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Introduction

Is an ethical philosophy primarily philosophical, a true discourse that happens to be about moral phenomena? Or is such a philosophy primarily ethical, an edifying discourse designed to stimulate good behavior, an exhortation, instruction or prescription rather than an explanation, description or denotation? Knowing that the drowning child must be saved, even when coupled with knowing how to save the child, is not the same as saving the child, unless knowing and doing are synonymous, which in our world they are not. For Levinas goodness comes first. His philosophy aims to pronounce this goodness, to articulate and emphasize it, and thus to realign its relation to the true. His thought is not simply an articulation, but a peculiar ethical exacerbation of language which bends the true to the good.

The issue between the true and the good is one of priority. Each claims absolute priority. If truth is primary then the criteria of epistemology, of cognition and knowledge, take precedence over moral standards. Knowledge interests dominate. Truth absorbs and transforms goodness to its own purposes, in more or less subtle ways, even when it claims not to. Aristotle and Hegel discover that the highest good ultimately surpasses the responsibilities and duties of citizenship, friendship and love. For these thinkers what is most needful is for thought to think itself. Such thought, however (and typically), includes citizenship, love, and the other less exalted human activities and relations, which are oriented toward and by

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knowledge. Today, to take another example, one often hears scientists lay claim to a “value-free” language, that is to say, to a language beholden only to itself, to its own criteria. The deconstruction inaugurated by Derrida, too — so apparently at odds with science as with all naivete — is only a more recent instance in a long tradition of the self-absorption of knowledge.

But if the good were somehow primary in philosophy and life, and the standards of ethics took precedence over those of epistemology, then knowledge, for its part, would apparently be legitimately outraged. Is one not justified in fearing that the quest for truth would be hampered by moral scruples? Would it not be shackled by the nonfreedom of moral obedience? In the final account knowledge cannot distinguish moral scruple from tyranny or from cowardice; it has yet to learn one true morality, yet to see its proofs. In place of universal truth, or the quest for universal truth, one would have instead the contending particularities and vagaries of history: class truths, female truths, Islamic truths, and so on, each claiming moral superiority in a war of all against all.

Epistemology and ethics only seem able to distort one another unrecognizably.

But is the opposition of ethics and epistemology an opposition of two systems on the same plane? Truth is not the other of ethics in the same sense that goodness is the other of epistemology. The false is the other of the true; evil is the other of good. How are true, false, good, and evil related? Nietzsche proposes that ethics and epistemology have converged in the goodness that the latter finds in truth and not in falsity. Nietzsche will challenge this epistemological preference for the goodness of truth. Heidegger sets out to show that ethics and epistemology converge in “onto-theo-logy,” in the eminence given to one being over all other beings. He rejects the very form of this superiority. Levinas proposes that ethics and epistemology converge in a moral righteousness that is not the rightness of the true but that makes truth possible. For knowledge such a condition is an exteriority, but for ethics it is better than knowledge. Ethics would not be a legitimate or illegitimate epistemological power or weakness, in the Nietzschean or Heideggerian sense, but the responsibility of the knower prior to, and the condition of, knowing.

Knowing cannot know such a condition. Socrates requires that we pause to know what right and wrong are before we act — but can

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this pause ever end? Cain asks if he is his brother’s keeper and is thus already condemned. Knowledge, even when about morality, is insufficient, inadequate, inappropriate — and inasmuch as these terms of “criticism” are themselves products of knowledge, they too are insufficient. This does not, however, imply that ethics is an ignorance, a stupidity, for ignorance is but the other side of knowledge. Rather, for Levinas “it is time the abusive confusion of foolishness with morality were denounced.” Knowledge must once again be reexamined.

For knowledge to be knowledge it must turn upon itself, retrieve its project, deliberate, probe, and prove. In such a quest Socrates’ dictum — know thyself — is unnecessary: all knowledge is self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the telos, the auto-nomy at the origin of knowing. Whether it takes the empirical or the transcendental turn, knowledge must reject any authority as external and alien if that authority cannot pass through its evidence-checkpoint. Evidence, as Husserl understood, is the “principle of principles,” the legitimizing instance of knowledge. Knowing must always decide beforehand what will count as knowledge. Hence knowledge and method are inseparable. Even when an entire paradigm of knowledge shifts, however unpredictable the shift may be it always makes sense retrospectively. Knowledge cannot be taken by surprise. Thus it is not the specific evidential standard upheld at any particular time that makes knowledge insufficient from the ethical standpoint, but its usurpation of priority itself. Its “beforehand” already excludes the import of ethics and thus, also, undermines knowing’s claim to wholeness.

But in its own way such a failing is not altogether unknown by knowledge. Knowledge has never, even to its own satisfaction, reasoned out its origins, or reasoned itself out of its origins. Since its inception in ancient Greece this failure has trapped it between the cold logic of Parmenides and the fiery madness of Heraclitus. That is to say, on the one hand, knowledge can claim to contain its own origin, to be one and whole, but only at cost of sacrificing the way to becoming knowable, the path from finitude to perfection, from the world of change, appearance, multiplicity to the perfect unity of the one. Here being and thinking are one: eternal, unchanging, indivisible. From the formulations of Parmenides, to Pythagoras, to Spinoza, knowledge remains eternally only itself, pure, divine — the rest is illusion, indeed, the illusion of illusion, for

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illusion has no being. But when, on the other hand, knowledge attempts to look outside of itself for its origin it falls into an abyss of infinite regress, of a flux verging on chaos and held from chaos for no good reason. From the formulations of Heraclitus to Hume to Nietzsche, this tendency of thought contains itself only with an evanescent hollow laughter, fading into the appearance of appearance of appearance of . . . naught. Thus knowledge, by its own lights, is torn between being and nothingness, positivity and negativity, a too perfect purity and a too imperfect impurity. Like an oyster, the irritation of knowledge over its fundamental incompleteness secretes a pearl: myth. From the formulations of Plato to those of Hegel philosophy attempts an impossible synthesis by means of more or less disguised myths of beginning and end. But myth only succeeds in appropriating and distorting the genuine import of knowing’s lack of origin — for “in truth” here knowledge encounters the ethical situation upon which it uncomfortably rests. Knowledge, however, is so far willing to deny its own essential frustration, so far willing to defend its freedom and autonomy, that it wills the “make believe,” wills the false for the sake of the true.

But this desperate addiction to mythos should teach the logos something about its limits, about the meaning of the disruption it finds so intolerable yet so inevitable. Ethics does not satisfy knowledge, it is not a myth, it is precisely what disrupts knowledge and myth. The ineradicable ethical movement beyond knowledge is not a movement on the plane of knowledge, reason, themes or representation. Nor is it a movement of creative imagination, poesis, or displacement. Ethics, for Levinas, is not a movement toward the light or away from the light. Rather it is a trembling movement, that cannot be measured, toward the height and destitution of the other person.

Ethical necessity escapes knowledge not because it occurs in a different territory, another world, but because it is exerted through but not contained in themes. Its force is not that of the sufficiency of reasons. Nor is its force that of a myth or ideology that props up knowledge in its weak moments. The assertion that “A logically or politically implies B” can be shown to arise out of shared presuppositions. Through such assertions knowers join together in the relevance of transpersonal truths, truths true for you as well as for me. But there is a prior question about these transpersonal truths.
This prior question concerns the epistemological criteria but cannot, without circularity, be settled by them.

For Levinas the lack of epistemological regulation here caught sight of is a positive event. Moral force cannot be reduced to cognitive cogency, to acts of consciousness or will. One can always refuse its claim; that is, once can be evil — and the capacity to rationalize such refusal is certainly without limit. Ethical necessity lies in a different sort of refusal, a refusal of concepts. It lies in prethematic demands that are necessarily lost in the elaboration of themes. Ethical necessity lies in social obligation prior to thematic thought, in a disturbance suffered by thematizing thought. “The conceptualization of this last refusal of conceptualization is not contemporaneous with this refusal; it transcends this conceptualization.” Ethics occurs as an unsettling of being and essence, as the “otherwise than being or beyond essence,” whose otherwise and beyond cannot be thematized because goodness is better than the true and the false. This is not because ethics makes some truths better and others worse, but because it disrupts the entire project of knowing with a higher call, a more severe “condition”: responsibility.

What is prior to the apriori conditions for cognition is neither the thematizing project itself, the ever escaping set of all sets, nor an antecedent attunement to being. It is the relationship with the alterity of the other person in an obligation to respond to that other, a responsibility to and for the other person that comes from him but is mine. The unassumable other of discourse — a discourse that can be true or false, beautiful or ugly, spoken or written — is the other person. This other is the ethical other, irreducible to what is known and outside the dominion of autonomy and freedom. The other, without “doing” anything, obligates the self prior to what the other says. It is this obligation, this responsibility to respond to the other that is, paradoxically, the unspoken first word prior to the first word spoken.

Thought retains a positive though residual awareness of this obligation. Though its telos is self-knowledge it does not think of itself or by itself. Its words are not merely its own formulations of itself in a vocal material. Nor is thought the auto-nomous movement of a system of signs. One says something to someone. The dative is an essential, irreducible aspect of all meaningful discourse, even if it escapes the most scrutinizing thematization, indeed, precisely inasmuch as it escapes all thematization. To acknowledge it one must
go beyond what one can grasp in themes. Movement toward the
other must not be confused, then, with the epistemological search for
a moment of immediacy, an irrefragable origin, a pure given. Such
immediacy has been shown to be contradictory time and again (by
Adorno, by Sellars, by Derrida, et al.). Knowledge will not be
humbled by an immediacy it knows — rightfully — to be mediated.
But knowledge of itself knows of no sufficient reason to set its suffi-
cient reasons in motion. Rather, it only knows sufficient reasons —
it knows nothing more compelling than reason. Knowledge wants
only more knowledge, wider and more firmly established knowledge.
Yet its freedom is always in search of more freedom, more autonomy.
It moves, but its movement is always homecoming, even in its dif-
ficulties and uncompleted programs, across however vast a territory
of accomplishments and tasks, no matter how many researchers
share in its adventure. Its transcendence is always reducible to that
of intentionality, never going beyond the confines of noes and
noemas. What is lacking to reason is its very raison d'être, its why. The
movement that sustains knowledge while remaining outside of
knowledge is that of the ethical situation.

The ethical situation is excessive. The originality of Levinas'ethical
philosophy lies in the very exorbitance of its claim. Precisely
the excess of the ethical claim is what both contests knowledge and,
as a nonepistemic contestation, makes for the seriousness of the
ethical situation itself. The ethical situation is a unique relation, a
relation without distance or union: the proximity of the one for the
other, the face to face. Each of its four components is excessive, both
its "terms": (1) the alterity of the other person and (2) the passivity
of the self, and their "relations": (3) the other's command and (4) my
responsibility to respond. All four of these inseparable yet
distinguishable elements are exorbitant, excessive, yet irreducible
to knowledge and freedom. They are infinite in the sense Descartes
gives to this term in his third Meditation when he writes that “in some way
I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite” and that
"the strength of my mind . . . is in some measure dazzled by the
sight." Levinas borrows the word "infinite" from Descartes to
characterize the alterity of the other, my own passivity, the other's
command, and my responsibility. Let us look at these four com-
ponents of the ethical situation in turn.

1. Ethics exceeds knowledge by beginning in what lacks an
origin, a radical exteriority: the absolute alterity of the other person.
For Levinas what makes the other person other is not a unique attribute or a unique combination of attributes but the “quality” of aliterity itself. The other is other because his aliterity is absolute, indeterminate and indeterminable. Of course, the other is always a specific other, a fellow citizen, a widow, an orphan, a magistrate, but the other is never only that, never only a phenomenon. The utter nakedness of the other's face pierces all significations, historical or otherwise, that attempt to mask or comprehend it.

2. Ethics exceeds knowledge in its “terminus,” an “agency” without its own origin, a radical passivity: the inalienable responsibility to respond to the other person. The radical aliterity of the other person contacts the subject beneath and prior to its powers and abilities, including its acts of consciousness. Prior to the reciprocal relations that may voluntarily or traditionally bind one to another, prior to the reasons the subject may propose in response to the other, prior to the respect one may have for the other, and prior to the sensuous receptivity that may welcome the other, the self is subjected to the excessive aliterity of the other. In relation to the other the self is reconditioned, desubstantialized, put into question. Put into relation to what it cannot integrate, the self is made to be itself “despite itself.” Hence one is “in some sense,” as Descartes says, — a sense indeterminable by knowing — for the other before being for oneself. Hence one is radically passive in a superlative passivity equal only to the superlative aliterity of the other person.

3. The ethical relation holds together what knowing can not hold together: the absolute aliterity of the other person and the absolute passivity of the self despite-itself. The other's aliterity is experienced as a command, an order which as it orders ordains the self into its inalienable selfhood. It is the other who “awakens” the subject from the abilities which make the life of the ego continuous and ultimately complacent, a homecoming. The other disturbs, pierces, ruptures, disrupts the immanence into which the subject falls when free of unassimilable aliterity. The other, then, contacts the self from a height and a destitution: from the height of aliterity itself and from the destitution to which the frailty and ultimately the mortality of the human condition make the other destined. The unspoken message which appears in the face of the other is: do not kill me; or, since the message has no ontological force, but is the very force of morality: you ought not kill me; or, since the aliterity of the other's face is aliterity itself: thou shalt not kill.
4. Subjected to subjectivity by the excessive alterity of the other and the demand this places on me, the I becomes responsible: responsible to and for the other. Here again, responsibility is not an attribute of the self, but the self itself, the self-despite-itself is responsible to and for the other. In the face of the other, and only in the face of the other, the self becomes noninterchangeable, non-substitutable, which is to say, it becomes inalienably itself, “in the first person,” responsible. To be oneself is to be for the other. Further, the responsibility to respond to the other is an infinite responsibility, one which increases the more it is fulfilled, for the other is not an end that can be satisfied. The self is responsible for all the frailty of the other, the other’s hungers, wounds, desires; and for the very responsibility of the other — I am my brother’s keeper; as well as for the very death of the other, so that the other may not die alone, forsaken.

Excessive alterity, excessive passivity, excessive demand, excessive responsibility — these are the components of the ethical situation that Levinas draws to the attention of philosophy. The relevance of such a situation cannot be that of a “new” theme or a potential theme. Rather, ethics is the essentially nonencompassable context, the nonplace, the utopia, within which knowing “takes place.” The identities, themes, reflections and reasons of knowledge occur within the exorbitant context of the nonidentifiable, nonrepresentable, non-thematizable, non-reflective, unjustified proximity of one face to another. Cutting knowledge (with a wound) diagonally, as it were, ethics is that absolute from out of which emerges the relative exteriority and interiority of knowledge — evidence and intentionality — without being on the same plane as itself, thus without submitting to the constraints of epistemology.

Knowledge is not thereby degraded. Indeed it is an important product of the ethical situation itself and has tremendous ethical significance beyond its natural tendency to cover up its beginnings. Knowledge emerges from the ethical situation owing to exigencies within that situation itself. The excess of the ethical relation needs limitations “to breathe,” one might say, but in truth it needs limitations because the world contains more than two people. We do not live in the garden of Eden. More than ethics is required in order to be good, justice is also required. The subject realizes that the absolute other is also other relative to others, and that its own inalienable, infinite responsibility for the other is also a responsibility to others.
and a responsibility like others'. In this way the value of justice, of 
equality, emerges from the originary unequalled and unequal ethical 
relation. The demands of justice arise from out of the ethical situa-
tion and at the same time pose a danger for that situation. The 
danger of justice, injustice, is the forgetting of the human face. The 
human face “regulates,” is the goodness of justice itself. “The fact that 
the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, 
who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness, justice 
and philosophy. The unlimited initial responsibility, which justifies 
this concern for justice, for oneself, and for philosophy can be forgot-
ten. In this forgetting consciousness is a pure egoism. But egoism is 
neither first nor last.”

Levinas' writings, then, are paradoxical. As philosophy they 
must justify themselves, but their justification lies beyond the text, 
not in a reference, a signified, but in what is essentially elusive: 
goodness, sincerity. Knowledge must be of the true. It cannot be 
“corrected” by knowing the good for the good is good insofar as it is 
outside knowledge. This is precisely the trouble with knowledge, in a 
double sense: by essence it cannot know the good, but it is disturbed 
by the good, by the ethical plenitude that encompasses and escapes 
it. Hence Levinas' writings are condemned to incessantly speak about 
the good, about the “to the other” of ethical discourse. His writings 
are signs of lost traces. Levinas admits this paradox: signs of non-
signs, sense of nonsense, justification of the unjustifiable. Yet it is by 
raising this paradox, by invoking its nonmeasurable movement, that 
his writings make sense in transgressing sense. The absence of the 
ethical subject is the ethical subject-matter whose escape is the 
“evidence” that animates Levinas' writings. Can this tenuous exercise 
bring seriousness to knowledge? Can knowledge, on the other hand, 
take it seriously?

It is the impropriety of Levinas' ethical claims that draws 
together the articles selected for this collection: they are caught with 
their guard down, struck by the anteriority of the ethical claim, 
challenged by it into thought, wondering which comes first, the 
thought or the challenge, the statement or its moral force, question-
ing anew what it means to come first, what it means to “do” 
philosophy.
Part II of this collection, "From Ethics to Philosophy," then is both its center and heart. Here lies the issue: the question of the relation of ethics to thought, the problem of a thought which must somehow think the unthinkable, the paradoxical language of the good in philosophy. Steven G. Smith, Charles William Reed, Theodore de Boer and Jan de Greef, examine Levinas from within, as it were, in an attempt to precisely pinpoint those crucial moments when what cannot be said is said, and to articulate the nonepistemic conditions that make them possible. Jean-François Lyotard and Robert Bernasconi are no less interested in these moments, but illuminate them in relation to Kant's notion of respect and the elusiveness of Derridaian semiology respectively.

Part I, "Proximity," and Part III, "Contexts," "contain" the uneasy paradoxes of the center. Richard Kearney's interview provides a concise overview of the wide range of Levinas' thought. "Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," by Levinas, affords a glimpse of his thought at work. Blanchot's brief remarks offer a sensitive appreciation by one of France's leading literary critics and a life long personal friend of Levinas. Adriaan Peperzak and Alphonso Lingis draw us outside the central debate to explore other lines opened up by Levinas' thought, in its relation to Hegel, Kant and Heidegger, Luce Irigaray, too, explores alternative lines, taking ethical alterity to the alterity of the erotic encounter.

Collections such as this gather around original thought, not merely to be warmed by its radiance, but to radiate, to light various ways, and to indicate distances traversed and distances yet to be traveled. Levinas challenges thought to rethink its proper righteousness, to grapple with the forever unstable unity of being and the better than being.

Notes

1. AEA E 162/OBBE 126.
2. AEA E 163/OBBE 127.
3. AEA E 165/OBBE 128.