the same time! But, how, as a finite being, can I do so? I must make the difficult choice of who comes before whom, which Levinas refers to as a “comparison of incomparables.” My absolute responsibility for the other, which I am in no position to question as subject to it, now must be called into question—in light of another face, the face of another other. This for Levinas introduces the question of justice, for I now must regulate my responsibility, subject it to a rule, distribute it among my neighbors.

Such a situation is not, of course, the exception, but our everyday reality; we never are, and never were, called to respond only to a single other. There are always other others, a multitude of others, as numerically infinite (for extending even to the faces of all future generations) as each face itself is infinitely obligating. If I were, therefore, to give myself wholly to the first face (which I am ethically required to do!) at the expense of the second, then my ethical response would be—in an irony to beat all others!—profoundly unjust. To be just, my ethical obligation to the other must take the form of a care for all, which requires law, and institutions, and universal norms—all of that which, qua “ethics as codification,” “ethics as responsibility for the face” called into question to begin with. And this is why, to return to the beginning of this section, we find in Levinas not an unnuanced “criticism” of ethics, but a “critique” of ethics qua universal laws of conduct. The latter are necessary for justice, but dangerous to the ethical moment that animates the requirement of justice; the face and the faces are what makes justice possible and necessary, but justice in its universality is an ongoing threat to the other as other who continues, qua face, to call all such systems into question. A rule must be established that—per impossible—is fair to all, but that yet answers to the face of the singular, vulnerable other—the very raison d’être of justice in the first place. As Theo de Boer has so precisely put it, “Levinas lays a foundation—and at the same time some dynamite—under institutions,” as under the ethical rules, of which these are the embodiment.
B. THE INVISIBILITY OF GOD

Now, what I want to point out is that this exposition of ethics, as responsibility to the other (“the ethical”) and as the “subsequent” transition of ethics into principles (“justice”), has been transacted without reference to God. Of highest interest is that while Levinas insists that this must be possible, he himself includes in his exposition of ethics frequent references to God—references that are, moreover, neither superfluous nor incidental. So God need not be excluded from an exposition of ethics, even while the exposition of ethics must not rely upon reference to God. Levinas permits of a certain God-talk (within the limits of ethics alone, to employ a quasi-Kantian idiom), yet will reject any “theological ethics,” i.e., an ethics derived from prior theological posits. For Levinas, this always possible omission of God from an account of ethics is a matter of neither mere nor willful neglect, but integral to ethics—a claim, clearly, with important implications for theology.

Losing Face

Levinas’s concern with theological ethics relies upon his observation that when God is made the fulcrum of ethics, rather than mediating between the other and myself in a way that opens up in governing the relationship between us (the point upon which any ultimately theological system of morals insists), “God” in fact functions as an impediment to my “face-to-face” relationship to the other. Two articulations of this concern present themselves.

If, as per theological ethics, I must turn my eyes first toward God to receive my marching orders regarding my neighbor (as in the typical reading of Jesus’ summary of the law and the prophets—first love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and then, as a by-product of this theophily, love your neighbor as yourself), how—bedazzled by the blazing radiance of the glory that is God, the Infinite, the fullness of Being of the “I am that I am”—am I to simultaneously, or even subsequently, to re-focus my eyes in the dark upon the lowly stranger, widow and orphan, the “others” who are anything but luminous, the inglorious, painfully fleshly shadowy ones whom even the Scriptures refer to as those who “are not”? How, on the model of theological ethics, is the face not overwhelmed and eclipsed (even occluded) by the presence of God? How could the
neighbor in his poverty and pathos possibly compete for attention with the splendor and glory of God?

But even if such refocusing were, however improbable, possible, a model that insists I must turn my gaze on high in order to see my neighbor here below means that my relationship to him will always be indirect, refractory. This brings us to a second, closely related but distinguishable, concern that a God who is required to mediate my relationship with the other becomes, instead, a means by which the other is reduced to the same—the very image of Occidental/philosophical violence according to Levinas. If God mediates the relationship between persons, sets forth the commandments in terms of which we are to conduct ourselves regarding each other, two consequences follow: (1) I am ethically oriented toward and by the divine commands that dictate to me my obligations to the neighbor, not oriented to the neighbor according to his need (his face); and (2) since the same divine commands apply to us all, the other becomes, effectively, another “same,” triggering a power-play that not only permits but requires that I enforce upon the other what I take God to be enforcing upon me, thus responding to the other not on his own terms, but on mine, according to what I take to be good for me. To the extent that I am capable of finding myself in relationship with the other on this model, I am impeded from finding myself in relationship with the other as other. Case in point: I am far more likely to impose what I take to be the law of God upon the other than I am to impose upon myself what the other takes to be the law of God. God (on the model of theological ethics) becomes the means (i.e., mediating term) by which the other is assigned his place in the cosmic economy as I understand it: as sinner or saint, among the lost or chosen, a goat or a sheep, where these categories (or whatever ones my theology implies) dictate who the other is, and what I, in consequence, do (or do not) owe him. God becomes here, not only a distraction from the obligations issuing from the face, but—even beyond mere mitigation—at times the very organ for overriding them.

Once again: for Levinas, anything that interrupts the immediacy and directness of the face-to-face relationship, anything that serves to “lessen the shock” of the irremissable obligation that the face imposes, must be relativized. Anything, ... including God! That is why, for Levinas, if we are still to speak of God, we must do so in a way that keeps the face central to our concern. We can now turn to what might be called—with all due caution—Levinas’s theology.
Levinas’s “Theology”

There are two principal places in Levinas’s discourse where God-talk figures prominently, where Levinas speaks of God at work, or, in Levinas’s own phrase, where God “comes to the idea,” and, not surprisingly, in both cases the context is governed by ethical, rather than straightforwardly theological, concerns.

The first involves the very mise en scène of the ethical situation itself, wherein I find myself obligated, guilty without excuse, to the other—testifying to God, glorifying God, across my having been called to neighbor love: “The glory of the Infinite is the archaic identity of the subject flushed out without being able to slip away. It is the ego led to sincerity, making signs to the other, for whom and before whom I am responsible, of this very giving of signs, of this responsibility: ‘here I am.’ The saying prior to anything said [i.e., my finding myself responsible before I respond in terms of some or other concrete articulation of this responsibility] bears witness to glory.”

According to Levinas, God does not appear directly to me, as “an alleged interlocutor,” but only across the face-to-face relationship with the human other. “The Infinite then has glory only through subjectivity, in the human adventure of the approach of the other, through the substitution for the other, by the expiation for the other.” God gets the glory, as it were, for my finding myself responsible for the other. “God’s glory” is precisely a translation for my having been assigned to the other, to the care for the other where the other—in his poverty and vulnerability—is “higher” than myself, which Levinas describes with the evocative metaphor of the “curvature of intersubjective space.” For Levinas, “This ‘curvature of space’ is, perhaps, the very presence of God.”

The second place where Levinas speaks of God as integral to the ethical adventure, paralleling my being assigned by God to the other, is where the other takes responsibility for me. Remember my earlier description of the “transition” from ethics to justice, from my responsibility for one to my responsibility for all. In this situation, where I am called upon to divide my responsibility among the others, there is yet no warrant for my demanding or expecting that the other will be reciprocally responsible for me—even if, Levinas claims, there can be no true justice unless there is justice for me too. And yet, mirabile dictu!, the other—and thus in excess of what I can insist upon or expect—does care for me. “[I]t is only thanks to God [grâce à dieu] that, as a subject incomparable with the other, I am approached...
as an other by the others, that is ‘for myself.’ ‘Thanks to God’ I am another for the others. ... The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society.” Indeed, while my business is my responsibility for the other(s), the other, due to the grace of God, has always already cared for me. Even before I was born, even as I was being knitted in the womb, the (m-)other cared for me with a sacrificial love, caring for me out of her own nourishment, loving me as “the other in the same,” the very trope (“maternity”) that Levinas employs in his later work to describe my relation to my neighbor. And Levinas extends the family metaphors to describe God’s role in the “justice,” which places me on an equal footing with my (br-)others, referring to the God of monotheism as bespeaking the common parentage of all people, equals, despite (and founded upon) my asymmetrical responsibility to the other. “Synchronization is the act of consciousness which, through representation and the said, institutes ‘with the help of God,’ the original locus of justice, a terrain common to me and the others where I am counted among them, that is, where subjectivity is a citizen with all the duties and rights measured and measurable which the equilibrated ego involves, or equilibrating itself by the concourse of duties and the concurrence of rights.” Justice is for me, too. Thank God!

The Trace of God

Having turned me toward the other, and the other toward me, God—if not to be an impediment to neighbor-love—must withdraw from the scene so that I am directed, unimpeded and non-distracted, into the immediacy of the face-to-face relationship. God, in setting the ethical scene, removes himself from the scene, must himself be unseen. God, having left a trace of his glory across the responsibility that we bear for one another, is no longer he to whom, or of whom, we speak, even if in speaking to the other in responsibility we bespeak, with or without acknowledgment, the glory of God. Thus, says Levinas:

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. ‘Here I am, in the name of God,’ without referring myself to his presence. ‘Here I am,’ just that! The Word God is still absent from the phrase in which God is for the first time
involved in words. It does not state ‘I believe in God.’ To bear witness to God is precisely not to state this extraordinary word, as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis, or become being’s essence. As a sign given to the other of this very signification, the ‘here I am’ signifies me to the other in the name of God, at the service of the men who look at me, without having anything to identify myself with, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture—the saying itself. To be effective as the non-diverting charge to neighbor-love, this withdrawal of God must be so complete, so convincing, that atheism (real, not a feigned, atheism) must be a permanent possibility—but an atheism, a divine atheism, that nevertheless testifies to the glory of God:

The infinite would be belied in the proof that the finite would like to give of its transcendence; entering into conjunction with the subject that would make it appear, it would lose its glory. Transcendence owes it to itself to interrupt its own demonstration. Its voice has to be silent as soon as one listens for the message. It is necessary that its pretension be exposed to derision and refutation, to the point of suspecting in the ‘here I am’ that attests to it a cry or a slip of a sick subjectivity. But of a subjectivity responsible for the other!

One wonders whether the biblical claim that no one can see God and live has less to do with some specter of sacred terror, and more to do with the impediment to interpersonal life that “God’s presence” can effect. Marked by a kenosis to the point of the real possibility of non-existence, Levinas’s God is eminently worthy of worship in his refusal of worship—except as translated into care for the stranger, widow, and orphan. Glory be to God!

ENDNOTES

1 I provide a detailed argument for this reading in my book The Intrigue of Ethics: A study of the idea of discourse in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). That work represents the exegetical background to the more popular and “breezy” account provided here.
2 He died December 25th, 1995.
3 Of course, once having bought into this account of ethics, it is the face that becomes the scandal. Legalism is easier than neighbor-love, and in most cases therefore preferred by us. It is infinite obligation to the other that is hard, and, as we shall shortly see, even impossible, but no less holy for that.
Dudiak: Levinas and the Invisibility God

LEVINAS AND THE INVISIBILITY OF GOD • 17


5 This is why, early on, Levinas was critical of “love” as “a solitude of two,” where the concern for and devotion to one other comes at the expense of the concern for the other others. In his later work he softened his critique of love, though not of the motivation behind it.


7 Not chronologically, but structurally subsequent.

8 We are too familiar with the phenomenon here described (of attention to God being not only a distraction from attention to the neighbor, but even—despite all rhetoric to the contrary—an alibi to disdain him) not to be moved by Levinas’s concern, but it is not clear to me that the promise of theological ethics (that genuine neighbor love is the effect of love for God) is not sometimes, at least, realized. Jesus’ response to John’s query (which is a question about whether God is present) in Matthew 12: “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk,” etc., needs perhaps trump the in principle insistence upon either model.

9 Levinas, Otherwise than Being (1981), 144-5.

10 Ibid., 148.


12 Levinas, Otherwise than Being (1981), 158.

13 Ibid., 160.

14 Ibid., 149.

15 Ibid., 152.