LEVINAS, ADORNO, AND THE ETHICS OF THE MATERIAL OTHER

ERIC S. NELSON

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Eric S. Nelson

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Chapter 7 draws on Eric S. Nelson, "Levinas and Kierkegaard: The Akedah, the Dao, and Aporetic Ethics." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 41, no. 1 (2013): 164–184.

Chapter 12 draws on Eric S. Nelson, "Against Liberty: Adorno, Levinas, and the Pathologies of Freedom." *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory*, 59, no. 131 (2012): 64–83.

Chapter Thirteen draws on Eric S. Nelson, "Cosmopolitan Tolerance and Asymmetrical Ethics: Adorno, Levinas, Derrida." Curtis Hutt, Halla Kim, Berel Dov Lerner, eds., *Jewish Religious and Philosophical Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 153–172.

Introduction

On the Way to an Ethics of Material Others

> The need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject.
>
> —Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*

> Has the material meaning of philosophical reflection been lost? And if there is no consideration of the materiality of human existence— no consideration of the negativity of starvation as a starting point (as Ernst Bloch makes it)—then it seems that the critical sense of historical reality (which was indeed this "material negativity" for the first school) has faded away. The "second generation," upon losing this material sense and thereby losing negative critique (not in relation to a discursive community, but rather a community of living humans), effectively fell into a moralistic formalism.
>
> —Enrique Dussel, "From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation"

Opening Reflections

Ethical Imperfection and the Priority of the Material Other

A common prejudice concerning ethics is that only the morally perfect should speak about it. The present work will trace possibilities of an ethics of "imperfection" in which ethical moments arise in the encounters and relations of bodily material others exposed through embodied desires and

wants to need, suffering, injury, and death. This is an ethics that concerns what Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) diagnosed as damaged life in *Minima Moralia* and what Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) described in his 1935 work *On Escape* as the "insufficiency of the human condition" and later thought as incompletion, which cannot be understood as a limitation or negation of the "sufficiency of being."[1] Ethical incompletion and imperfection are heuristic expressions and inform critical diagnostic models deployed within and against existing material and social conditions, as in an ideology-critique of ethics, to contest disciplinary ideologies of the virtuous and morally privileged elites, and their judgments of who ranks as good, as well as the theories of moral perfectionism that dominate Western philosophical and practical discourses and that are integral to the social-historical perpetuation of damaged life against which that life resists and revolts: in its wounds lies hope.[2]

This volume consists of interwoven essays on critical natural history, mimesis and responsiveness, and the environmental crisis (part 1); religion, prophecy, and the good (part 2); and equality, liberty, and solidarity (part 3). These essays present in outline a critical model of an ethics of the material other addressing experiences, encounters, and discourses of the alterities, nonidentities, and the good that constitute, interrupt, and reorient ethical and social-political forms of life. The ethics of material others as "first philosophy" has a number of significant implications: (1) the self is constituted through material, mimetic, and communicative relations to others, as outside of and exterior to the subject, in "other-constitution" rather than individual or collective self-constitution; (2) encounters with the prophetic "other-power" or transcendence of the good in others, in the ordinary mundaneness and sufferings of immanent material life, disturb and place into question the economies of the individual ego relishing its own happiness and collective identities that codify themselves through the subjugation and refusal of nonhuman and human others; and (3) the infinite ethical and social-political demand of others calls for unrestricted solidarities that can reorient and transform ethical and social-political sensibilities and possibilities. Ethical and social demands are mediated by and contest existing material conditions and communicative processes of a given form of social reality such as the contemporary global capitalist order.

Given the persistent entanglements and mediations of the prophetic emancipatory potential of the present moment, with hegemonic power relations and ideological discourses that justify them, the imperfectionist

ethics (in which the ordinary self, who can never be sufficiently ethical, is addressed by and responds to the material other) articulated in the current book must also be a politics and political economy of material others that would begin to transition beyond the confines of previous discourses.

The present inquiry into the material other is a heterodox response to the thought of the German philosopher, sociologist, and social theorist Adorno and the Lithuanian-born Jewish French philosopher Levinas, drawing on, interconnecting, and critically transforming their interpretive strategies with regard to the contemporary environmental and social-political situation. Their philosophies will be comparatively reconstructed in the chapters of this volume; some elements will be intensified and interrelated (such as nonidentity and alterity) while others are criticized (such as the Eurocentric hypostatization of modernity as an exclusively Western rather than an intercultural formation).[3]

The strategy of this project is to articulate a hermeneutics of alterity and nonidentity in regard to the relations of ethical life, or the lifeworld, and social totality (systems) as determined by the global exchange, circulation, and consumption of goods and labor. It deploys while critically revising examples, models, and strategies from Adorno, Levinas, and their interlocutors to address a series of interconnected ethical and social-political issues related to the relations between nature and nonhuman and human animals (part 1), religion's functions as ideology and as prophecy (part 2), and interhuman justice (part 3).

The Ethics of Alterity and the Negative Dialectics of Nonidentity

The logic of identity is, according to Adorno, a logic of exchange and equivalence. It requires universal fungibility, interchangeability, and a totality of relations that appropriates and commands the sacrifice of all things. In response to the hegemony of identity in the theoretical attitude and in practical life in which life has become the consumption of life, Adorno proposed a nonidentity that is not only conceptual but also material and indicates that which exceeds and interrupts identification and equivalence. While Levinas rejects dialectic as signifying mediation and closure (totality), dialectic in Adorno breaks totality by radicalizing the moments of the concept and of mediation that inevitably point beyond themselves. Both resist the totalizing movement of dialectic, but Adorno's negative dialectics is an aporetic and para-doxical (deconstructive of

doxa) logic unfixing reified conceptualities and contesting practices of identification and identity formation.

Adorno heightened the negativity in the dialectic against the thinking of identity and totality that defined classical forms of dialectic logic. This intensification of negativity appears alien to while intersecting with Levinas's suspicions regarding negativity and dialectic altogether for an alterity and otherness that would be other than identity and totality. The strategies of Adorno and Levinas against negativity as derivative of positivity are distant and contradictory inasmuch as Adorno heightens the negativity that Levinas deconstructs. Their respective discourses are aligned in that they each develop a discourse of that which exceeds and disturbs forms of identity and totality that they both associate with the dominant paradigm of Western philosophy and social-political life.

The two paragraphs above used Adorno's language to clarify each discourse. It is already evident that the present work operates between the tensions and affinities of these respective philosophers, as well as others from Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Jacques Derrida and Enrique Dussel, thereby inevitably presenting its own third model that lacks the authority of these names and texts. Throughout this work, there will be transitions between these distinctive forms of communication as well as the emergence of creolized, mixed, or "hybrid" languages.

Whereas Adorno presents us with critical heuristic models of non-identity and a radical negativity irreducible to logical negation, which need to be reconfigured in relation to the present situation, Levinas reveals the priority of "the other," who is primarily interpreted with respect to embodied human and nonhuman material others in the present work. This asymmetrical priority of the other is not reciprocal in the sense of a direct or indirect expectation of exchange: it is the "an-archic" (as intractable to an *archē* [ἀρχή] as origin or an ordering power), infinite (as irreducible to totality or an integrating system), and impossibly demanding (as unfeasible to perform and yet called for) condition of ethics as first philosophy: the responsiveness and substitution of one for the other without calculative exchange or an underlying principle of identity. Ethics transpires in its impossibility and tension with existing realities in which the encounter with the other is an indication of the good, and of its priority and sovereignty. All of ethics is in essence an ethics of the other, even as standard moral theories neglect the asymmetrical relations and responsibilities that the ethical encounter and

situation entails. According to Levinas, "the Other" both is and is not the others who are materially and socially situated and address us in interpolation, need, and suffering. The interpretation articulated in the following chapters will stress the ethical demands of a multiplicity of human and nonhuman embodied material others without eliminating the prophetic and emancipatory dimensions (articulated in more directly political ways in Benjamin, Bloch, or Dussel) of Levinas's emphasis on transcendence, other-power, and the good.

A Materialist Interpretation of Nonidentity and the Other

What does "nonidentity" signify? To introduce a preliminary heuristic definition, which will be developed and modified in its elucidation, this expression refers to identity while endeavoring to say something other than and incommensurable with identification and the positing of identity. Nonidentity is an expression that does not make sense from the perspective of identity. In Adorno's strategy of negative dialectics, it is not merely a derivative negation or relative modification of identity (which would place it under Levinas's repudiation of negativity). It is something inevitably "more than" and excessive to experiential, affective, and cognitive-conceptual modalities of identification. Nonidentity is intimated in the object itself insofar as it evades and resists sublation in and reconciliation with the individual or collective subject and its theoretical and practical activities.

The very idea of nonidentity raises a number of problems. First, analogous to the Mādhyamika Buddhist discourse of emptiness (*Śūnyatā*) in Nāgārjuna, the concept of nonidentity faces its own reification that would turn it into another expression of identity thinking. A completely unconditional nonidentity is difficult to communicate in ordinary referential language given the identity-maintaining functions of language and concept formation. Given this problem, there appears to be no direct way to identify an absolutely nonidentical or a wholly other without reifying it in identification and reproducing the very identity it would evade.

Second, the intensification of Adorno's negativity and Levinas's alterity risks absolutizing nonidentity against any identity and the other as transcendent, infinite, "Wholly Other" (*Tout Autre*) against the multiplicity of concrete material nonidentities and others.[4] This potentially leads to moral perfectionist and mystical visions of nothingness, the supersensible, God, and the good while disregarding exploited and suffering

existence. Levinas contests the idolization of God and the reification of the good, noting how—for instance—"God," as a distance indicating my own responsibility and as "transcendent to the point of absence," is a word arising in the ethical intrigue and divine comedy of responsibility.[5]

A reply to both of these problems is found in a pluralistic and materialist modification to nonidentity and alterity as interlinked with—to adopt the language of the early Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* and the *Theses on Feuerbach*—concrete bodily existence and sensuous material praxis.[6] "Sensuous" refers in this context to the mediation of life through the senses. In my reading, this modification is already at work in preliminary ways in Adorno and Levinas in their attention to sensuous temporal material life. The emphasis on embodied material alterities runs against interpretations of Levinas that wish to focus on religion and transcendence as exceeding materiality that is not sufficiently passive. But Levinas as well as Adorno recognized the ethical and social-political dimensions of the embodiment and sensory life of others in earthly joy and suffering. It is this regard for vulnerable life that this work proposes intensifying in a prophetic and ethical materialist direction. Drawing on Adorno and Levinas, this does not signify a materialism of naturalistic abstraction, individual contemplation, or the practical activity of a subject but rather the priority of ethical alterity, nonidentity, and responsiveness within the conditions of sensuous material life.[7]

Other-Constitution and Aporetic Thinking

Philosophies of radical alterity and nonidentity, of "other-constitution" through otherness and the nonidentical, appear nonsensical from the dominant perspective of identity thinking and the self-constitutive subject. Adorno's negative dialectics (negative in hesitating before the affirmative moment of synthesis and reconciliation, and in recollecting the violence done in the dialectic movement) and Levinas's ethics of the other who is beyond the self's grasping (that is, alterity in the sense of an otherness that cannot be subsumed or incorporated into the same or the one) share affinities with forms of skepticism in placing ideas of the system, totality, and ontology into question. Philosophers in Greco-Roman skepticism and South Asian Mādhyamika Buddhism, postmodernism and deconstruction, have questioned strategies of relying on identification that reproduce the predominance of identity, revealing the nonidentical at the heart of identity and the absence of unitary self-sameness at the core of the subject. Insofar as it contests identity thinking, skepticism

relies on the empirical contingent nature of things as well as the aporetic conditions of language, thinking, and being.

A philosophy of nonidentity is an aporetic philosophy that risks perplexity in exposure to irresolvable aporia. The modern usage of *aporia*, as paradox and contradiction, stems from the classical Greek word ἄπορος signifying an impasse without exit or passage. As early as Socrates, as presented in the early dialogues of Plato, the aporetic lack of resolution itself operates as a means of dialogue and inquiry, and a way to begin inquiry anew in which the dialogue twists and turns in novel directions while keeping in mind its earlier attempts. The aporia revealed in dialogue has a double meaning of an impasse that cannot be crossed and a generative opening that cannot be closed. This enigmatic closure/opening conditions the structures of thinking and, dialectically speaking, the structure of what is to be thought. It is in this sense that modalities of aporetic ethics are considered in relation to the ethics of the material other.

What does "ethics" mean in this context? Ethical questioning and reflection should be distinguished from moralizing posturing, which Levinas as much as Adorno resisted, and moral theorizing. It is also not the listing of principles and rules. Ethics, according to Levinas, is a first philosophy that cannot be grounded in epistemology, ontology, philosophical anthropology, or other discourses of knowing, being, and the subject. It signifies the disorienting exteriority of the alterity and nonidentity (the affinities and differences of these two concepts are queried later) that places the self in its self-imprisonment and self-concern into question, a self who is shaped and threatened by natural and social forces.

Who is the self in this ethics? The question of how to articulate an ethics of nonidentity in the midst of relentless forces of identity, which require adopting and modifying interpretive strategies from Adorno, Levinas, and other authors, is bound together with the problem of the self. The self is simultaneously a subject (1) who is materially and socially conditioned, determined, and mediated by conditions and forces; (2) whose "selfhood" is defined by the impossible ethical demand of the other to be infinitely responsive and responsible; and (3) who is an embodied and temporally existing self who is called to nourish the material life of nonhuman and human others in asymmetrical yet unrestricted solidarity that would allow each to take its turn.[8]

The book before you is a consequence of an endeavor to pursue an inquiry into the good intimated in material life through the asymmetrical ethics of alterity and nonidentity with respect to nature, religion, and

justice for the sake of articulating an ethics without a founding origin and governing power and as directed toward bodily material others in their height and priority. The asymmetrical difference between me and the other signifies in Levinas a kinship not based on being or nature, an ethical inequality that contests oppression and existing inequalities.[9] It offers an analysis of conceptions of the differences that aporetically unsettle fixations of identity. It pursues questions of whether radical difference can be constitutive of ethics and the ethical subject. The constitution at stake here is not transcendental self-constitution but what is better described as "other-constitution" in which the self is constituted "outside itself" in exteriority and otherness.

An Overview of the Work and Its Motivating Questions

Nature, Religion, and Justice

I consider in the following chapters the extent to which the "nonidentity thinking" of Adorno and the "ethics of the other" of Levinas point toward alternative ways of critically engaging three areas of concern: (1) the ethical status of "inhuman subjects" such as natural worlds, environments, and animals; (2) the bonds and tensions between ethics and religion and the formation of the self through the dynamic of violence and liberation expressed in religious and metaphysical discourses; and (3) the regressive uses as well as conceptual and practical limitations of classic, modern, and contemporary liberal and republican discourses of equality, liberty, tolerance, and their reified conceptions of the autonomous individual self and subject.[10]

     Why do the three parts of this work address nature, religion, and justice? It could be objected that each concept has its own experts and theorists who do not need to converse with one another, and, more significantly, that each reality named has its own dynamics of oppression and emancipation. The argument traced in the following book indicates that what these three basic words name is deeply entangled and interconnected. Questions concerning a critical rather than reductive "natural history" (a concept rejected by Levinas in this sense) of the domination of nature and a brutal struggle for existence, religion as hope in suffering and the prophetic accusation against injustice, and interhuman justice and solidarity are interwoven in a form of life and its material conditions.[11]

Addressing these questions discloses different perspectives and examples for the ethics of material alterity that is at stake throughout this work. There are, as will be traced in the course of the following chapters, three overlapping concerns that orient this inquiry: nature (as entangled and crisis-ridden ecological-material life), religion (as the weak prophetic and messianic demand for a love and justice yet to come, and the good), and justice (as equality, liberty, and solidarity).

The five chapters of part 1 articulate a challenge and alternative to the anthropocentrism and intersubjective idealism of contemporary critical social theory maintained by philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth by pursuing questions of the materiality of human existence, nonhuman animals, ecosystems, and environments. These issues are of vital concern given the environmental and material crisis tendencies of contemporary—neoliberal and neomercantilist—capitalist societies. The stakes and strategies of part 1 are unfolded through reinterpretations of materiality and natural history in Adorno, and earthly embodied existence and the animal other in Levinas.

The five chapters of part 2 engage the multiple functions of religion as and contrary to political theology.[12] They address problems concerning the systematic complicity of religion with violence and subjugation while elucidating the an-archic and prophetic appeal to the good that is more than intimated in religious discourses and practices. Religion justifies and excuses systematic hierarchies and injustices. Yet the truth of religion and spirituality is, Levinas notes, prophecy that is a hearing without striving to hear.[13] As the "heart of a heartless world," it prophetically places exploitation and violence into question, intimating profounder forms of love and solidarity with the abject, exploited, and oppressed as well as between suffering vulnerable bodily beings.

Finally, part 3 turns toward topics such as equality, freedom, tolerance, cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and solidarity in order to interrogate their hegemonic theoretical and ideological forms. Its four chapters and the epilogue contest conventional liberal ethical and social-political philosophy—adopting and transforming (through the deployment of alterity, asymmetry, and nonidentity) radical republican (Rousseau through Levinas) and heterodox Marxist (Marx through Adorno to Dussel) political thought—for the sake of a radically nonidentitarian and unrestricted hospitality, solidarity, and welcoming. "Unrestricted" will be deployed in the double sense of decentering and undoing the fixed and fixating subject, of breaking down and relaxing the violence of essence, through

the ethical priority of the other in Levinas's sense and formalization, experimentation, and responsiveness in freedom toward and felt contact with the object in Adorno's works. Ethical moments of the nonrestriction and nonindifference of the good occur in the midst of imperfect everyday life (in all of its affliction, damage, folly, ignorance, incompletion, and perplexity) in response to the earthly, embodied, and material other.

In the following chapters, I pursue a philosophical problematic and project through a historical study of philosophers associated with the critical social theory of the Frankfurt school (from precursors such as Kant, Hegel, and Marx to heirs such as Habermas, Honneth, and more recently Rahel Jaeggi) and the ethics of difference (from predecessors such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to Derrida and Dussel). However, the accent is placed on the writings of two twentieth-century European philosophers, Adorno and Levinas, since their works are to different degrees germane to articulating an asymmetrical and imperfectionist ethics from moments of otherness and transcendence within traumatized life.

Perfection and Imperfection

Ethical imperfection is a consequence of the concepts of damaged life and *minima moralia* in Adorno, and diachrony and incompletion (time as disquiet and unrest instead of continuity, flow, or a whole) in Levinas.[14] One objection to an imperfectionist elucidation of ethics is the claim that insofar as Adorno and Levinas have an ethics, it is either negative or morally perfectionist.[15] Levinas's reconstructions in *God, Death, and Time* of Plato's form of the good beyond being, Descartes's argument in the *Meditations* concerning the infinity of God, and Kant's articulation of hope and the supreme good can be interpreted as arguments for perfectionism insofar as the good places the imperfect into question, and ideas of infinity and perfection allow one to recognize one's own insufficiency and imperfection.[16] Such accounts (discussed in chapter 10) miss a key point: the good, the infinite, and the perfect are perfections beyond the dynamic of human perfection and imperfection that is at stake in the moral perfectionist perspective. Levinas persistently describes how the good and the infinite are other than and beyond the activity and capacity as well as even the receptivity and passivity of the subject. The infinitely affected and afflicted finite self can never respond to the infinity of the good, stirring inside its immanence, revealed in the other's demand. The anarchy of the good, a radicalization of the sovereignty of good outside

the boundaries of moral perfectionism, is not known and mastered in the canons, customs, exemplars, and habits of moral elites cultivating and perfecting their virtues and arts of existing. It is not the idea of perfection in the good and infinite that constitutes what is objectionable in the moral perfectionist position. Perfectionist and virtue ethical models of morality are placed into question (as forms of domination) due to their assumptions of moral authority, expertise, mastery, and privilege that undermine both the singularity and the universality of ethics.

Where then is the good potentially revealed if not in the mastery of the self and others? Levinas clarifies in his reading of Plato's *Symposium* that the good is intimated not in knowledge but in affect and desire; that is, in desire and neediness in search of the other who is not merely a projection of that desire and need. Needy, wanting, imperfect life in its incompletion is not only necessary for the desire for the good, which, as disinterested and nonindifferent, surpasses being determined by hunger or need to the point of giving the other one's sole piece of bread, but is the locus of the alterity of ethical transcendence within worldly material immanence. Levinas emphasizes consequently that it is not knowledge or the idea but eros and desire—to the point of becoming a desire for the good in nonindifference without concupiscence and self-concern—that is operative in the Platonic good beyond being, the Cartesian notion of perfection that places my own freedom in question and welcomes the other, or Kantian hope as a hope beyond measure in and for the finite mortal life of subjectivity.[17]

Levinas does not portray the good as a mere normative ideal nor as a negation of imperfection. The transcendence of the ethical occurs within the immanence of transient material life, and the other-power of the good in the midst of incompletion and imperfection. The desire and hope for an undamaged life arises within—to modify Adorno's expression—the incompletion and imperfection of "damaged life" itself. In light of arguments unfolded in Levinas and Adorno, the good does not primarily address the morally perfected but rather those afflicted and subjugated by life's physical and moral evils in the midst of their ignorance and folly.

Why Levinas? Why Adorno?

Levinas might seem to be a dubious choice for such a project given his reliance on the religious language of transcendence and his suspicions

concerning modern materialism and naturalism.[18] Naturalism, as the justification of what is and as a particular way of constructing and ordering nature, forgets what ought and should be, misses the enigmatic encounter with the transcendence of the other who is incompatible with ontology as the order of things. Levinas described in his 1947 work *Time and the Other* (*Le temps et l'autre*) how the personal is constituted in the event of the transcendent. The relation with the other (*l'autre*), whose absence is the relationship with the other person or someone else (*autrui*), and time, remains irreducible to power: "If one could possess, grasp, and know the other (*l'autre*), it would not be other. Possessing, grasping and knowing are synonyms of power."[19]

Levinas began his major work *Totality and Infinity*, described by Derrida as "an immense treatise on hospitality," with questions of war, betrayal, and the imprudence of the ethical.[20] He poses the basic problem of ethics in the following terms: how are we not duped and played for a fool by morality? Natural and ontological being presents itself as a state of competition and war that would make ethics impossible and the belief in ethics naïve. Levinas pursues the aporetic and paradoxical route of an ethics of alterity in response to its natural and ontological impossibility and its calculative and prudential foolishness. The height of ethics is the ultimate foolishness, which he calls holiness, of living outside of oneself for-the-other. The boldness of Levinas's project surpasses the limitations of his presentation of it and makes it difficult to ignore. Despite the genuine danger of reducing it to moralistic platitudes and narcissistic self-congratulation, its saying and unsaying continues to challenge ordinary reified conceptions of the self and identity.

Adorno also raised the prospect of the impossibility of ethics given its complicities with domination. He asked the question in *Minima Moralia*, echoing the suspicions posed at the beginning of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, can morality be anything more than ideological posturing? Is morality the smug expression of the comfortable bourgeoisie who can afford to moralize and assert their superiority over the poor and abject who struggle to survive? Morality serves to apologetically reconfirm and excuse the existing order in neoliberal and neomercantilist capitalism, just as in premodern societies, thus obscuring the inequalities and injustices perpetuated under the veil of abstract equality and justice.

Adorno's persistent suspicions concerning ethics and morality might imply a rejection of ethics as such, or his criticism might be informed by its own ethical perspective; that is, an ethics of nonidentity that

challenges—with its "more than this" and "always not yet"—the ideology of identity and identification as forms of reification and fetishization. Thinking's genuine interest is the negation of the fixations of reification.[21] There are traces of resistance and hope within the negativity of manipulated damaged life that imagines possibilities of a genuine unforced reconciliation and a justice and equality that do not undertake violence toward the uniquely and concretely singular.

Despite their divergent philosophical orientations rooted, respectively, in critical social theory and the phenomenological movement, Levinas and Adorno addressed the questionable character of goodness and justice in the face of the totalizing power and hegemonic violence of modern societies and in the wake of the catastrophe of the Holocaust. The crises of modernity disclose the hypocrisy of conventional moral theories and normative prescriptions. Both thinkers eschewed normative ethical theorizing and prescriptive moralizing while pursuing their own forms of ethically concerned inquiry into living less wrongly a damaged life as a socially mediated and vulnerable material self. They challenged the unconditional monadic subject for the sake of a complicit and conditional individual subject who is betrayed and endangered by its naturalness and socialization, and its material and sensible embodiment, which threaten to overwhelm it.[22]

Three Queries about Ethics

The current ethical and social-political project faces a number of concerns, three of which can be outlined schematically here in a preliminary way and concretized in the subsequent chapters.

First, can alterity or the nonidentical be a necessary and sufficient condition for ethics? The answer to this is undoubtedly no. A different route is pursued in this work. The ethics of nonidentity is suggestive and formally indicative for ethical reflection and practice. It is a necessary and yet impossible condition, to speak with Derrida, remaining inevitably paradoxical and incomplete from the standpoint of the requirements of normative and prescriptive moral theories that themselves have been inadequate to address the ethical demand of material others.

Second, can an ethics of alterity be formulated formalistically only in outline? The answer to this must also be no. Such an ethics cannot be purely formal, as it is compelled toward concreteness because it is bound to sensible material subjects and their happiness and suffering. It

must be bound to the multiplicity of material life in order to articulate the concrete differences that matter: specifically, the materially existing other. Asymmetrical or differential ethics requires encountering the differences and materialities without reducing them to identity. It must therefore emphasize recognizing and responding to the sensibility, sentience, and suffering of conditional material selves and fragile temporal subjects instead of eternal souls and self-constituting autonomous subjects. This entails encompassing more than human subjects, such as animals, organisms, ecosystems, and natural worlds. As Martin Buber noted in *I and Thou*, each one can be encountered as ethically addressing me.[23] The ethics of material others, as a result, to speak schematically here, are expansively naturalistic and materialistic while contesting reified and limited conceptions of nature and matter. The natural (the immanent) is already infected and recurrently interrupted by the ethical and the autonomous good (the transcendent) rather than in opposition to it.[24]

Third, if it is not to be an empty gesture and monotonous bourgeois moralizing, how can a materialist ethics of nonidentity—as distinct from an ethics of norms, prescriptions, and principles—be pertinent to contemporary sociopolitical issues such as the perpetuation of ecological devastation, identity violence, and social-political injustice characteristic of contemporary capitalist societies and the international order? The anomalous moment of the nonidentical reveals the nonharmonious dissonances and tense interconnectedness of conditional material subjects in relation to their environments and animals (the topic of part 1) and human animals (the topic of parts 2 and 3); that is, the nexus of complex and fragile formations of reciprocity and that which cannot be reciprocated or exchanged.[25]

Historical Contexts and Critical Departures

Marxism, Phenomenology, and New Critical Models

Karl Marx presciently depicted, initially in early works such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844), and later with more theoretical and empirical sophistication in the *Grundrisse* (the unfinished *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*) and *Capital*, how the paradigm of exchange dominates in capitalist societies, as values are reduced to exchange values and relations to exchange relations. Even

as Marx's description and critique remain pertinent given the ecological and material crises of contemporary capitalist societies that damage life and endanger human survival, his ethical and social-political diagnosis and prescriptions do not offer an adequate response and require reinter-pretation through an ethics of the alterity and nonidentity of embodied material others.

The disruptive logic of nonsymmetrical relationality and reciprocity (exemplified in hospitality, generosity, and gift giving) requires tracing existing and potential alternatives to the hegemonic logic of equivalence, exchange, and sacrifice determining conventional ethical and material life and moral-political discourses. This interpretive strategy allows difficult and complex questions concerning environments and animals, religious identity and difference, and the ethics and politics of justice to be reposed in the context of their asymmetries and materialities. Adorno and Levinas accordingly offer a significant alternative to orthodox forms of Marxism and anti-Marxism, phenomenology and antiphenomenology.

Marx remarked in *The German Ideology*, "Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life."[26] This claim is correct not so much in the sense of economic determination, which Marx had not developed at this point (if he ever did) to the degree later attributed to him, but in the sense that embodied conscious or self-reflective life is an ethos or praxis of living in and from the world and is called to respond to, address, and nourish its material others, contexts, and conditions. Ethics in the Levinasian sense signifies a stricter, more rig-orous determination that interrupts the determinacy of being, including social-economic and anthropological-biological being. The unsettling and reorienting "an-archy" of the good is disruptively incarnate in the midst of material life rather than separate from it in an otherworldly or supersensible realm.

The thinking of Adorno and Levinas appears to intersect in a number of significant ways that other authors, such Hent de Vries, have examined. This impression is not incorrect insofar as there are striking affinities. Both discourses, as de Vries and others have described, engage in critiques of religious and secularized theodicies, the ordinary defini-tion of which is the justification of God's justice in the world given the realities of suffering and evil, and its modern secularized incarnations.[27] Both confront modern Western society and philosophy, and in particular, in response to Martin Heidegger's ontology, through Auschwitz and the Shoah, which have thrown previous certainties concerning theodicy—or

its secularization in progress, the invisible hand, and world spirit—into question.

Each of these philosophies has its own senses of "critique." Levinas speaks of philosophy as "justifying and critiquing the laws of being and of the city," deployed to assess ordinary conventional ethics, morality, and the social-political life that justifies and excuses the evils humans inflict upon one another.[28] These concerns encompass, more extensively in Adorno and less sufficiently in Levinas, animal life and the natural world. Although Levinas does not have as comprehensive a sense of nonhuman life as Adorno, he focuses on the significance of embodiment, sensibility, and the sensory that he links with the fragility and vulnerability of others, who are essentially concrete material others in their hunger and need for bread and daily sustenance, for habitation and care. This is a phenomenology of bodily others in Adorno and Levinas, which Adorno describes as the truth in materialism in contrast to its doctrinal and dogmatic forms.

Adorno and Levinas likewise retain a crucial phenomenological dimension in thinking that links thought to a care for concrete differences, to the primacy of the object in Adorno and the priority of the other in Levinas, even as they reject previous phenomenology for the priority it gave to conceptual cognition and subjectivity. One can perceive common emphases on irreducible differences, which Adorno analyzes through the notion of a nonidentity irreducible to and interruptive of the logic of identity and identity thinking, and Levinas depicts through the alterity of the other that is irreducible to and interruptive of the integrating sameness of the self-concerned self who is struggling in existence to preserve itself relative to the totality of social relations. The impersonal reality of totality, and its logic of exchange, sacrifice, and war, is that which Adorno and Levinas confront with moments of nonidentity and alterity, such that they might be thought to be allied sources for social critique—insofar as totality remains a problem at this stage of the capitalist social-economic organization of life.

At the same time, there are crucial differences between the two that should be kept in mind. They make it difficult and perhaps impossible to integrate the discourses associated with the proper names Adorno and Levinas. Accentuating the negative nonidentical moment in Hegel's dialectic Adorno's discourse is a dialectical one without—he stresses—the affirmative moment of identification: that is, the forced reconciliation and integrating synthesis that assimilate and preserve subsumed moments

in an identity. Adorno's critical social theory concerns immanence, and the self-disruptive character of immanence to itself, in nonidentity. Its endeavor is to be a critical discourse of society that addresses and potentially participates in the transformation of the present. Levinas, in contrast, contests the very terms that are employed in Adorno's works: the language of dialectic, immanence, theory, and critique.

Levinas shares the phenomenological distrust of dialectic, which is also at work to varying degrees in the works of Husserl and Heidegger; dialectic is assimilative, and Levinas pursues the anarchic moments that surpass dialectic, such as the good beyond being in the dialogues of Plato. Levinas's mature works, which are already prefigured in the idea of escape from the immanence, positivity, and self-sufficiency of being in his *On Escape*, articulate a discourse of sweeping and excessive transcendence that is incompatible with and interrupts the order of immanence. Further, Levinas does not employ the language of negativity and critique, which would potentially reassert the dialectic in relation to what is critiqued, reestablishing totality. Negation and negativity are fundamentally inadequate to the encounter with alterity, an alterity that exceeds the attempt to identify or define it, including in terms of singularity, personhood, or ineffability. Critique as theoretical and practical self-reflection addressing the present situation is likewise insufficient. Levinas's thinking delineates what would exceed negativity and critique, allowing this work to rethink these very concepts beyond Levinas. Such excessiveness applies to Levinas's own discourse, which he describes in *Otherwise Than Being* as a passage and passing from an event of alterity to an alterity that cannot be conceptualized in or limited to the event of its encounter.

Cacophonies and Dissonances

In one sense to be elucidated in the present book, it appears as if Adorno and Levinas are speaking of overlapping questions and themes in the distinctive languages of nonidentity and alterity. Adorno's question "[H]ow is the right life possible in the midst of the false?" evokes Levinas's question, posed in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, how is ethics not only possible but first philosophy given the omnipresence of the ego, its striving for existence (*conatus essendi*), competition, and war? Each not only articulates the vulnerability and perishability of bodily life in the context of racial oppression, national socialist extermination camps, and capitalist systems of exchange but also attempts to consider to what

extent the promise of liberation and the otherwise than this lingers and speaks under these conditions.

In another sense, it appears that their respective strategies might well be incommensurable ways of endeavoring to articulate that which evades the identification of cognitive conceptual thinking, the sacrificial logic of social totalization, and confronts the pathologies of contemporary forms of life. Adorno embraces, often indirectly and through hesitation (except in occasional writings and more straightforward discussions in the lecture courses), the promise of freedom through the aesthetic moment, beginning with an interpretation of an experimental, formalized, and unrestricted mimesis. Mimesis in Adorno's reconceptualization is not mere identification, imitation, or realistic representation, and accordingly needs to be distinguished from its meanings in previous aesthetics.[29] It signifies in this context, to offer a preliminary description that is extended in chapter 3, a responsiveness to objects and others glimpsed in moments of childlike play, the tenderness of love, as well as in art. Adorno accentuates the emancipatory tendencies of the aesthetic dimension, to an extent that *Aesthetic Theory* is arguably his most revolutionary work, even as it is managed and manipulated under the auspices of consumeristic society and the culture industry. Levinas writes less frequently and more skeptically of the aesthetic, and much more of eros and love. His discourse relies heavily on ethical and religious vocabulary and interpretive strategies, only some of which find echoes or affinities in Adorno's works.

A number of Adorno-oriented commentators identify an ostensible theological moment in Levinas that is incommensurable with Adorno's more secularized thought and secularized use of the prophetic moment in Judaism that Adorno had encountered in the thought of Walter Benjamin. In contrast to Adorno's prophetic caution and modified Marxian social analysis, to speak summarily, Levinas inscribes Jewish prophetic and messianic inspirations, in conjunction with the idea of fraternity from the French republican tradition, in his most philosophical treatises as well as in his Jewish writings that emphasize its ethical moments.

There is also a rift between Adorno's and Levinas's use of the language and concepts of ethics and morality. Adorno avoids and contests the language of ethics and morality, particularly its moralizing perfectionist incarnations, famously naming a work of his most personal philosophical reflections *Minima Moralia*. Levinas appears to speak a language of *maxima moralia*. He can excessively exaggerate moral language and the ethical demand in a hyperbolic accusative manner that strikes a number

of interpreters as the kind of moralizing that Adorno had challenged as bourgeois pretense. Whereas Adorno minimizes ethical and theological language, while still utilizing it for the purposes of social criticism (as a number of recent works on Adorno's aporetic and negative ethics have shown), Levinas amplifies and embellishes this language such that our desires and motivations are always in question. It might be inexactly said that Adorno intensifies negativity while minimizing ethics, and Levinas minimizes the use of negativity while intensifying ethics and its demands. At the same time, each rejects the moments of positivity (which justifies the world as it is) operating in the discourses of negativity of Hegel and Heidegger, even while Adorno extends Hegel's dialectic against identity and beyond this positivity.[30] It is the cacophony and dissonance of their disruptions of prevailing philosophical paradigms that indicate alternative critical models for contemporary thought.

If Levinas's works are read beyond the suspicion of their religious language, a suspicion that is turned around in a religion understood as the prophetic ethics for the other, it becomes problematic to read them as mere moralizing and theology, as they contest the economic and social-political pathologies of the present: the neglect and denial of the other, who, according to Levinas, is not God but the concrete material other who suffers from hunger and need, neglect and denial. The religious category of transcendence is transformed in being concretized in the material sensibility and vulnerability of this other who addresses and interrupts the "I," the my own, and the immanent sphere of the self-concerned ego.

Phenomenology and Antiphenomenology

Adorno and Levinas are each informed by and critically engage the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas's strategy in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* is not so much to moralize, or morally edify, as it is to enact a transformed phenomenology of the ethical in which the practice of phenomenology and the idea of ethics have been altered from their prior classical forms in Husserl and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Levinas describes himself at points as a phenomenologist and a student of Husserl, and at other points as an antiphenomenologist who has broken the limits of phenomenology. Adorno recognizes an essential phenomenological moment of philosophy in the responsive encounter with the thing and the object in its primacy, while criticizing the reification

that he diagnoses as being at work in the categories of consciousness and being thematized in Husserl and Heidegger.

Classical phenomenology, to briefly sketch it in a preliminary way, aims at a description of the phenomena as they show themselves to us and an analysis of the conditions of this appearing to us in intentional consciousness or ontologically in relation to being. Phenomenological descriptions of phenomena lead to the analysis of their conditions in notions of intentionality in Husserl and attunement and comportment in Heidegger, of consciousness in Husserl and the being-there of Dasein in Heidegger. Much more, of course, needs to be said than we have time to express here concerning how Adorno and Levinas have parallel concerns about the limits of classical phenomenology in terms of sensibility and the body, as well as a moment of difference that cannot be subsumed in the discourses of consciousness or being.

Levinas enacts a form of phenomenological description in his writings as he traces moments such as sensibility and insomnia, eros and the death of the other, totality and infinity, and being and that which is otherwise than being and not being. That is to say, Levinas's practice of phenomenological description leads to a distinctive analysis of its conditions: not activity but a passivity more passive than the activity of passive synthesis or the letting be of *Gelassenheit*; not the interiority of consciousness or the mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) of Dasein but the exteriority, the exposure, and the nonmineness of the me and my own (its heteronomy); not the primacy of the ego, the self, or the subject but the priority of the other; not the phenomenon or that which appears but the inapparent, invisible, and impossible; and not the sphere of immanence but transcendence. This passing or passage, as Levinas calls this transition in *Otherwise Than Being*, is not a negation or reversal; it is noncoincidence, a transformation of a way of being by that which is otherwise than being.

Chapter 1 of *Otherwise Than Being* begins in a sense with the question of being as much as with Hegel's *Science of Logic* or Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Being is not construed as an abstract and empty category that passes over into its negation, nonbeing, and is then overcome in becoming (Hegel). Nor is being construed as fallen, or forgotten, and in need of authentic remembrance and retrieval (Heidegger). Being is interpreted instead as essence, interestedness, concerned with itself, and consequently as the striving for being, struggle for existence, and war. This condition of war is being without its other closed in upon and consuming itself.

In the midst of the closed immanence of being and its murmuring even in the deepest void, and the self-concerned care of being in the world, there are interruptive traces of transcendence, of the otherwise than being, that as anarchic is not nonbeing or the negation of being. This otherwise than being, according to Levinas, is not an otherworldly world behind the world or heavenly realm that would not signify the ethical but remain another form of being, "a celestial city gravitating in the skies of the earthly city."[31] The otherwise than being is thematized by Levinas as the interruption and reorientation of being, essence, interest toward the disinterestedness of the good and justice, which is how transcendence speaks in the realm of being.

Being and the otherwise than being have been interpreted as a dualistic or even gnostic interpretation of a reality structured by the diachrony of time, temporal noncoincidence and nonsimultaneity without synthesis. In such readings, Levinas's discourse is divided between being as the realm of egoism, the struggle to exist, and war and the otherwise than being as the anarchic good and ethical. Such interpretations are in need of complication: there is, to adopt Adorno's language, a third moment of nonidentity that is not a totalizing synthesis or a forced reconciliation in Levinas's description of the disruptive passing of the good into being and history. Levinas's analysis of the diachrony of time and the saying beyond being entail an intractability that is not merely a duality and consequently a far-reaching antireductionism to which even receptivity and responsiveness are inadequate.[32] Diachrony (as temporal nonidentity) in Levinas resonates with the prominence of dissonance over harmony in Adorno that he interprets temporally in his musical writings. While the former polemicized against totality and its form of temporality, the latter contested harmony both as a social as well as an aesthetic category. Levinas's strategy here brings to mind, to an extent, Adorno's articulation of nonidentity and its moment of materiality as moments that resist and undermine identification, synthesis, and totalization.

Conclusion

This volume addresses the historical contexts of Adorno and Levinas and their critical departures from their contexts. First, the disasters of twentieth-century history, in particular national socialism, from the initial emergence of Hitlerism to genocide and the Shoah, afflicted them in their reflections on ethical and social-political life and death. Second,

the radical republican, socialist, and Marxist intellectual and practical tendencies that shaped twentieth-century life and thought form another significant historical context for this interpretation of Adorno and Levinas. Third, Adorno's and Levinas's adaptations, critiques, and transformations of Western philosophical traditions (in particular, the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger) also reveal their proximities and distances, sketched in the pages that follow.

The present inquiry is not primarily an intellectual history of two authors who did not discuss each other, nor a comparative reconstruction of their ideas. While considering the historical contexts of these two philosophers, it will think with and against them to address contemporary crisis tendencies that distort and endanger nourishing life in others and in oneself.

The succeeding chapters will illustrate how Adorno and Levinas offer two dissonant yet intersecting strategies for articulating an anarchic otherwise or nonidentity that cannot be pacified and that speaks in bodily sensibility and in the encounter with the other's suffering, need, and material life. Levinas's asymmetrical interpersonal ethics is arguably more phenomenologically developed than the portrayal of alterity and the dynamic of the other in Adorno's writings, despite provocative portrayals of the prejudicial and fascistic gaze. Adorno's depiction of nonidentity is provocatively linked with the problematic of the domination of nature and nonhuman life that shapes the contemporary failures of ecological politics and the ongoing ecological crisis, increasingly more devastating for human and other animal species, which require reimagining the conditions for ecological democracy and alternative ways of becoming-with and inhabiting-with (as the works of Donna J. Haraway disclose) other animals and the natural world.

This volume draws on and departs from Adorno and Levinas as sources for confronting the contemporary situation with a prophetic asymmetrical ethics and politics of material others that endeavors to respond to the harms and injustices being done to human and nonhuman life.

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PHILOSOPHY

This book sets up a dialogue between Emmanuel Levinas and Theodor W. Adorno, using their thought to address contemporary environmental and social-political situations. Eric S. Nelson explores the "non-identity thinking" of Adorno and the "ethics of the Other" of Levinas with regard to three areas of concern: the ethical position of nature and "inhuman" material others such as environments and animals; the bonds and tensions between ethics and religion and the formation of the self through the dynamic of violence and liberation expressed in religious discourses; and the problematic uses and limitations of liberal and republican discourses of equality, liberty, tolerance, and their presupposition of the private individual self and autonomous subject. Thinking with and beyond Levinas and Adorno, this work examines the possibility of an anarchic hospitality and solidarity between material others and sensuous embodied life.

"This is an extremely impressive, original, and thorough treatment of two key twentieth-century thinkers and their applicability to the most pressing social and political issues of our time."

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ERIC S. NELSON is Professor of Philosophy at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He is the coeditor (with John E. Drabinski) of *Between Levinas and Heidegger*, also published by SUNY Press, and the author of *Chinese and Buddhist Philosophy in Early Twentieth-Century German Thought*.

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