

DOES ETHICS PRESUPPOSE RELIGION? A LEVINASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: Levinas's fundamental thought about ethics as the questioning of the I by the other earns him a unique position among moral philosophers who usually analyze the good-and-bad principles of a moral action. Levinas places such questioning on the idea of metaphysics as desire for the Infinite that leads to the responsibility for the Other. With such an idea about ethics, one may ask whether Levinas's thought is rooted in religion. This article purports to analyze the question by analyzing how Levinas understands the relationship between ethics and religion and whether his ethics is nothing but religion. Using the phenomenological method and textual analysis, the author shows that the answer to these questions is inherently complex. For Levinas, true ethics is fundamentally religious, and conversely, a true religion is fundamentally ethical. All this is manifested, among others, in the acknowledgment of the transcendence of the Other and the refusal to all forms of totalization.

Keywords: ethics, religion, transcendence, the Other, totalization, the Infinite.

Abstrak: Pemikiran fundamental Levinas mengenai etika sebagai pertanyaan atas sang Aku oleh Yang Lain menempatkannya pada posisi unik di kalangan filsuf moral yang biasanya membahas prinsip baik-buruk sebuah tindakan moral. Levinas menempatkan pertanyaan ini pada gagasan metafisika seperti hasrat terhadap Yang Tak Terbatas yang membawa kepada rasa tanggung jawab terhadap orang lain. Gagasan demikian dengan mudah menimbulkan pertanyaan apakah etika Levinas berakar pada agama. Artikel ini hendak menjawab pertanyaan tersebut dengan mendalami bagaimana Levinas memahami hubungan antara etika dan agama serta apakah etikanya tak lain merupakan sebuah agama. Menggunakan metode fenomenologi

dan analisis tekstual, penulis menunjukkan bahwa jawaban atas pertanyaan tersebut secara inheren bersifat sangat kompleks. Bagi Levinas, etika sejati secara fundamental bersifat religius, dan demikian pula, agama sejati secara fundamental bersifat etis. Hal ini terungkap antara lain dalam pengakuan atas transendensi Yang Lain dan penolakan atas segala bentuk totalisasi.

Kata-kata Kunci: etika, agama, transendensi, Yang Lain, totalisasi, Yang Tak Terbatas.

INTRODUCTION

The question about the relation between ethics and religion may have arisen with the arrival of philosophy as a rational inquiry into the nature of reality and that of human life. Previously, 'religious' traditions in a broader sense had provided the beliefs, practices, and rules of conduct for the people. The term 'religious' here is to be understood as the non-rational character of the understanding of reality and life. As far as these traditions also prescribed laws and guidelines for daily conducts, ethics and religions were intermingled, if not indistinguishable. Then, philosophy appeared on the scene in Greece, and its thinkers began to engage in the rational analysis and justification of the existing norms and life practices. Aristotle in particular advocated human happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) as the ideal and the goal towards which human activities are directed. Since then, philosophy has analyzed and defined more sharply what it means to be human and how to live properly according to their dignity, hence ethics or moral philosophy. More specifically, as developed in modern philosophy ever since, ethics explores principles of moral values, theories of the rightness or wrongness of an action as well as moral duties and obligation. As a philosophical inquiry, it differs from religion in that it involves the exercise of public reason without any existential commitment to religious beliefs.

Levinas's ethics is rather far from a sheer theory about principles of conduct or obligations for proper living as human beings. Ethics for

Levinas does not mean a particular moral perspective, but rather the putting into question of the ego or what he calls 'the Same,' by the Other:

A calling into question of the Same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of the spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished by a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.¹

In Levinas's view, an ethical space or realm is created when the Other arrives on the scene, questioning and disturbing my freedom as I am enjoying the world.² In the encounter with the Other, the I is not only being challenged and called into question, but also summoned by the Other for responsibility. Here lies the importance of the concept of 'the face of the Other,' which Levinas is famous for, as the appeal for responsibility occurs through the face. A proper relationship with another person, in Levinas's view, begins with the encounter with the face, not one's abstraction of that person. Being appealed makes possible the movement of the I toward the Other, leaving behind all the existing security and enjoyment.

Thus, the ethical, as Levinas calls it, is a turn to exteriority, a movement toward the "elsewhere" and the "otherwise."³ Being ethical means going out of oneself and assuming responsibility for the Other. True ethics never means returning to oneself or taking care of one's own needs because if it did, ethics would be egology in disguise. For Levinas, the search for universal moral principles that Western philosophy carries out is not radical enough because it does not show a full responsibility for the Other. Every time one works out a universal ethics, the Other fails to become the center of one's preoccupation as one's own needs are also on the

1 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 43.

2 Ruud Welten, "In the Beginning Was Violence: Emmanuel Levinas on Religion and Violence," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 53 (2020), p. 359 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-020-09491-z>.

3 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 33.

horizon. What is necessary in ethics, for Levinas, is a true transcendence that seeks no return.

Levinas's account of ethics, with some metaphysical underpinnings such as the desire for the Infinite and the idea of the Infinite, lends itself to the reading that it is fundamentally religious in nature or even religion masked as philosophy. Dominique Janicaud sees Levinas's thought as an example of what he calls "the theological turn of French phenomenology." Like Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, and Michel Henry, according to Janicaud, Levinas introduces the content of faith into phenomenology to where it does not belong: "The dice are loaded and choices made; faith rises majestically in the background."⁴ For Janicaud, Levinas's obsession with the Other is a "dogmatism," which "could only be religious."⁵ Alan Badiou goes even further by arguing that there is no philosophy in Levinas's thought, not even philosophy as the 'servant' of theology. It is rather philosophy already "annulled by theology" that cannot maintain itself even as theology.⁶ The result is that ethics becomes a category of pious discourse.

Levinas's ethics is indeed religious in nature, and Derrida thinks such a blurry line may be "more than problematic."⁷ Does it pose a problem because there is no place for religion or anything religious in philosophy? Would any discourse on the Infinite or God necessarily bring us out of the philosophical realm? In what sense is Levinas's ethics religious? How does Levinas himself think of the relation between ethics and religion? What can we, despite our reservation about his ethical thought, learn from it? These are the main questions that this article attempts to address.

4 Dominique Janicaud, "Contours of the Turn," in Janicaud, *et al. Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": the French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 27.

5 Janicaud, "Contours of the Turn," p. 45.

6 Alan Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 23.

7 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 84.

Since Levinas's ethics is well known and widely discussed, I will give much more space to his account of religion that he describes, often briefly, in his philosophical works. My analysis is based mainly on the phenomenological reading of these works because they give a more general and formal account of religion than his Talmudic writings do. In some important ways, his account of religion, which is to be explored in the first part of this article, is incredibly unique and should not be taken for granted. I argue that, as discussed in the next two consecutive sections, for Levinas, a true ethics is fundamentally religious, and a true religion is fundamentally ethical. This way of framing their relation is an attempt to avoid collapsing them, as some commentators have done. I will conclude with some critical assessment of Levinas's account including the place of his ethics among modern ethical theories.

DISCUSSION

Religion is often understood as the embodiment of a belief in God or the Transcendent whose power is at work in this world, though coming from outside the world. Given the human expression of such belief, it naturally includes some cultural or social aspects in the form of common worship as well as moral norms to adhere to in a society. Thus, it is common to understand religion to mean, as Royce Clark does, as "an organized body of belief and behavior that usually has rituals, symbols, and ethical codes to reinforce its unique identity."⁸ Religious teaching or doctrine also forms the popular concept of religion, especially when one thinks of organized or institutional religions whose presence is still strongly felt in the so-called postmodern world. Scholars often view religion in a more abstract manner, however, for example, as a set of ideas, values, or experiences that shape a societal life.⁹ In this context, religion is seen as an organizing principle of life or a worldview that affects one's thoughts and actions as an expression of the belief in the Transcendent.

8 W. Royce Clark, *Ethics and the Future of Religion: Defining the Absolute* (New York: Lexington Books, 2021), p. 9.

9 Richard B. Miller, *Friends and Other Strangers: Studies in Religion, Ethics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 21.

Levinas's concept of religion shares some of the features above including the general belief in the Transcendent. His notion of religion also entails, very strongly indeed, the social practices in the form of responsibility for the Other. It is worth noting that Levinas's main concern in his philosophical works, I argue, is not religion as such, but rather ethics. The issue of religion necessarily arises as he attempts to find the meaning of transcendence through human relations. Given the intimate link between transcendence and religion, however, Levinas's works could easily be seen as bordering on theology, to say the least, as some commentators have charged him with.

When Levinas speaks of religion, he does not appear to endorse its modern view as a particular system of belief embodied in a bounded community.¹⁰ Levinas's notion of religion is rather close to a pre-modern one that assumes a formal character and entails a certain way of living. In his view religion is not so much about lofty thoughts about God as about moral forces for action. That is why religion in Levinas's writings does not mean Christianity, Judaism, or Islam that tend to be mutually exclusive. When he wishes to allude to any organized religion, Levinas either mentions it explicitly such as Christianity or Judaism, or simply uses the plural form 'religions.' To be religious in the Levinasian sense, one does not need to abandon one's adherence to a particular organized religion. In fact, his notion of religiousness means more like holiness, which is clearly beyond the boundaries of positive religions.

Levinas's concept of religion can be summed up in four points below.

1. A RELATION WITH THE INFINITE

For many Levinas readers, the claim that religion for Levinas pertains to a relation with God or the Infinite might sound quite remote as he

10 Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues that this conception of religion is a modern invention of the West that began to take shape following the hot theological debates during and after the Reformation, particularly in the seventeenth century. Prior to the period, religion was thought of more in terms of faith, piety, worship, etc. and less in terms of doctrinal differences with other kinds of faith. See his work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

tends to heavily link it to the responsibility for the Other than to anything else. But such a formal, yet fundamental notion of religion needs to be brought forth first, regardless of how distant and minimal such a relation is in comparison with its counterpart in other accounts of religion. I call the relation *distant* and *minimal* because, as Levinas sees it, it never takes place as a face-to-face or direct encounter. For Levinas the Infinite reveals itself not as presence, but always as absence, or as we have seen, as a trace. God is conceived of not as a 'You' but rather as an 'Il.' The illeity of God does bring forth a sense of remoteness and poverty if one is to assess the quality of such relation.

The importance of bringing forth the relational element in Levinas's concept of religion is intimately tied to his critique of it, which can already be seen in his early writings. In the 1951 essay, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," Levinas writes:

Religion is the relation with a being as a being. It does not consist in *conceiving* it as a being or as an act in which a *being* is already assimilated, even if this assimilation were to succeed in disengaging it as a being, in *letting it be*. Nor does religion consist in establishing who knows what *belonging*, nor in running up against the irrational in an effort to comprehend *beings*.¹¹

Here Levinas is clearly not proposing a conception of God as Being. His notion of God, as he makes clear, always pertains to that which is beyond Being. The emphasis in this definition is rather given to *relation* instead of to any kind of *conception* about God. Religion for Levinas is not a matter of knowledge about God, regardless of how comprehensive that knowledge may be. It is an "invocation" or "prayer," because the relation with

11 Emmanuel Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 8. Levinas's first usage of the word "being" here may be puzzling for the reader who is aware of Levinas's later concern with onto-theology that identifies God with Being. Here Levinas seems to make the very mistake of identifying the two. But I think in this early essay Levinas simply attempted to emphasize the relation with the Infinite over its conception. At the time of the writing of this essay the issue of onto-theology might not be as important for him as he showed in his later works.

God, like the relation with a person, is articulated in the vocative.¹² We call upon God or the person we are in relation with. Thus, comprehension and knowledge cannot be the basis of such a relation. In his later works, however, he begins to give more nuance to the term, for example, by calling it “relation without relation”¹³ or “a relationship without a simultaneity of terms.”¹⁴ The qualifications of the term are given due to the irreducible difference of the Infinite, to the effect that the relation between the human being and the Infinite can never become a correlation.

It is worth noting that for Levinas, this relation with the Infinite does not require me to obey or surrender myself to God or God’s will, as one may find in many views of religion. In fact, Levinas would shun such a conception of religion because it would destroy the freedom of the human being. The relationship with the Infinite is rather enacted in the anarchic responsibility for the Other.¹⁵ It orders me to responsibility even prior to my very freedom.¹⁶ Thus, religion for Levinas never consists in a direct and intimate relation with God, first, because God reveals Godself only as a trace, and second, because God orders me to the neighbor. Thus, what defines my relationship with the Infinite is not personal prayer or a visit to a place of worship, but rather the very responsibility for the Other (*Autrui*).

2. A RELATION WITHOUT TOTALIZATION

Totalization is one of the keywords in Levinas’s ethics that evokes the idea of covering the whole realm that leaves no room for otherness. Totalization occurs, in his view, when there is a reduction of the otherness of the Other due to the assimilation effort by the I into the Same. In the

12 Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” pp. 7-8.

13 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 80.

14 Emmanuel Levinas, “Hermeneutics and Beyond,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 107-8.

15 Richard White, *Reflections on God and the Death of God: Philosophy, Spirituality, and Religion* (Omaha: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 7.

16 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 168.

ethical realm it is manifested in any kind of stereotype present in a society, when a person or members of a certain social group are viewed, often in a derogatory manner, in a particular way and associated with a certain psychological trait. Here their alterity is not fully respected, but rather reduced to a level where society wants to treat them. Society 'knows' or 'wants to know' these people only in this particular way.

Totalization can also occur in the religious realm. We recall that Levinas has a rudimentary understanding of religion as a relation with the Infinite and yet, at the same time, "without relation."¹⁷ Since the word "relation" indicates "a simultaneity among its terms in a system... the synchronic representation of the world, society and its institutions, its equality and justice,"¹⁸ Levinas uses it quite carefully. When defining religion as a relation without relation, Levinas suggests one in which the parties involved do not fall into a common sphere such that they become indistinguishable. In this sense they are "without relation." When I reduce the otherness of the Other, a totality occurs because the Other is within me such that, in a way, the Other and I become one. Here I contain the Other through representation and thematization.¹⁹ To maintain the "relation without relation" here means to resist any form of totalization. For Levinas, totalization runs counter to the idea of religion because in religion the alterity of the Other is fully respected, whereas in totality it is suppressed.²⁰ In other words, the relation with the Infinite is to take place "without constituting a totality."²¹

Totalization indeed occurs in an assured and comprehensive knowledge about God. Levinas often warns against the identification of the relation-(without relation)-with-the-Infinite with knowledge about such a relation or God. He also does so against the collapse of the distinction

17 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 80.

18 Levinas, "On Jewish Philosophy," in *The Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 183.

19 Jeffrey Bloechl, *Levinas on the Primacy of the Ethical: Philosophy as Prophecy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), p. 63.

20 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 104, 81.

21 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 40.

between religion and theology. Such a relation, or in fact, any relation, cannot be reduced to a matter of knowledge. As we attempt to grasp knowledge about God, we can easily fall into the illusion that we know everything about God, or even worse, that we 'own' God. Theology, he says, "imprudently treats the idea of the relation between God and the creature in terms of ontology."²² Thematization always serves to reduce God's transcendence, capturing radical otherness in the webs of the familiar. It always leads to "the bankruptcy of transcendence," as it "assigns a term to the passing of transcendence."²³ But religion, which is fundamentally a relation, is clearly not theology or the thinking about the Infinite. It can never be reduced to an intellectual exercise, no matter how lofty the thought is:

Would religion not be the original juncture of circumstances in which the infinite comes to the mind in its ambiguity of truth and mystery? But if that is the case, then can we be sure that the infinite's coming to the mind is a matter of knowledge, a manifestation the essence of which would consist in establishing the order of immanence?²⁴

For Levinas, the identification of religion with theology is nothing but a reduction of God to Being. This 'known' God is no longer God beyond Being, but rather the God of onto-theology, the problem of which Heidegger has brought up and criticized. Levinas thus takes up the task, particularly in *Otherwise than Being*, of letting God speak without the contamination of Being, which is "a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology."²⁵ An onto-theological conception of God is problematic not only because it confuses God with Being by mistakenly identifying God with "the highest being," but also and more importantly, because it reduces God to Being and ends up

²² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 293.

²³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 5.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Idea of the Infinite in Us," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 219.

²⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. xlviii.

denying God's transcendence. Like any kind of totalization, it refuses to recognize the alterity of the Other, or in this case, God's own alterity.²⁶ It forgets that God signifies "the other of being" (*l'autre de l'être*).²⁷ The onto-theological conception of God is oblivious to the fact that there is an asymmetrical relation between God and Being that is resistant to any form of synchronization: "The Other as Other has nothing in common with the Same; it is not thinkable in a synthesis; there is an impossibility here of making comparisons and synchronizations."²⁸ Such forgetfulness results in an intellectual totalization, even in a sublime discipline such as theology.

3. A SEPARATION FROM GOD (ATHEISM)

It may sound strange that a notion of religion, as Levinas envisages, demands a separation from God. Is not the purpose of religion to bring human beings closer to God? Levinas invokes the notion of separation in his ethics to prevent the occurrence of totalization. Separation, in his view, is required so that the relation between the subject and the Other does not collapse into a unity or totality. This principle applies not only to the relation with the human Other, but also to the Divine Other. The relation between the human being and God also requires separation.

The requirement of separation means several things. First, such a relation cannot become a mystical union in which the human subject loses her identity in God. It never takes the form of totalization, even on God's part. Second, unlike the commonly held teaching in many religious traditions that the human beings originally belong to God but wander away, the separation principle suggests just the opposite, that the original rela-

26 Hent de Vries, "Anti-Retractationes: On Inexistence, Divine, and Other," in *Religion in Reason: Metaphysics, Ethics, and Politics in Hent De Vries*, eds. Tarek R. Dika and Martin Shuster (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), p. 344.

27 Emmanuel Levinas, "Beginning with Heidegger," in *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 124. See Rudi Visker, "The Price of Being Dispossessed: Levinas's God and Freud's Trauma," in *The Face of the Other & the Trace of God: Essay on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), p. 247.

28 Emmanuel Levinas, "Being and Meaning," in *God, Death and Time*, p. 127.

tion between God and the human being is fundamentally atheistic. That is to say, the human being is originally separated from God, neither belonging to, nor united with, God before the Fall occurs. She lives her life as an I, separated from God: "To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created – these are synonyms."²⁹ The separation is "so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief."³⁰ The atheistic human being thus "lives outside of God," at home with herself; she is "an I, an egoism."³¹ This separation is, for Levinas, the condition for a true relationship with God: "Faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, itself implies metaphysical atheism. Revelation is discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required. Atheism conditions a veritable relationship with a true God καθ' αὐτό."³² This is because the separated being would not find herself under the totalizing power of God or the violence of the Sacred. Levinas's concept of God with regard to this issue would thus look like this:

In the dimension of height in which his sanctity, that is, his separation, is presented, the infinite does not burn the eyes that are lifted unto him. He speaks; he does not have the mythical format that is impossible to confront and would hold the I in its invisible meshes. He is not numinous: the I who approaches him is neither annihilated on contact nor transported outside of itself but remains separated and keeps its as-for-me. Only an atheist being can relate himself to the other and already *absolve* himself from this relation.³³

29 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 148.

30 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 58.

31 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 58.

32 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77. See also the following: "The rigorous affirmation of human independence, of its intelligent presence to an intelligible reality, the destruction of the numinous concept of the Sacred, entail the risk of atheism. That risk must be run. Only through it can man be raised to the spiritual notion of the Transcendent." Emmanuel Levinas, "A Religion for Adults," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays On Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 15.

33 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

Thus, it is particularly important for Levinas to distinguish transcendence “from a union with the transcendent by participation.”³⁴ True transcendence for him does not destroy the freedom of the subject.

4. A SOCIAL RELATION

Religion often entails a social dimension in the form of the gathering of individual members to pray and worship together. Their personal relation with God is situated within a community of fellow believers. It is understood that the individual does not stand alone in terms of her faith but shares it with other members of the community. This community of faith becomes the place where they cultivate their relationship with God.

In Levinas we find a deep social dimension of religion as well, but not in the sense that believers tend to form a community together to practice their faith. Rather, it refers to the anarchical bonding between each member of humanity such that each is responsible for everyone else. The responsibility for the Other is the expression of their relationship with the Infinite; it is the order given to them even prior to their freedom. Thus, for Levinas, religion is fundamentally, or even better, anarchically *social*: it is to be enacted and expressed in the relationship with other people, namely, through responsibility for them. At the roots of religion is “the social relation;”³⁵ religion is “the excellence proper to sociality with the Absolute.”³⁶

One of Levinas’s inspirational figures in this regard is Emile Durkheim who sees society as more than simply a multiplicity of the individuals and defines it in terms of religion: “To reach the Other through the social is to reach him through the religious.”³⁷ Indeed, in Durkheim’s view, religion is a central force in society, as, among other factors, it exerts the strongest influence over people. Both society and religion are systems of symbols.

34 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 77.

35 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 109.

36 Levinas, “On Jewish Philosophy,” p. 171.

37 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 68.

Therefore, the study of religion requires a penetration into the social reality represented by the symbols. For Levinas, Durkheim's notion of society contains some transcendental elements, as it moves beyond a sheer collection of individuals.³⁸ But his notion of the religious, to Levinas's dissatisfaction, turns out to be merely a collective representation whose structure serves as the ultimate interpretation of the religious itself.³⁹ The so-called religious in Durkheim is for Levinas not the transcendent, but only pointing to transcendence.

Levinas's emphasis on the social character of religion helps us understand his remark that in choosing the term 'religion' he has initially in mind the meaning that Auguste Comte gives to the term in the beginning of the *Politique Positive*: "Nothing theological, nothing mystical, lies hidden behind the analysis that we have just given of the encounter with the other (*autrui*), an encounter whose formal structure it was important to underline: the object of the encounter is at once given to us and *in society* with us."⁴⁰ We understand that Comte has proposed the so-called "religion of humanity" shared by all human beings on earth: instead of the "fictitious gods" of antiquity, the human beings should worship the Great Being of Humanity and cooperate willingly in perfecting the order of the world. Such religion should operate on Love as its principle, Order as its basis, and Progress as its end.⁴¹ In making the remark on Comte, I think, Levinas attempts to emphasize the main character of religion as the common enterprise of all humanity through responsibility for fellow human beings. Religion is not about the individual's relationship with God without involving her fellow human beings. Instead, the encounter with God should take place through the relation with other people.

38 Those 'believers,' both Catholic and Protestant, were understandably unhappy with Durkheim's move. They criticized him for reducing religion to its social component and denying the existence of God. Also missing in Durkheim's notion of religion, they argue, are precisely the most crucial factors such as the individuals and the spiritual elements. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), p. 26.

39 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 68.

40 Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental?," p. 8.

41 Auguste Comte, *System of Positive Polity*, vol. 1 (New York: Burt Franklin, 1875), p. 257.

It is important to note here that the character of givenness in the sociality of religion helps us understand Levinas's preference to use the term 'fraternity' to designate the bond among human beings. This is because fraternity, in Levinas's view, presupposes the absolute difference of human beings from one another: "Transcendence is only possible with the Other (*Autrui*), with respect to whom we are absolutely difference, without this difference depending on some quality."⁴² Similar terms such as human solidarity assume that human beings have things in common since they belong to the same genus, which Levinas rejects: "Have you ever seen individuals from a genus who enter into fraternity?"⁴³ Fraternity, by contrast, is "the very relation with the face" because it is founded on the *Is* that are unique and absolutely different from one another: "The human I is posited in fraternity: that all men are brothers is not added to man as a moral conquest, but constitutes his ipseity. Because my position as an I is effectuated already in fraternity the face can present itself to me as a face."⁴⁴ We can also say that I am other.⁴⁵ The uniqueness of the *I* implies that no one else can substitute for its responsibilities.

THE INTERTWINING BETWEEN ETHICS AND RELIGION

Having discussed Levinas's account of religion, we can now spell out more explicitly the relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought. One simplest proposal that has been brought forth in this matter is that Levinas's ethics *is* religion.⁴⁶ In this view no distinction can be made between the two; they simply collapse in Levinas's treatment of them. Is it that simple? I disagree with such a position. I would argue that Levinas's ethics and religion are still distinguishable for reasons I will

⁴² Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," p. 27.

⁴³ Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," p. 27.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 279-80.

⁴⁵ Thomas Jones, "From the Golden Rule to the Platinum Rule: An Auto-ethnographic Account," in *Education, Religion, and Ethics – A Scholarly Collection*, ed. Dianne Rayson (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023), p. 260.

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), p. 115.

elaborate below. I will offer my argument in two sub-sections, namely, ethics as fundamentally religious and religion as fundamentally ethical.

ETHICS AS FUNDAMENTALLY RELIGIOUS

The argument that Levinas's ethics is deeply religious has several layers of meaning. To explicate this claim, I will begin with an account of his investigation into the meaning of ethics as a religious quest, followed by his analysis of ethics as the realm in which the word 'God' becomes meaningful. The last part of this section will deal with the claim that ethics, as the responsibility for the Other, is the passage to God.

Ethics as A Religious Quest

There is no doubt that the Holocaust plays a crucial role in Levinas's analysis of the meaning of ethics. In his autobiographical essay, "Signature," Levinas speaks of the "presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" that dominates his life and thought.⁴⁷ Indeed, he dedicates *Otherwise than Being* to the victims of the Holocaust.⁴⁸ The atrocities, done by civilized and educated people, clearly show the failure of human thinking, particularly in the area of ethics. The following questions are raised everywhere: "How and why did it happen? How could people do that?" A more poignant question is as follows:

How did human beings who had previously lived unexceptional and inoffensive lives end up watching, condoning, or inflicting continuous acts of intense cruelty and unprecedented genocidal destruction against the aged, women, children, and generally helpless people who engaged in no acts of provocation and committed no crimes, as *crime* is defined by advanced societies?⁴⁹

Even philosophy is forced to examine its own conception of the relationship between the true and the good, knowledge and ethics. This is

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 291.

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. v.

⁴⁹ John K. Roth, "Introduction: Ethics after Auschwitz," *Ethics After the Holocaust: Perspectives, Critiques, and Responses*, eds. John K. Roth, et al. (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1999), p. xv.

why Levinas begins his preface to *Totality and Infinity* with the very call to self-examination: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the utmost importance to know whether we are not duped by morality."⁵⁰ Morality itself is now put into question: "Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?"⁵¹ Thus, Levinas's analysis into the meaning of ethics can be seen as a philosophical task in response to the Holocaust. Ethics is undoubtedly Levinas's primary concern besides holiness or the meaning of transcendence, as we will see below. Contrary to Badiou's criticism, it is a philosophy, as it attempts to address the failure of ethics and to find its more fundamental meaning and relevance to today's world.

More importantly for our purpose here, the ethical inquiry arises as a religious quest as well after the end of theodicy. In the Holocaust, as in other atrocities in the twentieth century such as Hiroshima and the Gulag, one sees "suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to."⁵² In Levinas's view, there is no way in which the suffering of the people can be rendered adequate meaning. Even theodicy, as an attempt to explain the suffering and evil by a "grand design" that eventually makes God innocent, fails to do its task because they are unassumable.⁵³ The Holocaust renders "impossible and odious every proposal and every thought that would explain it by the sins of those who have suffered or are dead."⁵⁴ It also testifies to the death of the God of miracles who would intervene in human history as "a force, sovereign... invisible to the eye and undemonstrable by reason."⁵⁵ In fact, in one of his interviews Levinas refers to Auschwitz as the site where "God let the Nazis

50 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 21.

51 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality," in Robert Bernasconi, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature. London: Routledge, 1988), p. 176.

52 Levinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 97.

53 Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering," pp. 91, 96.

54 Levinas, "Useless Suffering," p. 98.

55 Emmanuel Levinas, "Signification and Sense" in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, intro. Richard A. Cohen (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), p. 24. See Robert John Sheffler Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger: Emmanuel Levinas's Ethics as First Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1993), p. 150.

do what they wanted.”⁵⁶ Such an idea of God, arising from the thinking of God in terms of Being, is no longer tenable because it betrays people’s experience of history.

Thus, Levinas’s account of ethics can be seen as the search for a new signification that both religiosity and the human morality of goodness may still have after the end of theodicy.⁵⁷ It attempts to speak of “an absolute commandment after Auschwitz.”⁵⁸ In addition, it seeks for a new meaning of God that would take into account God’s silence during the horrors of the Holocaust. This faith is expressed in the radical responsibility for the Other, in a non-indifference of one to another. Or, as he puts it in *Otherwise than Being*, the ethics of responsibility is a way of speaking of religion that survives ‘the death of God.’⁵⁹

Ethics as the Realm Where the Word ‘God’ Has Meaning

As we have frequently seen, Levinas provides us with the concept of ethics as the opening of the self to the summon and demand of the Other (*Autrui*) to responsibility. To be able to respond to the face of the Other, one needs to deal with one’s natural tendency to persevere in one’s existence. The responsibility for the Other is only possible, in Levinas’s view, when there is rupture with the *conatus essendi*. For “it is the being that we are, being itself, which prevents us from recognizing our ethical duties.”⁶⁰ But when the rupture occurs, that is the very moment of generosity and the gratuitous act toward the Other (*Autrui*). That is where ethics begins, and the path to transcendence is open. For Levinas, the ethical relation thus becomes the site where the word ‘God’ may have meaning.

In his essay “God and Philosophy,” Levinas criticizes theology for bringing the word ‘God’ into “the course of being,” while the term actu-

56 Levinas, “Paradox of Morality,” p. 175.

57 Levinas, “Useless Suffering,” p. 99.

58 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 176.

59 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 123.

60 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 177.

ally signifies the beyond of Being, or transcendence.⁶¹ In doing so theology only continues the “destruction of transcendence” that the history of Western philosophy has done. If the word ‘God’ is to have a meaning, Levinas claims, such meaning would have to cease to “express itself in terms of being.”⁶² It is clear that Levinas’s main concern is not with the ontological questions regarding the existence or non-existence of God, but rather with the meaning and speaking of God. As Alphonso Lingis notes in the introduction to *Otherwise than Being*, in using religious language in his account of ethics, Levinas does not mean to exalt the human relations, but rather means “to locate the proper meaning of God – the one God – in the ethical bond.”⁶³ In the preface to the collection of essays “Of God who Comes to Mind,” Levinas himself states that the volume represents “an investigation into the possibility – or even the fact – of understanding the word ‘God’ as a significant word.”⁶⁴ Later, in his note on the claim that ethics is not a moment of being but otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond, he suggests that the meaning of the beyond is to be found in ethics.⁶⁵ With ethics as responsibility for the Other that always increases beyond any finality or self-preservation, one cannot but view it as the signification of the beyond Being, the mark of true transcendence.⁶⁶ It is in ethics, Levinas concludes, that the word ‘God’ has meaning. In fact, as he puts it in his essay “Beyond Intentionality,” ethics is “the singular signification of God.”⁶⁷ It means that the ethical relation is the only place where one can find the signification of the word ‘God.’ More concretely, as we will see below, one can only encounter God, as a trace, in the responsibility for the Other.

61 Cf. Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 56.

62 Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” p. 57.

63 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. xxxix.

64 Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. xi.

65 Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” pp. 69, 200n.23.

66 Gwenaëlle Aubry, “Violence, Religion, Metaphysics,” trans. Jacob Levi, in *Religion in Reason: Metaphysics, Ethics, and Politics in Hent De Vries*, p. 35.

67 Emmanuel Levinas, “Beyond Intentionality,” *Philosophy in France Today*, edited by Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 114.

Ethics as the Passage to God

The religious character of Levinas's ethics can primarily be seen in the notion of responsibility for the Other as the site where one may encounter God. Ethics, in the Levinasian sense, is not a moment of being but rather the signification of the beyond Being, or transcendence. It is this signification of transcendence that Levinas seeks for, which he finds in ethics.⁶⁸ In making this claim, Levinas shows that his interest lies not only in ethics but also in the meaning of transcendence or holiness. In the end, it is the religious character of ethics that summarizes his thought, without turning ethics into a theology.⁶⁹ The exposition of the ethical meaning of transcendence, and of the Infinite beyond Being, he says, can be carried out "starting from the proximity of the neighbor and from my responsibility for the other."⁷⁰

For Levinas, ethics or my relationship with the Other is in most important ways the very locus in which I may encounter God, not directly, but rather as a trace. I respond to the call and appeal of the Other by substituting myself for the Other. The Other becomes my utmost responsibility, and this is what holiness for Levinas all about.⁷¹ My responsibility for the Other is the way I am related to God. Here, as Derrida puts it, the ethical relation becomes "a religious relation."⁷² Levinas does not start from a theology or an exposition about God. Instead, he begins from the event of our responsibility for the Other and finds the significance of the word 'God': "I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations

68 Eric S. Nelson, *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2020), p. 273.

69 See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 4.

70 Levinas, "God and Philosophy," p. 70.

71 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Vocation of the Other," in *Is It Righteous To Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 111.

72 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 96.

and not the inverse...The inadmissible abstraction is God; it is in terms of the relation with the Other (*Autrui*) that I speak of God."⁷³

It is clear that for Levinas, the religious character is not only a dimension of his ethics, but more importantly, it constitutes his ethics. The ethical relation is the relation with the Infinite, according to Levinas, because "it is not disclosure."⁷⁴ It is rather a "revelation which is not a knowledge," which is an ethical testimony through the expression "here I am!" in the presence of the Other. This "here I am!," Levinas says, is "the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen."⁷⁵ The revelation of the Infinite occurs precisely through this testimony. It becomes the source of the ethical resistance against totality. This resistance is thus not a human effort to attain liberation, but a surplus or overflowing thanks to the very "presence of infinity."⁷⁶ Yet, the beyond of this totality does not lie in another world or beyond it; it is rather to be "reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience."⁷⁷ I take this 'within' to refer to the empirical character of such infinity: it belongs to the very human experience. The experience of infinity thus becomes concrete, and in this sense, transcendence becomes immanent.

RELIGION AS ETHICAL

We have seen that for Levinas, religion consists in the relation with the Infinite without totality. This relation does not cause the human subject to lose her freedom and independence. The subject thus remains separate from the Infinite. In fact, in Levinas's account, the separation already takes place at the time of creation when God contracts itself to make room for the world to exist independently. Plurality in the world is therefore intended from the very beginning. For this reason, religion is primarily social in structure, namely, that it maintains separateness and plurality

⁷³ Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," p. 29.

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 106.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 106.

⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 55.

⁷⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 23.

among beings as well as between God and the human beings. Two points on the ethical nature of religion are worth elaborating here, that is, religion of responsibility and religion as adrift.

Religion of Responsibility

Religion, for Levinas, can function as a mask for many things, including our selfish needs. Even the longing for salvation, which many believers presumably share, is fundamentally a return to the self. It arises, using Levinas's own terminology, from a Need to secure one's place in the afterlife, rather than from a metaphysical Desire for the Other. It is thus merely a "nostalgia, homesickness," since it seeks for "a world that is for-me."⁷⁸ Pursuing the need for salvation through prayer and offering, in Levinas's view, would only serve the *conatus essendi* of the self. If the believer is genuinely concerned with offering and sacrifice to God, he or she may do the best by offering his or herself to the Other. Organized religion, in Levinas's view, attains its *raison d'être* only when it directs its adherents to the responsibility for the Other. Religion as such is not about returning to one's origin, namely, the Creator, but rather about concrete responsibility for fellow human beings. Levinas is indeed not Kierkegaard, as he does not envision a direct relationship between the human being and God. One's relationship with God, for Levinas, must be mediated through the neighbor.⁷⁹ As Merold Westphal puts it, the fundamental difference between Levinas and Kierkegaard is that while Kierkegaard holds that God should remain the middle term between me and my neighbor, Levinas insists that it is the neighbor who is always the middle term between me and God.⁸⁰ Using Kierkegaardian language, Westphal argues that the ethical for Levinas is the teleological suspension of the religious. In this suspension the latter is relativized to be "affirmed in relation to

78 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 350.

79 Nelson, Levinas, *Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*, p. 199.

80 Merold Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 5.

that which is higher.”⁸¹ God’s commands cannot possibly invalidate my ethical relation with, and anarchical commitment to, the Other. Thus, in Levinas’s view, God cannot put me on trial, as Abraham experiences, in which I would have to choose between obeying God’s order and betraying my commitment to humanity.

Levinas’s disregard of personal and eternal happiness in his account of religion is quite similar to Kant’s position on the primacy of moral duty. Both philosophers hold that the pursuit of happiness cannot serve as the motive of moral action because it arises from self-love. Kant himself thinks that happiness always hinges on an uncertain content that is unique to every person and therefore cannot guarantee the promotion of the universal moral law. In Levinas, as Ronald Arnett points out, the critique of the search for personal happiness in religion is based not so much on the empirical character of happiness as on the indifference to the well-being of the Other.⁸² In his view it is the care of the interests of the Other that marks religion as religion because it best expresses the holiness of the Holy. This is not to say that Levinas rejects the human desire for happiness. In *Totality and Infinity*, he shows how we live on so many things and enjoy them. The living and enjoying of the earthly things mark the first emergence of the ego from the grip of the *il y a*. But the encounter with the fragility of the face of the Other would call all this enjoyment into question and even suspend it. It contests the subject’s right to existence and enjoyment. The suspension of the subject’s happiness in Levinas lasts indefinitely because unlike Kant, he does not think that the responsibility for the Other, as virtue in Kant’s view, will one day be united with happiness. The hope of eternal happiness in Kant’s religion does not exist in Levinas’s.

81 Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard in Dialogue*, p. 47.

82 Ronald C. Arnett, *Levinas’s Rhetorical Demand: the Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), p. 124.

Religion as Adrift

The relation between ethics and religion in Levinas's thought is clearly connected to his view of the relation between religion and philosophy. For Levinas, philosophy is always about the determination of Being, about the Said (*le Dit*) that conveys meaning and intelligibility. As such, it has its own limitations because not everything can be thematized or represented.⁸³ The history of Western philosophy, in Levinas's view, has not been aware of these limitations, as it seeks an ultimate comprehension of reality and thus tends to subject everything to a totalizing thought. This is why Levinas accuses this history of destroying transcendence.⁸⁴

According to Levinas, philosophy, as an attempt to proclaim the meaning of Being, comes from religion: "Philosophy, for me, derives from religion. It is called into being by a religion adrift, and probably religion is always adrift."⁸⁵ Here philosophy is portrayed as the effort to identify the intelligibility and meaning of Being through its kerygmatic proclamation. Thus, it names things and makes them objects of consciousness. Intentionality is the operation in which the objects of our consciousness are brought to the horizon. All this, whatever philosophy tries to enunciate, in Levinas's view, comes from religion. Religion, he claims, knows much more than what philosophy can ever determine.⁸⁶ It encompasses both Being and the beyond Being. But unlike philosophy, it does not have the determination of philosophy. In other words, it is always adrift. Thus, while religion may claim a larger area of operation, so to speak, it does not

83 Matthew Stone, *Levinas, Ethics, and Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 35.

84 Levinas, "God and Philosophy," p. 56.

85 Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Intro. Annette Aronowicz. (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 182. In the original French version, we may notice the play on words between *dérivée* (to derive) and *être à la dérive* (to be adrift). "La philosophie *dérive* pour moi de la religion *en dérive* et toujours probablement la religion est *en dérive*."

86 This is probably the reason why Levinas claims, presumably alluding to Boethius's work, that it is religion, not philosophy, that can bring consolations (cf. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 118; *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 86). But if religion simply means the responsibility for the Other without reward, one may wonder what kind of consolations religion may bring.

have the ability of philosophy to identify and name things in an adequate manner. For this reason, religion needs philosophy for clarity and understanding. Such a relation between religion and philosophy, in Levinas's view, does not indicate any "servility on the part of philosophy, nor any lack of understanding on the part of religion."⁸⁷ They are "two distinct but linked moments" in the "unique spiritual process that constitutes the *approach* to transcendence."⁸⁸ It is important to note that philosophy is seen as a spiritual activity that attempts to approach transcendence, and not a sheer attempt to make meaning of Being. Given the nature of philosophy, Levinas quickly reminds us that an approach is not an objectification; otherwise, transcendence would be denied. Objectification, he adds, is necessary to the approach, but it cannot replace it.

It is no surprise, then, that philosophy has imported a lot of notions from religion. Levinas himself suggests that even the word 'God' comes to philosophy from the religious realm.⁸⁹ But given its thematizing nature, philosophy always places this term within "the gesture of being."⁹⁰ The meaning of the term 'God' is now reduced to a manifestation of presence, thus rejecting God's transcendence. The God of philosophy turns out to be different from the God of religion. This is because God, in Levinas's view, is "the name outside of essence or beyond essence, the individual prior to individuality... It precedes all divinity, that is, the divine essence which the false gods, individuals sheltered in their concept, lay claim to."⁹¹ Even in Levinas's own philosophical writings, the notion of God does not coincide with that found in the revealed religions, of course for a different reason. In any case, he sees religion as having the ultimate structure of reality: "Totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being. Religion, where relationships subsist between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole –

87 Levinas, "Jewish Philosophy," p. 174.

88 Levinas, "Jewish Philosophy," p. 174.

89 Cf. *God, Death and Time*, pp. 214-15; "God and Philosophy," p. 62.

90 Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 56.

91 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 190n.38.

the idea of infinity – is the ultimate structure.”⁹² Philosophy can only see or name some part of it.

Seen from this perspective, what Levinas is doing is not a reduction of religion to ethics or even a withdrawal of ethics into the domain of religion.⁹³ Rather, it is an attempt to think of religion more seriously, to make it less adrift, in response to the Holocaust: “Before the twentieth century, all religion begins with the promise. It begins with the ‘Happy End.’ It is the promise of heaven. Well then, doesn’t a phenomenon like Auschwitz invite you, on the contrary, to think the moral law independently of the Happy End? That is the question.”⁹⁴ The responsibility for the Other is unmistakably more concrete and less contaminated with personal interest. The result of this kind of thinking, to Levinas’s own admission, is a religion that is difficult to preach: “To be sure, this religion is impossible to propose to others, and consequently is impossible to preach. Contrary to a religion that feeds on representations, it does not begin in promise.”⁹⁵ This religion is difficult, if not impossible, to preach because it is a “piety without reward,” namely, that I can demand of myself what I cannot demand of the Other.⁹⁶ It goes against the natural disposition of human nature or the *conatus essendi*. But when I respond to the face of the Other, that is the moment when the rupture with nature occurs. It is also the moment when religion begins to find its meaning.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

The depth of the interweaving between ethics and religion in Levinas’s thought, as we have seen, may make us wonder whether his concept of ethics is still ethics in the modern sense of the word. The argument that his ethics is fundamentally religious and that his religion is deeply ethical, as this article purports to show, may not satisfy those who attempt to

92 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 80.

93 See Jeffrey Bloechl, *Liturgy of the Neighbor: Emmanuel Levinas and the Religion of Responsibility* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), p. 222.

94 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 176.

95 Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation,” in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 177.

96 Levinas, “The Paradox of Morality,” p. 176.

find Levinas's place among philosophers of ethics. This is not to mention those who find Levinas's ethics impossible to put into practice. In this section I will explore the question of the sense of ethics in Levinas's thought. By doing so, I hope we may get a better understanding of his place among ethical thinkers. Then, I will show Levinas's account of religion in relation to ethics as a response to Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. Finally, I will offer some consideration regarding the application of his ethics in ethical decision making.

We all know one of Levinas's deepest concerns is the Other or the other person. For him the question of ethics is that of the other person, and therefore, it is of great importance to pursue it. Every ethical decision involves people who may get overlooked especially when we focus on finding a solution to the ethical dilemma. Let us take the classical example of Utilitarianism, that is, the "Trolley Problem." Here we are presented with a situation in which we are standing near a set of train tracks with some critical knowledge of a runaway trolley heading towards five people who cannot escape. But we have the ability to divert the trolley onto a different track where only one person is standing. What decision should we make in such a situation? Is it morally acceptable to sacrifice one life for the sake of the other five? As a moral philosophy that emphasizes maximizing overall happiness or utility for the greatest number of people, Utilitarianism would deem diverting the trolley morally justifiable since it saves more people.

For proponents of Utilitarianism the dilemma is solved with the application of its principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number." An ethical decision has been made, and therefore, the case is closed. But how about the one person whose life has to be sacrificed to save the other five? How about his family? I think Levinas would raise these questions. For him there are always people behind every ethical decision we make as ethics fundamentally concerns real people. Such questions may make us feel uneasy because they force us to acknowledge the reality of the one person and take responsibility for him and his family. This is precisely

what Levinas means by ethics, namely, the questioning and disturbance by the Other.

Moral philosophers often develop their theories in the abstract with certain principles to follow. Doing so certainly removes real people from the ethical situation to which these principles are applied. I think we can say that the more abstract the moral principles are, the farther they will take us from the lives of concrete people. Kant's categorical imperative, for example, offers us formal and abstract moral principles such as that of truth-saying that needs to be followed as moral duties regardless of the consequences. This means no consideration for the face of the Other, as Levinas would put it, given the focus on the observance of the relevant moral duties. This is why Levinas warns us not to be "duped by morality," particularly when we assume that morality always concerns the well-being of real people.⁹⁷

By extending the ethical situation beyond the solution of the moral dilemma, Levinas wishes to make the point that our responsibility for other people knows no boundary, despite our tendency to hastily bring it to a closure. With the notion of infinity coming into play, I think Levinas finds an opportunity to connect his ethics with religion that does speak of the Infinite. The exploration of the true meaning of transcendence allows him to explicate both the infinite responsibility for the human Other and the trace of God or the Infinite through such radical responsibility. Here ethics and religion intricately intersect as we have seen.

Levinas's attempt to connect his ethics with religion is, of course, no coincidence. One can see this as the fruit of bringing philosophical and religious traditions into a conversation without, as he claims, any deliberate effort to harmonize them.⁹⁸ More importantly, this is Levinas's response to Heidegger's critique of the onto-theological thinking of metaphysics. In his critique Heidegger shows that the metaphysical tradition that extends from Anaximander to Nietzsche has allowed a Highest Being to

⁹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 21.

⁹⁸ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 23.

enter the scene as “the generative ground” of beings or “*causa sui*.”⁹⁹ The purpose of this entrance, Heidegger charges, is to serve the philosophical project of rendering the whole being intelligible to human understanding. With this gesture, the whole of being is ultimately to be understood with reference to the Highest Being that Heidegger calls “the god of philosophy.” This account is both ontological and theological, hence onto-theology. One of the problems with such metaphysics, as Heidegger sees it, is this god of philosophy is not the God that monotheistic religions worship. This would make a bad theology, he argues, since “Man (*sic*) can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”¹⁰⁰

In the wake of this critique, philosophers of religion in particular have attempted to speak of God or transcendence without falling into onto-theology. What Levinas is doing on his account of religion is precisely taking up Heidegger’s challenge to go beyond Being. He speaks of transcendence as a trace of the Infinite in the ethical responsibility for the Other. The face of the Other does not show or present God to us, but summons me to God is forever departing, bidding *adieu*. Such a God is, Levinas writes, “transcendent to the point of absence.”¹⁰¹ Since God does not manifest in and for consciousness, the achievement of adequate knowledge through intentionality, which is a mark of onto-theology, is impossible. Of course, one can argue against Levinas’s retrieval of God and religion through ethics only as if there were no other way to speak of transcendence.¹⁰² There may be rich resources for lively discussion on this issue. But I think Levinas’s account of the intertwining of ethics and religion shows a strong engagement with Heidegger’s critique of onto-theological thinking in metaphysics: “It is in this ethical perspective that God must be thought, and not in the ontological perspective of our being-there or of some Supreme Being and Creator correlative to the world, as tradi-

99 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 72.

100 Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, p. 72.

101 Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” p. 69.

102 See Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger*, p. 157.

tional metaphysics often held... it is only in the infinite relation with the other that God passes (*se passe*), that traces of God are to be found."¹⁰³

The deep relationship between Levinas's ethics and religion has brought forth a thorny question whether his ethics is feasible at all for any human being to follow. How can one exercise an infinite responsibility for the Other? This is a legitimate question as we humans constantly make ethical decisions and try to follow them through. I think Levinas's ethics can be very useful as a backdrop against which our ordinary ethical decisions are made. Take the solution to the Trolley Problem using the approach of Utilitarianism, for example. The pragmatism behind this approach that favors the life of five people over that of one may leave behind a lingering question whether our existence is just about number. Here Levinas's ethics can serve as a strong reminder that there are always people behind every single ethical decision we make. Thus, one does not need to follow through Levinas's ethics in all circumstances. Being duped by morality, as Levinas warns against, is precisely the sense of relief that we have done our job after making an ethical judgment according to a certain moral theory. When challenged about the injustice that the solution incurs, we get behind the formal ethical procedure followed during the decision-making. We just want to get behind the problem and move on. Here Levinas's ethics can be seen as a bulwark against our ethical complacency that fails to take into account the greater responsibility for the Other. Of course, religious believers can connect this ethics with their faith insofar as it enunciates a dimension of social responsibility. But on a practical level, this may not be necessary as long as one recalls that ethical issues always concern real people and therefore, their consideration should not be made in the abstract. After all, ethics exists and becomes a necessary dimension of our lives due to our very existence. Ethics is fundamentally about us human beings, whether it involves our interpersonal relationship or that with the environment. Failure to acknowledge this essential matter will undermine our integrity as human beings.

103 Richard Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," in *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 80.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to see Levinas's ethics as simply another ethical theory. A deeper look, however, may bring one to the realization that his ethics is not a theory at all, as it does not give us any moral principle to live our lives, which we usually find in an ethical theory. Levinas's ethics is, as Derrida puts it, an ethics of ethics, the very foundation of any encounter with the Other. Levinas himself calls his ethics *prima philosophia* that is supposed to ground all kinds of morality in society.¹⁰⁴ One will also notice its large framework that is religious in nature. For Levinas, the ethical relation is the scene, the clearing, the only horizon within which God is truly revealed. All this does not mean that Levinas himself likes to show the religious character of his ethics. In fact, he often tries to avoid using the term 'religious' unless it is necessary. The appeal to the religious character of his ethics is demanded because the kind of ethics he proposes would not make sense without such a presupposition. We see that Levinas is incredibly careful with the designation of religiosity to his ethics to avoid any misunderstanding. He wants this discourse to remain philosophical. His critique of Western philosophical tradition, together with his call for the ethical responsibility for the Other, is done within the same tradition. As Merold Westphal points out, it is an immanent critique, as it does not arise from an appeal to some religious text or tradition as normative.¹⁰⁵ Yet, Levinas finds it impossible to escape the religious significance of the encounter with the Other.

Does it mean that Levinas' ethics as *prima philosophia* presuppose religion or a belief in God? I argue in this article that it does not in the sense that one does not need to believe in God to put his ethics into practice. Neither can one say that his ethics is a version of religion. On the contrary, belief in God, or religion in general, he claims, would presuppose ethics as the questioning of our own being and the opening to the Other. Such

104 Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," pp. 72, 82.

105 Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 191.

questioning and opening is deeply philosophical and thus accessible to everyone through reason.

Nonetheless, Levinas's ethics, as I have argued, remains fundamentally religious. For such radical responsibility for the Other, the subject being taken as hostage for the Other, would not make sense unless it is grounded in the Infinite that makes such a demand. As Levinas himself says, the ethical exigency to be responsible for the Other "undermines the ontological primacy of the meaning of Being."¹⁰⁶ His ethics no longer operates at the level of ontology, but rather finds its source in the beyond Being, as it puts the ontological right to existence into question.¹⁰⁷ It is an ethics that, as he puts it himself, goes "against nature."¹⁰⁸ He also acknowledges that the humanistic concern for our fellow human beings is already religious in the sense that it speaks the voice of God. But, he continues, "the moral priority of the Other over myself could not come to be if it were not motivated by something beyond nature."¹⁰⁹ This "something beyond nature" lends itself to the characterization of his ethics as religious, particularly when it is read together with this claim: "God is the Other who turns our nature inside out... God does indeed go against nature for He is not of this world. God is other than Being."¹¹⁰ In other words, the root of the radical responsibility for the Other that characterizes his ethics can only be attributed to God. This is another way of saying that Levinas's ethics is fundamentally religious without collapsing this distinction. True religion, on the other hand, necessarily embodies the ethical character that consists in a relation with the Infinite without totalization.

106 Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," pp. 74-5.

107 Michael Sohn, *The Good of Recognition: Phenomenology, Ethics, and Religion in the Thought of Levinas and Ricoeur* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), p. 30.

108 Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," p. 75.

109 Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," p. 76.

110 Kearney, "Ethics of the Infinite," p. 76.

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