

Outside the Subject: Levinas's Jewish Perspective on Time¹

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The best thing about philosophy is that it fails.
—E. Levinas, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas"

Levinas's Jewishness is a self-evident characteristic of his thought, whether considered from the particulars of his biography, or his close intellectual relationship to other modern Jewish thinkers, or the clues we might glean from his own writings—ranging from hints dropped in the midst of his "secular" essays to explicit allusions in his commentaries on Talmudic passages. At no level can one approach him without recognizing his profound indebtedness to Jewish sources, and thus it is not surprising that the very foundations of his philosophy would be informed by a Jewish perspective. The thesis I wish to sketch, and it can be little more than a preliminary exposition in the space here allotted, is that Levinas assumes a traditional Jewish understanding of Time as the foundation of his ethical stance. My interpretation parts company with previous critiques in two respects: the first is an analysis of time in the Judaic theological domain, which demonstrates the correspondence of a Biblical sense of temporality with the role Levinas assigns to time in his own "philosophical" work. The theme espoused here is that Levinas incorporates his Jewish understanding of Time (i.e., divine "time") as the essence of his secular project. Arising from this reading, my second concern (and perhaps its more unconventional aspect) is to suggest the significance of that alignment. It is at this "boundary" that attempts to separate where Jerusalem ends and Athens begins in Levinas's opus that I would radically assign him outside the subject of philosophy. In the conclusion, I will briefly consider where we might situate Levinas in what Derrida called philosophy's death.²

Although this paper was prompted by what I perceive as the overall religious character of Levinas's thought, Richard Cohen, perhaps for

other reasons, has focused my own view:

The alterity which is time itself, breaks up reality into an irrecoverable past and an unreachable future, disrupts the natural complacency of being, overloads it, charging it with a greater responsibility than its capacities can handle. This will mean . . . time must be rethought beyond its recent tutelage to the structures of existential understanding, from *history* and *temporality*. Time must be liberated from its liberators, for time is not a matter of freedom.³

I maintain that this vision of temporality has been translated from a deeply embedded Jewish understanding of Man's relation to God. Time for the (observant) Jew is presented in, and framed by, Divine alterity. Ethics arise from that conception of Time, and Levinas endeavors to extrapolate and deliver that religious precept to Western philosophy. But I maintain that he lingers outside the subject of philosophy, attempting to expand the analytic discourse into a realm it simply cannot abide.

The contrast I wish to develop is beautifully articulated in Abraham Joshua Heschel's sermon, *The Sabbath*, where in the description of the day of rest, the holiness of time is set against the basic metaphysics of Western civilization and thought. This is the avenue in which we will find Levinas marching with a long tradition of rabbinic commentators. Heschel begins by opposing time and space:

Technical civilization is man's conquest of space. It is a triumph frequently achieved by sacrificing an essential ingredient of existence, namely time. . . . To enhance our power in the world of space is our main objective. Yet to have more does not mean to be more. The power we attain in the world of space terminates abruptly at the borderline of time. But time is the heart of existence.⁴

There is of course an entire ethical component in moving from the space of things to the holy dimension of time,⁵ a theme that informs this passage; further, there is an explicit opposition germane to placing Levinas in a philosophical context that Heschel explores:

Reality to us is thinghood, consisting of substances that occupy space; even God is conceived by most of us as a thing. The result of our thingness is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact. This is obvious in our understanding of time, which, being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it had no reality.⁶

Heschel goes on to note that there is no equivalent for the word "thing" in biblical Hebrew, whereas "reality" is derived from the Latin word *res*, which means "thing."⁷ Jewish reality is fashioned in a different realm altogether, and Heschel makes a bold assertion:

Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried . . . the Bible senses the diversified character of time . . . Jewish ritual may be characterized as the art of significant forms in time, as *architecture of time*. . . It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* [holy] is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness. . . .When history began, there was only one holiness in the world, holiness in time.⁸

I regard the theme of the sanctification of time as the fundamental substratum of Levinas's thought, where time in the ordinary sense is deconstructed and reformulated. This essay assumes some familiarity of the reader with Levinas's ethics. More specifically, I develop a *précis* of the Jewish understanding of divine Time, and then draw the correlations of those concepts with Levinas's own formulation. My endeavor is to situate Levinas firmly within his most intimate metaphysics and thus highlight the resonances of his "secular" philosophy with traditional Jewish themes, and the tensions that must then arise between these rabbinic and philosophical personae.

1. A Jewish Interpretation of Time

To analyze a Jewish perspective of time, let us begin with Time chronicled as history. Here we see the first manifestations of an ethical imperative. For the rabbinic sages, the Bible is not only a repository of past history, but serves as a guide to God's purpose.⁹ And God is known only insofar as he reveals himself "historically." There are numerous such examples in the Bible. For instance, when God declares himself in the First Commandment, he does so as the Divine Presence in History: "I am Lord thy God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exod. 20:2). And after the Hebrews had received God's commandments and wandered in the desert for forty years, Moses again admonished them on the dawn of their conquest of Caanan, "I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God, and also with those who are not with us here this day" (Deut. 29:13-14). To paraphrase this Biblical text, the relationship with the divine accompanies Jews of every epoch, including our own. These passages emphasize the two cardinal tenets of Jewish participation in recalling History: reciprocal remembrance between God and Man, and Biblical history continuing into the present, as the Covenant is

renewed with each individual. This endeavor to remain connected to History is signified by the divine commandment encapsulated in the Hebrew word, *Zakhor*—Remember!¹⁰ In this sense, God remains in History.

There is a critical distinction between *history* as developed in Greek and later Western thought, and the Jewish understanding of History, arising from a very different sense of Time.¹¹ The freshness and provocation of Levinas's thought resides in the revival of the Jewish concept within current philosophy, an intellectual move which has challenged a fundamental pillar of Western thought in its concept of time and history. Some might regard the enterprise as subversive, for after all, is not Levinas an Enlightened Jew, one committed to philosophy? I am doubtful. He would not confuse *Zakhor* with history, nor time with Time. *Zakhor* is not subject to rational or commonplace scrutiny without distorting it to something else. There is *Zakhor*, and then there is memory in its other, more mundane guises. *Zakhor*, Remember!, is a commandment, a religious precept that builds on a dialogical structure of God addressing Man, and man responding. To remember is to live in Time with God.

Levinas builds his ethics not from "dialogue," but from deeper structures that define our relationship to the Infinite. We must delve deeper into the foundations of such encounters to understand the metaphysics of his moral universe. Levinas fashions his ethics in Time. He has eschewed the temptations of regarding time in its Western tradition, as a linear, conventional frame of reference, with analyticity and other human dimensions in all of their varied compartmentalized forms. Instead, he articulates the Jewish understanding of Time in its context of divinity. As he wrote in *Totality and Infinity*, "When man truly approaches the Other he is uprooted from history" (TI 52). Once we appreciate this concept of alterity, his basis for asserting an ethical metaphysics becomes transparent. Time is deconstructed from its "naturalistic" parameters when Levinas invokes a Hebraic understanding of Time as the origin of his ethics. To understand this more clearly, we may consider the very characterization of God given to Moses upon his own first encounter at the Burning Bush, where he is introduced to the God of his Fathers. Recall that there Moses is instructed to appeal to Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites, and the shepherd's initial confusion and hesitation asks for whom he speaks:

And Moses said unto God: See, when I come unto them: the God of your fathers hath sent me unto you, and they will say to me: What is His name? What shall I then say to them? And God said unto Moses: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. And He said: Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: *Ehyeh* has sent me unto you. And God said

further unto Moses: Thus shalt thou say unto the Children of Israel. YHWH [The Tetragrammaton], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob hath sent me unto you. This is My Name for the distant future, and this is My memorial for all generations (Exod. 3:13-15).

This difficult and important passage deserves careful scrutiny, for it is here that we will find the foundation of Levinas's own ethical construction.

The primary issue is to understand the significance of connecting *Ehyeh* and the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, which of all the various names of God given in the Bible, is the only one that is considered unique and defining.¹² Maimonides, writing in the twelfth century, referred to YHWH as the "*nomen proprium*,"¹³ with all other terms but appellations and derivatives, having reference to qualities.

This sacred name . . . undoubtedly denotes something which is peculiar to God, and is not found in any other being. . . . [I]n the Hebrew language . . . the Tetragrammaton, in the way it [YHWH] was pronounced, conveyed the meaning of "absolute existence." In short, the majesty of the name and the great dread of uttering it [only allowed for the Priests], are connected with the fact that it denotes God Himself, without including in its meaning any names of the things created by Him.¹⁴

This Maimonidean interpretation of the Tetragrammaton denotes that God has absolute existence. Maimonides goes on to offer a possible etymology and explanatory grammar:

Ehyeh asher Ehyeh [is] a name derived from the verb *hayah* in the sense of "existing," for the verb *hayah* denotes "to be," and in Hebrew no difference is made between the verbs "to be" and "to exist." The principal point in this phrase is that the same word which denotes "existence," is repeated as an attribute. The word *asher*, "that" . . . is an incomplete noun that must be completed by another noun; it may be considered as the subject of the predicate which follows. The first noun which is to be described is *ehyeh*; the second, by which the first is described, is likewise *ehyeh*, the identical word, as if to show that the object which is to be described and the attribute to which it is described are in this case necessarily identical. This is, therefore, the expression of the idea that God exists, but not in the ordinary sense of the term; or in other words, He is "the existing Being, which is the existing Being." that is to say, the Being whose existence is absolute.¹⁵

The characterization of YHWH thus hinges on the grammar of *Ehyeh*, which is itself beset with certain ambiguities of translation. English Bibles render "Ehyeh asher Ehyeh" either as "I am that (or who) I am," or "I will be that which I wish to (or will) be." Umberto Cassuto explains that YHWH is connected to the stem *haya* [to be] in

this passage in the imperfect tense, which in the Hebrew of today is designated as the “future,” but because in Biblical Hebrew the imperfect may designate any tense—past, present, or future—the text may be interpreted as referring to the perennial present tense, whereby *Ehyeh* becomes, “I am.”¹⁶ But the ambiguity persists, and strictly understood, YHWH is the “future” tense, third person.¹⁷ This is not a trivial matter and the question of tense has been debated at least since Talmudic times, for its interpretation designates a particular understanding of God’s very nature.¹⁸ Without further explicating this grammatical detail, I will simply note how the mystical tradition has captured what appears to me the essential spirit of this revelation, which closely follows the traditional interpretation suggested by Maimonides. According to the Kabbalists, YHWH denotes the Crown (*Kether*) of creation, that is the very first Divine thought and impulse that initiated the creative process. Hence the “I will be” dominates any other interpretations, since at the time of this initial Act of creation, everything was in the future. And correspondingly, YHWH was revealed at the time God was about to create the nation of Israel.¹⁹

However, in the concluding verse (Exod. 3:15) these temporal distinctions are blurred, as YHWH stands before the Israelites as the God of their Fathers. Although they had forgotten His name, He had not forgotten them in remembering His covenant. Note that in the very next verse of this passage remembrance is directly enunciated: “I have surely remembered you and that which was done to you in Egypt” (Exod. 3:16). And true to the essence of *Zakhor*, future generations are enjoined to announce His name. The connection between Abraham, the generation of the Exodus, ourselves, and generations to follow, is explicit and telescoped in Divine insight and Mosaic prophecy. The “imperfect” tense precisely captures this fusion of time—past, present, and future—in YHWH as beyond time. Outside the realm of time, YHWH denotes the domain where past, present, and future are distinctions devoid of significance.

2. The Ethics of Time

Ethics arise from Time, not history. In this claim resides a complex existential stance, well articulated by Franz Rosenzweig:

The Jewish people does not count years according to a system of its own. For neither the memory of its history nor the years of office of its law-givers can become a measure of time. That is because the memory of its history does not form a point fixed in the past, a point which, year after year, becomes increasingly past. It is a

memory which is really not past at all, but eternally present. Every single member of this community is bound to regard the exodus from Egypt as if he himself had been one of those to go. . . . And so the chronology of this people cannot be a reckoning of its own time, for the people is timeless; it has no time of its own. It must count years according to the years the world exists. And so . . . this people is denied a life in time for the sake of life in eternity.²⁰

Rosenzweig has tapped into a profound paradox: in Judaism, Time has no normal reckoning, no past as normally understood: the Jew has traded finite time for eternity—both past and future—by accepting the moral imperative of his relation to YHWH, a divinity who has shattered time as naturally understood. Time, as described in the previous section, is no longer an *a priori* by which we might live in the world, but has become the sanctified dimension in which the Jew encounters Him. By enunciating and repeatedly declaring Man's relation to God, the Jew fulfills the essential moral nature of YHWH, whose essence is beyond time.

We cling to our naturalistic understanding of time to conceptualize the encounter. Thus remembering the past as the present fulfills God's mandate, whose promise is the future messianic age. In the process, as Hermann Cohen observed, temporality assumes a novel character:

Time becomes future and only future. Past and present submerge in this time of the future. This return to time is the purest idealization. . . . The Greeks never had this thought of a history that has the future as its content.²¹

This view is close to our original reading of YHWH, and begins to describe the ethical ontology Levinas was to develop more fully.²²

Let me briefly conclude: The past shapes us, and in turn we reconstruct the past to fashion ourselves in the present. This is a universal lesson. But then a critical caveat is added in Judaism: Jewish history is understood as shaping us with a particular moral imperative. It is in this complex dialectic that we *become*. We cannot simply be *in* the present and ignore the past, as occasionally recalled, or laxly referred to, neutral events or influences on our lives. *Zakhor* demands that we recognize the presence of the past, not only for particular moral demands, but for the crucial functions it commands in articulating our deepest character. And finally it is the future that dominates our sense of time in the Messianic promise. Underlying these human divisions of time is Divine Time that collapses such past-present-future distinctions, transforming Time into the holy domain where His people are to live the ethical life. Time thus assumes a different character than understood by the various interpretations offered in Western philosophy.

As YHWH is Being, i.e., Time without temporality, any encounter

recapitulates this deconstruction. To face God is to perceive timeless time; in this way Levinas enunciates Time as the foundation of ethics. Unlike others who would see history, overt or covert,²³ frame the ethical encounter, Levinas regards Time as establishing a fundamental interruption of ontology which founds his ethics. Human time pales when facing the Infinite, and in that encounter with the Other, we are forced to recognize divine Time, replacing history in a moral domain.

3. The Levinasian Ethic

According to Levinas, the Infinite enjoins man. The isolated self—in Levinas's terms, the self in its ironic totality—is extroverted to face "Infinity." The encounter with the face, as an embodiment of the Infinite, eclipses the circumscribed totality of the self. By extrapolation of such encounters with the "mundane" other—the metaphorical face—we fulfill the same existential mandate with the Divine Other as in our encounter with the Infinite. In the encounter with the face, which Levinas characterizes as "Infinite," the encounter with the Divine always recurs. This connection between the transcendence of the Other in Infinity and its concretization in the encounter with the face is a central notion that follows a "logic" that attempts to bridge a great divide, one approached not through reason, but through the "optics" of ethics (TI 29).

Infinity is thus to be approached, if not defined, in the ethical encounter, and here we come closest to approximating the Jewish sense of Time as a moral universe. Just as the encounter with YHWH is defined in the mystery of Time, i.e., in its radical non-temporality of Infinity's past and future (terms with no meaning in this context), so is the encounter with the other ultimately defined as an ethical one: "the epiphany of infinity is expression and discourse," where a being presents itself and to which the I must respond (TI 200).²⁴ The interruption by the face, its summons to ethical responsibility, both captures that same sense of the Infinite, and arises from it. Levinas thus seeks in the face a transcendence from totality to Infinity, and as YHWH is met outside time—outside philosophy and rationality—Levinas declares his thought remains beyond analytics:

The infinite can not be thematized, and the distinction between reasoning and intuition does not apply to the access to infinity. Is not the relation with infinity. . . foreign to theory? We have seen in it the ethical relation (TI 211).

The presence of the face is not on a par with other meaningful manifestations of coexistence, or even knowledge, but is "the primordial pro-

duction of being" (TI 305). Herein the ethical dimension is revealed, for to respond is to exhibit the self's response-ability to (for!) the other. The face, more specifically the encounter with the face, becomes a moral space of ethical possibilities, filling "the content" of a person's view of the world, building into our ordinary experience the inescapable demand for a moral response: "the epiphany of the face is ethical" (TI 199).²⁵ Man's ethical relation to the other is thus ultimately prior to his ontological relation to himself or to the totality of things that we call the world. This intersubjective encounter is the essential challenge of selfhood, for as we recognize the other, the Infinite, the non-self, we discover ourselves.²⁶

Our age is characterized by a deep insecurity regarding the existential contours of the "I." Yet Levinas defies this post-modern placement, because ultimately he arrives at a position similar to Descartes. First, Levinas recognizes the possibility of the Infinite as constitutive of the self. After all, there must be some motive force to drive the self out of its circumscribed totality. In Levinas's attempt to contrast with, and still link himself to Descartes, he wrote in "God and Philosophy" that we begin with "the idea of the Infinite, Infinity in me [as] . . . a passivity of consciousness" (CP 160). Here, he recognizes a pre-conscious potential, which becomes actualized in self-conscious engagement. The self is then ultimately realized as it actively encounters the Infinite. The sequence begins with a separate primordial, unreflective consciousness, contemplating the world, and itself, and is completed in the encounter with the other. The reception of the other, and the 'perception' of the face as Infinite, lead to a recognition of the incompleteness of totality: there always exists, then, a vague Cartesian intuition of the divine Other. But for Levinas this pre-conscious, passive 'sense' of the divine is both unformed and ontologically vague in *Totality and Infinity*, in sharp contrast to the Cartesian indisputable idea. Nevertheless, there is a finalization: through encounter the self will be realized. There is an end point—elusive, uncertain, and problematic—but at least there is potential 'closure', and there an ethics may be situated.

4. The Deformalization of Time

To illustrate the thesis that Time (as the Infinite) underlies Levinas's encounter with the other—hence his ethical system—I will base my comments on passages from two short essays that bracket *Totality and Infinity*, one from an early period, "Time and the Other" (1947), and the other relatively late, "Diachrony and Representation" (1982). In each we see how Time fashions Levinas's ethics in a particu-

larly lucid and fresh presentation, and the themes, although articulated twenty-five years apart, remain consistent. In both instances, resonances with the Hebraic understanding of Time are evident. As Levinas himself commented in a reflective Preface written in 1979,

Is time the very limitation of finite being or is it the relationship of finite being to God? . . . This way of examining time still seems to me today to be the vital problem. *Time and the Other* presents time not as an ontological horizon of the *being of a being* but as a mode of the *beyond being*, as the relationship of "thought" to the other, and . . . as the relationship to the Wholly other, the Transcendent, the Infinite. It is a relation or a religion that is not structured like knowing—that is, an intentionality. Knowing conceals re-presentation and reduces the *other* to presence and co-presence. Time, on the contrary, in its dia-chrony, would signify a relationship that does not compromise the other's alterity, while still assuring its non-indifference to "thought" (TO 30-1).

These lines are most telling. We witness the tension of two poles—thought (viz., philosophy) and the Transcendent—sometimes closer together and at other places pushed apart. Note, they are never integrated. In distinguishing how history is a product of philosophy and ultimately of the third party (OB 128), whereas Time emanates from the divine, Levinas founds his ethics in the alterity of the Infinite.

I maintain Levinas's understanding of Time is adopted from the traditional Jewish spiritual nexus described earlier. That interpretation might well begin with the opening sentence of "Time and the Other": "The aim of these lectures is to show that time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other" (TO 39). He immediately denies that this is a social construct, but must be characterized as its own ontology. For Levinas, actualization or the individuation of existence rests on this sense of encounter in Time. When time is confined to the present, uninformed by its relation to the Eternal, we are incompletely realized (TO 54). The face, when recognized, bursts our totality and challenges us to face the Infinite. Time as the eternal future and as the an-archic past (OB 100-1) frames Levinas's conception of the other.

Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship (TO 79).

And it is in that encounter that the concretization of relationships between humans is realized as a product of the primary dialogical event. The call to answer the Other is revealed as an eschatology, the

movement of the self towards the Other as defined in the Infinity of divine Time. This is the Biblical call to which Levinas is ever mindful. As Levinas himself observed of his early work,

The main thesis caught sight of in *Time and the Other* . . . consists in thinking time not as a degradation of eternity, but as the relationship to *that* which—of itself unassimilable, absolutely other—would not allow itself to be assimilated by experience; or to *that* which—of itself infinite—would not allow itself to be comprehended. . . . It is a relationship with the In-visible, where invisibility results not from some incapacity of human knowledge, but from the inaptitude of knowledge as such—from its in-adequation—to the Infinity of the absolutely other . . . (TO 31-2).

Here we clearly see Levinas's critique of philosophy—of rationality—as a foundation for ethics.²⁷ The encounter with the other recalls the Infinite. Relating—and hence the moral life—cannot be captured by rationality.

In "Diachrony and Representation" these dichotomous themes are more clearly developed, and the resonance with Jewish sources is particularly evident. The call of the other is pre-rational, emanating from a "space-less" reality:

From the first, that is, the ego answers "gratuitously," without worrying about reciprocity. This is the gratuitousness of the *for-the-other*, the response of responsibility that already lies dormant in a salutation. . . . The *for-the-other* dawns in the ego as a commandment understood by the ego obeyed before having understood, and as if the intrigue of alterity were knotted prior to knowledge (TO 106).

The obligation with regard to the Other is thus anterior to deliberation, commanding and "asymmetrical, without noematic correlation of any thematizable presence" (TO 108). There is a certain sense of being awash in the tides of time in Levinas's musings on the sources of responsibility that echoes the Hebraic fusion of past-present-future we have previously encountered. In regard to the past he observes,

In this responsibility I am thrown back toward what has never been my fault or my deed, toward what has never been in my power or in my freedom, toward what has never been my presence, and has never come into memory. There is an ethical significance in this responsibility, this an-archic responsibility, without the present recalling any engagement (TO 111).²⁸

The imperative of responsibility arises outside history, prior to thought, and most saliently, beyond selfness. Levinas is quite explicit that the order is implicit in Time.²⁹ The past is telescoped into the present encounter, a "categorical imperative" not subject to any justifica-

tion, for beyond some historical genealogy, it carries “an irrecusable responsibility, which devolves upon the ego and precisely is significant to it as a commandment” (TO 113).

The permeation of responsibility, emanating from the past and committing our being into the future, reveals how Time is at the foundation of Levinas’s ethics. “The futuration of the future is not a ‘proof of God’s existence’, but ‘the fall of God into meaning’. This is the singular intrigue of the duration of time” (TO 115). Responsibility and remembrance share the same inexorability, the negation of “freedom” for actualization, of totality for Infinity. Again the ethical lesson is emphasized: “dia-chrony—more than formal transcendence” is found to be “irreducible to all noetic-noematic correlation” through the concreteness of responsibility (TO 116). “The signification of a past that has not been my present . . . and the signification of a future that commands me in mortality or in the face of the Other” (TO 118) effectively “deformalizes” time.

Here we find the completed enunciation of what I believe is a deeply committed view of Jewish time, a dimension so closely identified with the divine that it cannot be analytically dissected into categories of temporality. This does not mean that temporal categories are equivalent or indissociable in principle for Levinas, however there is not space enough here to examine where they *are* distinguished. Obviously, as thinking creatures we divide time into past, present, and future, but to do so is to irretrievably distort its fundamental divine character.³⁰ Levinas would not eliminate time as a category upon which we base our rationality, but he would have us recognize that these essentially analytic divisions stem from our primordial susception by the Infinite and the Eternal (OB 122, 138). When Levinas heeds the commandment of responsibility he does so with the entire spectrum of time—past and future—fused together in the present instance of encounter with the Other. This ethical dimension resonates strongly with the Jewish themes already described, and is not to be confused with the traditional manner in which Western philosophy might regard time in all of its various formulations.

A moral *a priori*, Time becomes the basis of Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. To remove time from its traditional treatments in Western philosophy is thus to place it squarely outside that discourse. This is the challenge Levinas has presented to us. While posing as a philosopher, he is also an emissary of an ancient and on-going religious tradition. Provocatively, Levinas has declared a certain intent to fuse the religious mandate with the analytic project, combining these rich heritages to offer his own unique contribution (see TI 28). Ironically, perhaps, he

has revealed new philosophical insight into how we think and its significance as a deictic for that which we can scarcely think.

5. Conclusion

It is apparent that Levinas himself was ambivalent as to where he might be placed in the philosophical project. On the one hand he regarded himself as *doing* philosophy, but he recognized that in a post-modern sense, philosophy had “died” (see footnote 2) and he spoke “outside the subject.” But from where and with what significance?

The end of philosophy is not the return to an epoch in which it has not begun, in which one was able not to philosophize; the end of philosophy is the beginning of an age in which everything is philosophy, because philosophy is not revealed through philosophers (DF 185. emphasis in original).

Levinas, thus, by his own admission, is situated relative to how radically we choose to deconstruct postmodern philosophy. One formative axis of this discussion is how he is related to Jewish sources, and virtually each critic has followed the challenge. We witness a wide range of responses, of which a representative sampling is offered here in order to place my own views in context.

Of the various commentators, I probably am most sympathetic with Derrida's judgement that Levinas, by using language (the Greek *logos*), compromises his thought.³¹ This position is in direct lineage from Wittgenstein's famous pronouncement regarding the impossibility of talking or writing about ethics and metaphysics; language renders religious realities within the world of totality, where there is no “outside,” and thereby corrupts true spirituality. Derrida would rescue Levinas's project as an expression of “art,”³² whereas Susan Handelman regards Levinas's work as “less ‘art’ than a kind of ‘prophetic appeal’ . . . [which] parallels the language (and aim) of the biblical prophets.”³³ Placing Levinas firmly within his religious tradition draws closer to my own interpretation of Levinas espousing essentially a theological ethics. Although Catherine Chalièr is sympathetic to the religious orientation of Levinas's thought, it is only as a “tradition of thinking—and not to a faith” that she is willing to entertain a synthesis.³⁴ Because the *logos* is the universal means of communicating, she sees Levinas seeking the means for Jews to express their unique experience in philosophical discourse.³⁵ Robert Gibbs follows the same orientation, when he writes that “Levinas's discussion of Judaism requires Judaism to seek out philosophy, to seek out ‘Greek’ translation of its thought,”³⁶ but Gibbs has a more nuanced view:

The interaction between philosophy and Judaism is not one of two fixed terms in utter autonomy, but rather of two terms that become correlates of each other, each changing in itself through the relationship to the other. Philosophy does not simply assimilate Judaism, reducing and configuring it to fit within its late-idealistic or phenomenological method, but neither does Judaism create a space which lies permanently outside philosophy. . . . We will see not only how philosophy becomes Jewish, but also how philosophy and its other come into correlation and how the fall of one philosophical vision through criticism by its other creates a new philosophy.³⁷

I believe that most opinion would favor Gibbs's version of the synthetic quality of Levinas's opus, and while readily acknowledging Levinas's Jewish roots as influencing his philosophy, critics may insist, as he himself did,³⁸ that Levinas's thought bridged the traditions of Jerusalem and Athens. Richard Cohen succinctly presents this view: "In opposing the primacy of knowledge, Levinas opposes all that is Greek." and "Levinas's entire philosophy can be understood as but another layer of meaning attached to Sinai;" at the same time, "The 'Jewish' side of Levinas's thought is 'enlightened', that is, it is a Judaism made universal."³⁹ The issue for Cohen is that while Levinas is oriented by his Judaism, the attack has been filtered by a universalism that allows Judaic sources to engage philosophy. These universalized Jewish sources have been "made vital to global 'Western' civilization," and while Levinas may be deeply religious, his philosophy "stands or falls independent of its relation to Judaism."⁴⁰

My analysis of Time would deny that conclusion. The entire foundation of Levinas's ethics is built from the Judaic understanding of Time as defined by our relation to God; thus he cannot oppose philosophy as Cohen purports "with the absolute or pure exteriority of ethical transcendence,"⁴¹ for in his "exteriority," I believe Levinas remains within his own primary religious categories. His profound critique gains its power from that vantage and is thus entirely dependent on it.

I disagree with those who would assign Levinas to philosophy on two levels: 1) the Derridean-Wittgensteinian critique of religion or ethics scrutinized as *logos* leaves Levinas's project radically outside philosophy, and 2) even if we are to permit such discourse as an *approximation pointing towards the ineffable*, then Levinas's entire *œuvre* is embedded in specifically Judaic themes and cannot be separated from them.⁴² Cohen, and other critics sharing his orientation, leaves space for Levinas to be both the singular Jew and the secular philosopher, and to the extent that Levinas's writings resonate widely this is a legitimate reading. Nevertheless, the transcendence to which Levinas refers is fundamentally religious in character, and particularized in his

Jewish understanding of the Infinite. Although Levinas himself took pains to distance his philosophy from religion, it is widely believed that his intellectual novelty resides in his creative and provocative synthesis of the Jewish tradition with a critique of philosophy. But when one examines the foundations of his thought and finds there a deep commitment to Jewish concepts, then the "synthetic" quality of this work can be interpreted as subordinate to what I would call its "translation." This is not merely a semantic distinction, but demarcates the conceptual boundaries between philosophy and religion, and where one draws those lines assumes importance in the interpretation of his ethics. With "synthesis," there is a fundamental change in the joining of the various elements; in "translation," the project is to preserve the integrity of the translated element. Perhaps the implicit judgement is that Jewish *philosophical* concepts are admissible for "synthesis," whereas theological matters are not. I see a blurring of those distinctions in Levinasian ethics, presumably because I cannot differentiate where Levinas's religion ends and his philosophy begins. In short, I read him as a religious thinker, and although we may discern his commitment to philosophical discourse, he addresses philosophy from his Jewish perspective. I regard the synthetic project as a foil for Levinas's attempt to translate his Judaism; there is not enough space to develop this theme here.

But even the project of translation is problematic. If Levinas's thought is understood as fundamentally religious, its translation into philosophy also raises questions concerning the integrity of his message. In the case explicated here, *Divine Time*, removed from its full religious context, loses its deepest spiritual significance and the question remains as to precisely what is thereby lost and what remains of its ethical implications. The interesting question, one of seemingly endless debates in various epistemological and metaphysical forums, concerns the nature of translation (*à la* Quine). I cannot delve into the matter here, but suffice it to acknowledge that "translation" is deeply problematic and underlies the very nature of Levinas's project. Those who might be satisfied with the translation in question must appeal to the universal message as sufficient. Not surprisingly, I find that message a residue of the full religious construction. That is my judgement, but I believe there are indications that Levinas might also have shared this perspective (not that the critic must find confirmation by his subject!).

There are clues that Levinas also understood that his translation was incomplete, and that his primary allegiance was to "the first truth," namely the response to the face, which is the response to the command of the Infinite, and the Greek follows.⁴³ So I close by juxtaposing various comments Levinas made concerning the relation of his

thought, imbued with a Jewish ethos, to Western philosophy. There are key passages in "Revelation in the Jewish Tradition," published after his major philosophical texts had appeared, that reveal how he peered at philosophy across a *spiritual abyss*. Nor is he neutral in his assessment, concluding that his position could not be reached from the Greek perspective:

I wonder whether there are not aspects in Judaism which indicate the 'rationality' of a reason less turned in upon itself than the reason of philosophical tradition. . . . Obedience, which finds concrete form in the relation with the other, indicates a reason that is less centered than Greek reason, the latter having as its immediate correlative something stable, the law of the Same.

The rational subjectivity which we have inherited from Greek philosophy—and not to begin with this inheritance does not mean that we are rejecting it, or that we shall not have recourse to it later, or that we are 'sinking into mysticism'—does not entail the passivity which . . . I have been able to identify with the responsibility for the other. . . . *This opening to an irreducible transcendence cannot occur within the conception of reason that prevails in our philosophical profession today.* Here, reason is solid and positive: it begins with all meaning to which all meaning must return in order to be assimilated to the Same, in spite of the whole appearance it may give of having come from outside (BV 147, emphasis added).

Note that Levinas is admitting that the foundations of his philosophy cannot be reached through 'rationality'—through philosophy—although his project was based on building on those foreign piles. There is more than a hint of alienation in these lines, and Levinas goes on to deliver his credo:

I have wondered, too, whether the anxiety that the Other causes the Same is not the meaning of reason, its very rationality: the anxiety of man caused by the Infinite of God which he could never contain, but which inspires him. This inspiration is the originary mode of anxiety, the inspiration of man by God which is man's humanity (BV 147-8).

Here I detect the demand of the Divine to respond. Rationality is the mechanism of denial. So it is precisely where reasons ends, or where it cannot reach, that we are to seek, and enact, our truest humanity. And in recognizing wherein lies our sense of self, its fullest realization in the religious domain, Levinas again drives his fundamental message:

Here the 'in' of the 'excessiveness in the finite' is made possible only by the "Here I am" of man welcoming his neighbour. . . . [I]t is precisely within this relation that man becomes his 'self': designated without any possibility of escape, chosen, unique, non-interchangeable and, in this sense, free. Ethics is the model worthy of tran-

scendence, and it is an ethical *kerygma* that the Bible is Revelation (BV 148).

It is perhaps obvious to note that the phrase, "Here I am" is the classic response given by the Jewish prophets to the divine call. It is, of course, the same reply offered by Moses at the Burning Bush (Exodus 3:4), when God revealed his name, YHWH.

If one regards the thrust of contemporary philosophy as relentlessly anti-metaphysical, then Levinas must remain outside the subject, outside philosophy. With these last words, he speaks as a rabbi, and I believe this is his most authentic voice. Ethics is to be found in Time, and the entire project precedes philosophy. Levinas is quite clear about the priority of the Infinite, and the theological debts to his rabbis are hereby acknowledged. He put it quite succinctly in an interview: "the best thing about philosophy is that it fails."⁴ So beyond his critique of "totalizing" philosophy, whether Cartesian, Hegelian, or Heideggerian, there is a basic uneasiness for Levinas as to how philosophy might effectively address his concerns. Ultimately, on this reading, Levinas's ethical philosophy is a religious metaphysics—an ethical ontology based on a theism, and the seriousness he commands ultimately depends on how seriously *we* regard the Infinite as a relational one.

NOTES

1. The critical reading and suggestions of Bettina Bergo, Burton Dreben, Moshe Idel, Reuvan Kimelman, Diane Perpich, Bezalel Safron, and Louis-Georges Schwartz are gratefully appreciated. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Professor Isadore Twersky, friend, mentor, and *rebbe*.
2. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 79-153.
3. Richard Cohen, "Introduction" to TO, p. 26.
4. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1951), p. 3.
5. *Ibid.* "To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when in gaining power in the realm of space we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things in space, becomes our sole concern."
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5. In a footnote (p. 103) Heschel cites Bertrand Russell [B.

Russell, *Our Knowledge of the External World* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1926), pp. 166-67]: "According to Bertrand Russell, time is 'an unimportant and superficial characteristic of reality. . . . A certain emancipation from slavery to time is essential to philosophic thought. . . . To realize the unimportance of time is the gate to wisdom.'" Heschel and Levinas each oppose Russell's position.

7. Ibid., p. 7. "The word '*davar*,' which in later Hebrew came to denote 'thing' means in biblical Hebrew: speech; word; message; report . . . advice . . . promise . . . decision . . . theme . . . business . . . acts . . . good deeds . . . events . . . reason, cause; but never 'thing.'"
8. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
9. Y. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History, and Jewish Memory* (New York: Schocken, 1989), p. 21.
10. Remembering is the religious act at the heart of religious belief, for to recall the Covenant and the Exodus is to recognize and renew the special relationship with God. *Zakhor* thus dips into the deepest wells of Jewish spiritual identity. My views concerning *Zakhor* are more fully developed in "Home and *Zakhor*—Remember!" *Home*, ed. L. Rouner (Great Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996), pp. 148-169.
11. For brief overviews, see P. Mendes-Flohr, "History," *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, eds. P. Mendes-Flohr and A.A. Cohen (New York: Free Press, 1987), pp. 371-87; H. Bloom, Foreword to *Zakhor*; and E. Luz, "Buber's Hermeneutics: The Road to the Revival of the Collective Memory and Religious Faith," *Modern Judaism* 15 (1995), pp. 69-93.
12. L. F. Hartman, "The Names of God." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Ketar, 1972), pp. 674-82.
13. Maimonides. *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 89.
14. Ibid., p. 90.
15. Ibid., p. 95.
16. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1983), p. 38.
17. "The vowel of the first syllable shows that the verb is used in the form of a future-present causative *hiph'il*, and must therefore mean "He causes to be. He brings into existence." The explanations of the name as given in Exodus 3:14, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, "I-Am-Who-I-Am," offers a folk etymology, common in biblical explanation of names, rather than a strictly scientific one" (Hartman, "The Names of God," p. 679).
18. See for instance the thirteenth century commentary by the Ramban (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman or Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, trans. C.B. Chavel (New York: Shilo, 1973), p. 36.
19. Adopted from A. Kaplan. *The Living Torah* (New York: Maznaim, 1981), p. 152, where primary Jewish sources may be found. Also see M. Idel,

- Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 97ff., for extensive discussions concerning the Kabbalistic uses of YHWH, especially the use of letter manipulations for mystical excursions.
20. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 2nd ed., trans. W.W. Hallo (Boston: Beacon, 1972), p. 304. Rosenzweig goes on to make a stunning admission concerning the Jew's existential state of wandering relative to time and history: "It [the Jewish people] cannot experience the history of the nations creatively and fully. Its position is always somewhere between the temporal and the holy . . . And so, in the final analysis, it is not alive in the sense the nations are alive: in a national life manifest on this earth. . . . It is alive only in that which guarantees it will endure beyond time . . ."
 21. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Frederick Unger, 1972), pp. 249-50.
 22. *Ibid.*, pp. 261ff. It is interesting to note relative to my concluding comments concerning the "placement" of Levinas in current philosophy that Hermann Cohen regarded this Jewish construction of history as oriented towards the future (with its moral imperative) as Judaism's crucial gift to humanity: "The concept of history is a creation of the prophetic idea. . . . What the Greek intellect could not achieve, monotheism succeeded in carrying out. History is the Greek consciousness identical with knowledge simply. Thus, history for the Greek is and remains directed only toward the past. In opposition, the prophet is the seer, not the scholar. To see, however, is to gaze The prophets are the idealists of history. Their vision begot the concept of history as the being of the future." In Cohen's understanding of time, only the future holds the full realization of Mankind. More to the point, the future transforms Time into a moral category.
 23. Martin Buber distinguished between two kinds of history: "overt" (Greek and modern analytical history) and "covert" (Jewish). For Buber, the latter demands a personal commitment and dynamic encounter with the Divine, and thus this sense of history underlies his entire moral philosophy. Expounded in several contexts, see *Israel and the World: Essays in Time and Crisis* (New York: Schocken, 1963) and *On the Bible*, ed. N.N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1980). For a survey of Buber's view of memory and its role in his existential philosophy, see Luz, "Buber's Hermeneutics."
 24. As he wrote in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*, "this book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other . . . in it the idea of infinity is consummated" (TI 27, emphasis added).
 25. Levinas of course derives this position from several tributaries, but most importantly from his reading of Jewish law. For examples where the ethic is reiterated in his interpretation of Talmudic passages, see, for instance, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. G.D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), especially pp. 83ff and 103ff.
 26. Robert Gibbs makes a salient comment in this regard: "[T]he 'I' becomes

itself through its substitution for the other The 'I', as substitution, is a task of responding for the other—and as such becomes an infinite task through this inversion. Levinas calls this task ethics, but this is a translation of the 'Hebrew' term *sanctification*." (R. Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], p. 187).

27. See F. Ciaramelli, "Levinas's Ethical Discourse Between Individuation and Universality," *Re-reading Levinas*, eds. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 83-105. See especially p. 85. My own reading on this point and its application may be found in "From the Self to the Other: Building a Philosophy of Medicine," *Meta Medical Ethics*, ed. M.A. Grodin (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), pp. 149-95.
28. The theological origins of this position are pursued by Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* and Richard Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), while John Caputo in *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), draws the philosophical consequences most adroitly.
29. "The significance of the immemorial past . . . comes in the heteronomy of an order. Such is my nonintentional participation in the history of humanity" (TO 112).
30. Levinas concludes, "It was important for me to speak in this study about how, in the human intrigue, past, future, and present are tied together in time, without this resulting from a simple degradation that the unity of the One could have—I do not know how—undergone" (TO 119).
31. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 79: Philosophy's "question has not yet found the language it has decided to seek."
32. *Ibid.*, p. 312, n.7: *Totality and Infinity* is "a work of art not a treatise."
33. S.A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 180-81.
34. C. Chalier, "The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the Hebraic Tradition," *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 11. "I think that he is trying to use the philosophical medium, the *logos*, in order to help us understand the significance of ideas that come from the Torah, and above all the significance of election."
36. Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, p. 157.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5. Adriaan Peperzak also argues for a pluralistic approach to understand the multiple influences on Levinas in *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), pp. 8-9.

38. Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, eds. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 168-80. See especially pp. 173-4.
39. Cohen, *Elevations*, p. 127.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 128: "The 'Judaism' Levinas invokes . . . is one that teaches the whole world. The extent to which Levinas's ethics is 'Jewish', then, is that wherein the Jewish message is a message for all mankind." Cohen then takes Levinas at face value: "Wherever one sees 'Israel' in the sacred texts. Levinas writes, one can substitute 'humanity'."
41. *Ibid.*, p. 127. Although Cohen has in many respects deeply appreciated the Judaic dimension of Levinas's thought, he emphasizes the boundaries: "Levinas's thought is deeply rooted in Judaism, but it is important to remember that what is basic to his creative work is its philosophical character. Despite his radical criticisms of the hubris of knowledge, Levinas's work remains philosophical As a *philosophy* the work of Levinas stands or falls independently of its relation to Judaism and Jewish thought. In this sense, Levinas's work is not vital to Judaism." Cohen's view, although sensitive to the Jewish roots of Levinas's thought, and fully admitting that "his work (and life) remained true to Judaism" (*Ibid.*, p.127), still sees Levinas's thought as falling within the secular discourse.
42. It consistently follows that Levinas's thought can hardly be regarded as some kind of synthesized philosophy of religion as argued by Theo de Boer: the specific Jewish content is not required in de Boer's view, for there is no longer "any difference between the so-called . . . revelational theology and natural theology, or between theology and the philosophy of religion" ("Theology and the Philosophy of Religion According to Emmanuel Levinas," in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, p. 170).
43. Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," p. 174.
44. Levinas and R. Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 22. Levinas went on to say, "It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning—even though, as ontology, it has attempted just that—for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence." There are many interesting comments in this text concerning this matter.