

## Levinas and Kierkegaard on Divine Transcendence and Ethical Life: Response to Donald L. Turner and Ford Turrell's "The Non-Existent God"

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Received: 17 May 2007 / Accepted: 5 June 2007 /  
Published online: 21 August 2007  
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**Abstract** This article is a brief commentary on Donald Turner and Ford Turrell's "The Non-Existent God: Transcendence, Humanity, and Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas." While I agree with Turner and Turrell's general presentation of Levinas's existential conception of God and ethics, I reflect primarily on the reference the authors make to Kierkegaard as an existentialist forefather of Levinas. I show certain basic similarities between Levinas and Kierkegaard as existentialist thinkers, but also note their differences, also taking into consideration the influence of Hegel. This paper was delivered in the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

**Keywords** Turrell · Turner · Levinas · Kierkegaard · Hegel · Philosophy of religion · God · Ethics · Existentialism · Phenomenology · Abraham · Isaac · Dialectical mediation · Faith · Leap of faith

Dating at least from the nineteenth century, the task of navigating a way between models of divine transcendence and divine immanence has also demanded that urgent attention be paid to ethics. Donald Turner and Ford Turrell show clearly and effectively how Levinas's model of divine transcendence avoids the shortcomings of both traditional theology and Nietzschean-inspired critique of religion, and also robustly includes God in "the realm of inter-human ethical relations." To be sure, in the very life of religion itself, theists and believers accept that the choice to believe has decisive ethical implications. To underscore the relevance of the issue of how God relates to ethical life and the urgency with which we must interpret this issue, we need only point to the human community's recent and continuing willingness to mix religion, disparate ethical viewpoints, and domestic and global politics in the most explosive and destructive kinds of combinations.

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While I cannot here treat these kinds of ethical and political implications of faith, I would like to begin to explore the background of Turner and Turrell's exposition of Levinas, God and ethical life by reflecting on their reference to Kierkegaard as a kind of existentialist forefather of Levinas. Kierkegaard is certainly an esoteric genius as a religious thinker, someone whom we have to handle delicately as he dons his many pseudonymous masks—as Johannes Climacus, as Johannes de Silentio, and so forth.

In a short, great early work, *Fear and Trembling (FT)*, Kierkegaard interprets Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac to illuminate what it means actually to be religious. The crisis of the righteous Abraham is that he must either enact God's ethically horrifying personal command, which is to sacrifice his son Isaac, or defy this command, and so act in a way which would be consistent with recognizable prohibitive ethical norms (do not murder your children!). In response to the crisis, Abraham *relates* to the paradox (it is impossible for him to explain it away) via a profoundly intense, inwardly-directed, subjective leap of faith in the will of God who transcends. Kierkegaard's point is that if we take the Old Testament and especially the life of Abraham seriously, we are re-awakened to the fact that being religious in the most authentic sense is something different from and 'higher than' being ethical. Kierkegaard's radical position is especially opposed to the perceived dangerous predominance of Hegelian ethics and its derivatives, which very strongly tend to reduce the religious to the ethical. At least, this is Kierkegaard's perspective in *FT*.

Over the course of his authorship Kierkegaard develops further his response to the question of what it means to be religious, perhaps most notably in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments (CUP)*. A central line of continuity between *FT*'s treatment of Abrahamic religiousness and *CUP*'s study of Christian faith is that both Abraham and the true Christian believer must make an existential leap of faith. While these leaps are different, there is an order of intensity and inward-dwelling suffering which they seem to share. In addition, both leaps are driven by paradox; in the case of Christianity, this is the case of the paradox of the temporal becoming eternal in the incarnation.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, neither Abraham nor the true Christian can rationally mediate this relation to God (and thereby also come to terms rationally with how his or her religious consciousness is reconciled with the Hegelian, immanent universal–ethical) and at the same time remain true to what is truly religious about the relation. In other

<sup>1</sup> See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and transl. by David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1941, 96. In *CUP*, Kierkegaard treats the paradoxical character of the task of becoming a Christian in many ways. One of the most important is that the Christian individual must respond to the paradoxical character of the incarnation; God is both the eternal and the temporal (*CUP*, 194–195). A second, vitally important and equally paradoxical characterization of the task of becoming a Christian is that the individual subject must also acknowledge that the truth of her relation to God lies in her subjectivity, but that the finitude of her subjective existence puts the infinite eternity of God infinitely beyond the reach of any individual subject (See especially Book Two, Part Two, Chapter II (169–224) of *CUP*). Certainly, the Christian leap of faith is teleologically directed by the individual Christian's interest in her own eternal happiness (salvation), and is also defined through existential pathos (*CUP*, 384). According to Kierkegaard, this existential pathos is essentially defined as inward suffering (*CUP*, 389; see also *CUP*, 386–399), which he thinks at the same time is uplifting for the religious individual.

words, Hegelian immanentism is irreconcilable with Kierkegaardian faith, with all the pathos of paradox and suffering that this leap of faith entails. To be sure, over the course of his authorship Kierkegaard does indicate that what it means to be truly religious in a Christian sense is very close to being truly ethical.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, on Kierkegaard's view it ultimately seems that to relate to God in a truly Christian way, the subjective leap of faith outstrips in importance any 'reasonable' (i.e., Hegelian) ethical considerations.

Let us return to Turner and Turrell's treatment of Levinas. Like Kierkegaard, Levinas thinks we must accept the radical transcendence of God, and be ready to face the implications of this for how we think of the relation of God to ethics. While the spectre of Hegelianism and its implications for the interpretation of God and ethics might not be as menacing for Levinas as it was for Kierkegaard in the 1830s and 1840s, Levinas clearly seeks to avoid another set of pitfalls at least as treacherous. These are the conventions of traditional theology and belief in God, and the accompanying "conceptual acrobatics required to reconcile belief in such a being with the reality of radical evil." Turner and Turrell's exposition of Levinas shows his philosophy of alterity to be his response to the problem of understanding God in relation to ethics. But while Kierkegaard's existentialism does not shy from presenting the radical *separation* between religion and ethics as a way to circumscribe and illuminate just what it means to be religious, Levinas's existentialism sees the truth of God in ethical life differently from the perspective of Kierkegaard. Levinas presents the transcendent God as a trace in the face of the Other; ethical intersubjectivity reveals itself to be the ever-present, ever-vanishing dwelling place of God.

To treat further the relation between Kierkegaard and Levinas goes beyond the scope of this commentary. However, in the work of both these great thinkers, we find two remarkable ways to discuss divine transcendence, ways that are neither bound by the limitations of traditional theology nor are diminished by the pretenses of misguided Hegelianism.

## References

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- Kierkegaard, S. (1941). *Concluding unscientific postscript to philosophical fragments*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup>I am aware that certain of Kierkegaard's works, perhaps especially the later *Works of Love*, could be interpreted as putting forward a kind of divine command theory, which would be evidence of a more robust expression of continuity between the religious and the ethical in Kierkegaard's work in general (see especially Evans, C. S., *Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love: Divine Commands and Moral Obligations*, Oxford University Press, 2004).