

Otherness Precedes Asceticism: Emmanuel Levinas's Criticism of Onto-Theology¹

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore Emmanuel Levinas's ethical dialectic on asceticism and its relation to otherness and closeness. In parallel, I argue that Levinas's stance on asceticism constitutes a vehement criticism of the analytic insistence on onto-theology. In Levinas's later works, particularly *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, he maintains that Christian asceticism (especially in the Orthodox and Protestant traditions) has mistakenly focused on onto-theology, i.e., on an incarnated God who comes to mind. On the one hand, a number of continental thinkers argue that an individual can achieve direct communication with God through a symmetrical, reciprocal relation as a self-contained unit. Kierkegaard, for instance, claims that the subject's isolation through asceticism is a necessary and sufficient condition to meet God. As each person is responsible directly to God and his responsibility is a matter of his faith, the religious life does not coincide with ethics and sometimes even appears as an absurdity if measured by ethical norms. Similarly, Heidegger endorses the radical replacement of religion, prioritizing consciousness and cognition as necessary and sufficient conditions to comprehend God, via the esotericism of *Dasein*. Levinas raises severe objections to these positions. He claims that God exists outside of the cosmos and that we can seek only His trace through the other person. Hence, an individual cannot be in a direct relation with God as the person is a finite being and God is Transcendence (Infinity). This is why God disappears from human relations after sending the Other to me and subjugating me as a hostage. It is only here that we can speak about asceticism, that is, the individual must appear only as an equal interlocutor, as a subject, not as an object, emptying itself and abandoning all its ontological narcissistic criteria for the Other. In this sense, the ascetic self always starts from the Other. However, Levinas goes further, arguing that God leaves all human affairs in our own hands, absenting Himself almost entirely from our world. To

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Levinas, the individual is a subject in the sense of being commanded by and thus subject to God. One's thinking and consciousness is awakened not by exploiting the face of the Other but by serving it eternally as an infinite call and response, as a substitute for a direct relationship with the Divine. One's self-conscious personality, the "I," is secondary to the morally subjected "me" which practices asceticism for the sake of the Other.

Introduction

"...moi responsable je ne finis pas de me
vider de moi-même"²

The question of asceticism as a matter of consciousness begins with Plato, who argued that a utilitarian process of goodness must be distinguished from the absolute Good.³ Plato, the first Theologian, as a number of analytic thinkers characterized him, was the first philosopher to systematically address asceticism and the Good in terms of morality.⁴ In medieval Byzantine⁵ philosophy, in the Patristic (Eastern) tradition, Christian Fathers strove to isolate the subject – to achieve *kenosis* – by following a path that recognized only the self and the spirit of God as necessary and sufficient conditions of the soul's salvation.⁶ This line of thought has been further explored in the

2 E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique, 1986), 120; trans. B. Bergo, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 73: "...as a responsible I, I never finish emptying myself of myself."

3 See H.L. Stewart, "Was Plato an Ascetic?," *The Philosophical Review* 24.6 (1915): 603-13.

4 It is worth mentioning that Levinas was a great admirer of Plato, and summed up his view of Plato's contributions to philosophy, theology, and ethics in his remark that "philosophy is Platonic." See E. Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. M.B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), ix. See also his comments on Plato in Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 23.

5 Levinas seems to have been familiar with Byzantine theological tradition. In his work *Time and the Other*, trans. R.A. Cohen (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 70, n. 43, he discusses Heidegger's view on death in relation to Byzantine tradition: "Death in Heidegger is not, as Jean Wahl says, the impossibility of possibility, but the possibility of impossibility. This apparently Byzantine distinction has a fundamental importance."

6 By Patristic tradition, we mean the Christian Orthodox perspective in which self-transcendence depends on Trinitarianism through *kenosis* and faith. This thesis sets up an intriguing opposition between the Orthodox conception of human and divine personhood as being grounded in love and the relationship to the other, on the one hand, and conceptions of personhood drawn from post-

Cartesian philosophy, emphasizing such attributes as rationality and self-consciousness, on the other. *criterialism*: Concerning the theory of *criterialism* see T. S-G. Chappell, "Knowledge of Persons," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5.4 (2013): 31-56. Fr Sophrony of Essex, one of the major defenders of Patristic tradition, insists that God is not a mere essence or an Absolute Being without direct characteristics. On the contrary, he reminds us that God says: "ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν" (I am who I am) (Exodus 3:14), and demonstrates that God is a person and human beings need the same personal adjustment to be called persons. Sophrony insists that if we want to justify personhood we must turn towards the Triune God, the real and perfect personal existence. Sophrony posits an absolute correlation and symmetry between God and Man, as in Kierkegaard. Although God is uncreated and Man is created, it is possible to share the same personal measures, thus enabling an entity to become a person exactly as it happens to the Triune God. Levinas, on the other hand, would reject this argument, since, in Judaism God does not become a person, and there is no becoming in God, especially not the essential becoming described by Sophrony. Thus, for Levinas, God cannot become a person in the same way humans do, because there is no way that God has become a person (or three persons into one substance, as held by Christian Trinitarianism). Levinas takes a clear stand in the debate on incarnation, vehemently rejecting any theories that could objectify God's essence. For Levinas, everything is about Ethics, and whether Man can realize and understand his power to ethical consent, namely, to seek the trace of God through the face of the other person. Levinas understands *kenosis* only through man's capabilities and not through God's direct interference in the world (as Orthodox Christians do). For Levinas, "more important than God's omnipotence is the subordination of that power to man's ethical consent. And that, too, is one of the primordial meanings of *kenosis*." See E. Levinas, "The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. G.D. Mole (Bloomington: The Athlone Press, 1994), 126. The most valuable and comprehensive works concerning asceticism as *kenosis* in (medieval) Patristic tradition is N.V. Sakharov, *I Love Therefore I am: the Theological Legacy of Archimandrite Sophrony* (2002): 93-115. See also J-C Larchet, "Suffering in Spiritual Life and Teaching of Elder Sophrony (in Greek)," *Πρακτικά Διορθόδοξου Επιστημονικού Συνεδρίου: Γέροντας Σωφρόνιος. Ο Θεολόγος του Ακτίστου Φωτός* (2007): 435-56; see especially the English summary: 455-56. A comparative study between Levinas and Orthodox Patristic tradition on the relation of beings and freedom has been published by T.A. Ables, "On the Very Idea of an Ontology of Communion: Being, Relation and Freedom in Zizioulas and Levinas," *The Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 672-83, especially chapter 2: "The Levinasian Critique of Ontology," 676-78. For Levinas's view on ascetic suffering, see his chapter "Useless Suffering," in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M.B. Smith and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 91-102; and W. Edelglass, "Levinas on Suffering and Compassion," *Sophia* 45.2 (2006): 43-59, where the author discusses suffering along with being and alterity. See also a valuable text on Levinas and *kenosis* written by R.D.N. van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (The Netherlands: Springer, 2007), especially Part II: "Ethics, Religion and *Kenosis*," 101-206, where the author defines and discusses

Western philosophical and theological tradition through the writings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, where the subject must be seen as a self-enclosed unit before God: asceticism of the spirit. We suggest that for the Thomistic tradition, asceticism precedes otherness and individualism precedes relationalism, something that begins through the strict esotericism of God's essence and His relation to human beings.

It is worth noting that the definition of esotericism, which has then been translated as *kenosis* (asceticism), can be traced back to Thomas Aquinas, in his works *Summa Theologica*⁷ and *Contra Errores Graecorum*,⁸ where he claims that God's mind is absolutely outside of the cosmos and has nothing to do with our intentionality. God provides a rather ascetic esotericism on how He explores His relation to human beings. In other words, for Aquinas, God has no real communication with nor relation to human beings, as He can neither exceed His essence nor be compared to anything. God thus communicates and relates to human beings only through an inner esoteric dialogue⁹ with Himself, in a process called by Aquinas "esoteric asceticism." Hence, the God-Man relationship is real from the side of human beings but an illusion from that of God. However, according to Aquinas (and centuries later through the Hegelian dialectic), God's spirit is translated (and there is only one way to be translated) through the human being's consciousness, due to the fact

the paramount importance of *kenosis* in Levinasian thought through Ethics and Religion in comparison to other philosophical and theological accounts. The terms "*kenosis*" and "self-emptying" sometimes also refer to the God-person relation. For a helpful discussion on this matter, see M.L. Baird, "Whose *Kenosis*? An Analysis of Levinas, Derrida, and Vattimo on God's Self-Emptying and the Secularization of the West," *The Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007): 423-37. As Baird correctly points out (p. 424), "Levinas's model of *kenosis* [which he defines, borrowing Levinas's phrase, 'as subordination [of God's omnipotence] to man's ethical consent; see E. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. M.B. Smith (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 126] is a diachronic and transcendental self-emptying that has no immediate real time analogue."

7 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Indianapolis: Christian Classics, 1981).

8 Concerning the analysis of Aquinas's monograph see M. Jordan, "Theological Exegesis and Aquinas's Treatise Against the Greeks," *Church History* 56.4 (1987): 445-456.

9 Concerning Levinas's view on dialogue, divine and cosmic, see H. Ben-Pazi, "Ethics Responsibility and Dialogue: The Meaning of Dialogue in Levinas's Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 50.4 (2015): 1-20.

that God cannot escape His necessity or His absolute essence. Whatever enters a human being's intentionality is solely through the Spirit of God; our spirit derives and recalls ideas from God's Spirit. This is the only way, according to Aquinas and Hegel, for God to enter humanity.

The aforementioned syllogism introduced by Aquinas is not far from the contemporary Western tradition, as regards the analysis of subjectivity in the fields of history and political philosophy. For instance, a pessimistic line of thought runs that politics nowadays (especially under socialism and capitalism) react exactly as the Thomistic dialectic suggests: modern states develop a similar model of thinking, that is, conventions, regulations, terms and conditions to decide what is right and wrong, constructed and determined via states' esotericism. Modern states seek self-vindication through their inner narcissistic esotericism, which is possible to trace back to Aquinas's onto-theological theory.

To return to our main discussion, Levinas is not far from the above tradition, which is quite anti-Christian.¹⁰ Philosophically speaking, he follows the same path as those who reject deism and hold that God does exist infinitely and beyond metaphysics, above any secular onto-theological knowledge and apprehension.¹¹ In parallel, he would agree with Aquinas that even though God exists, He cannot exceed His essence and His Absolute necessity, and thus cannot possibly interact directly with human beings, as Christians mistakenly believe, through the appearance of a Man-God incarnate.¹² However, Levinas takes the argument a step further. He maintains that the Thomistic tradition of *kenosis* (i.e., inner esotericism of Spirit) demands further clarification and modification. Crucially, Levinas states that, "human existence should not be thought of as self-

10 By anti-Christian, I mean that, for Levinas, the incarnation of *Logos* cannot be construed philosophically.

11 H. Ben-Pazi correctly maintains that the Levinasian perspective must be seen primarily ethico-philosophically, through Jewish tradition, and not onto-theologically, through the cosmic chain of immanence. He claims that "Levinas offers a philosophical-ethical reading of Jewish wisdom, which gives religion metaphysical meaning, but maintains its connection to normative ethical discourse." See especially H. Ben-Pazi, "Theodicy as the Justified Demands of Atheism: Yeshayahu Leibowitz Versus Emmanuel Levinas," *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience* 36.3 (2016): 266.

12 Concerning Levinas's argumentation on the Christian principle of incarnation of *Logos*, see Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 53-60.

orientated, but as a reception of the other.”¹³ This otherness, in turn, precedes any asceticism. In this approach, the self must be exterior to any esoteric narcissism. It must be responsive, hostage, subjected to otherness, self-emptying, dispossessed.¹⁴ This is the Levinasian explanation of asceticism, bearing no resemblance to Aquinas’s divine esotericism, which directly affects self-consciousness and the history of man in general. Moreover, Levinas, like Kierkegaard, criticizes the established Church’s mistaken use of the term asceticism by defending secularism as a cosmic ideology that exploits humans’ free will.

Kierkegaard, therefore, in order to bolster his *ressentiment* against the established Church, proposed a rational, ascetic way of life, combining the aesthetics-ethics-religion triptych with a kind of isolationism, where self-consciousness and individual perception are necessary and sufficient conditions to meet God.¹⁵ On the other hand, Levinas, who was familiar with Kierkegaard’s existential accounts of asceticism, unpacked a different dialectic: otherness precedes asceticism and relationalism precedes individualism. Levinas argues that what stimulates an individual’s subjectivity to God is not a rational mind or a systematic apprehension of intentionality (i.e., fundamental ontology) but the face of the Other (i.e., ethical metaphysics).

Levinasian Ethics and the Problem of Onto-Theology

It is worth investigating whether we can provide valid arguments or a proper ethical intuition to answer the following question: can conscious human beings be cognitively aware of God? Philosophical accounts integrating God with man’s thinking appeared centuries before Christ. Socrates (470-399 BC) and especially Plato (427-423 BC)¹⁶

13 Van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas’ Hermeneutics of Kenosis*, 1.

14 S. Benso clearly defines Levinas’s notion of asceticism by saying, “Levinas maintains, the other is always a step beyond, always further than the I can reach (the ascetic ideal!);” See S. Benso, “Levinas: Another Ascetic Priest?,” *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 27.2 (1996): 142.

15 Concerning Kierkegaard’s notion of asceticism, see N. Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), loc. 1601-2580 [Kindle version].

16 For instance, Plato, in his work *Parmenides*, denies any ontological relation between God (τό Ἔν) and *logos*. He contends in *Parmenides*’s dialogue that “[...] οὐδαμῶς ἄρα ἐστὶ τό Ἔν. Οὐ φαίνεται [...] τό Ἔν οὔτε ἐστίν [...] Οὐδ’ ἄρα

together with Aristotle (382-322 BC)¹⁷ systematized the philosophy of religion during the fifth and fourth centuries BC. But it was Plotinus (204/5-270 AD)¹⁸ who – having pre-Socratic influences – first initiated

ὄνομα ἐστὶν αὐτῷ, οὐδέ λόγος, οὐδέ τις ἐπιστήμη, οὐδέ αἴσθησις, οὐδέ δόξα. [...] Οὐδέ ὀνομάζεται, οὐδέ λέγεται, οὐδέ γινώσκεται.” See Plato, *Λάχης, Μένων, Παρμενίδης*, (in Greek), tr. B. Tatakis, (Athens: Daidalos, 1990), 72: 142a. (Trans.: “The *One* cannot be shown. It is invisible, separated from the Being, which should be neither named, nor described nor thought of nor known.”) For the hypothesis of the Idea and Good in Plato, see J. Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics: from Parmenides to Levinas*, trans. L. Soderstrom, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 21-45.

- 17 Concerning Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, especially book E', Z', A' and his consideration of being as being and Being as first philosophy, see Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 46-55, and regarding onto-theology, see 55-66. For Aristotelian Ethics, see Aristotle, (in Greek), vol. 1-4 (Thessaloniki: Zitros, 2006).
- 18 Concerning Plotinus's *Metaphysics of the One*, see Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 68-73. In parallel, Levinas refers to Plotinus's works several times. Levinas is an admirer of Plotinus's theological aspects especially concerning Plotinus's argument on “the One” (Τό ἓν). The majority of Medieval and Byzantine philosophical and theological theories developed upon on the basis of Plotinus's and Neo-Platonists' theology of the ἓν. The most comprehensive monographies on Plotinus are written by H. J. Blumenthal, *Soul and Intellect: Studies on Plotinus and Later Neo-Platonism*, 1993, especially ch. VI, 140-152, where he comments on the Ennead V, which analyzes the notion of the One and what it is to be intellectual. Also see J. Bussanich, “Plotinus's Metaphysics of the One,” in L.P. Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 38-65; and K. Corrigan, “Essence and Existence in the Enneads”, 105-129 (both texts) in Gerson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, 1996. Levinas argues that “Plotinus conceived the procession from the One as compromising neither the immutability nor the absolute separation of the One. It is in this situation, at first purely dialectical and quasi-verbal [...] that the exceptional signifyingness of a trace delineates in the world” (Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 105-106). Presumably, Levinas derives several ideas from Ennead V, where Plotinus explores his argument on the conception of the One and his attributes against intelligibility, humans and absolute knowledge. For instance, Levinas might agree with Plotinus's position regarding the Transcendence of the One: §6. [The One] is beyond being. This is the requirement of negative theology. See Plotinus, *The Enneads*, ed. L.P. Gerson, trans. G. Boys-Stones et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 581. However, Levinas would disagree with Plotinus's generic remark that “the Intelligibles are not outside the Intellect” (ibid. 5.5 [32], 583). Levinas argues against this view since he believes that intelligibility is prior consciousness, will and freedom. It dwells between me and the eternal *a priori* responsibility for the Other. Levinas shows familiarity with Plotinus's texts, saying, “if you read the *Enneads*, the One doesn't even have consciousness of self, if it did have consciousness of self, it would already be multiple, as a loss of perfection. In knowledge, one is two, even when one is alone. Even when one assumes

the ‘duality of the One’ (τὸ “Ἐν ἐν δυσὶ ὑποστάσει), which influenced a number of medieval thinkers such as Augustine (354-430 AD), Maximus the Confessor (580-662 AD) Aquinas (1225-1274 AD), and Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109 AD), who brought questions about God and philosophy of religion into metaphysics.¹⁹ However, it was Martin Heidegger who first introduced onto-theology, a term unpacked in this chapter, into the philosophy of religion.²⁰ Specifically, this chapter analyses whether we can speak of God beyond and above onto-theology. Before diving into arguments regarding Levinas’s and Kierkegaard’s insights on God and our subjectivity as a response to God’s command, several terms must be defined.

By onto-theology,²¹ we mean the integration of thinking between beings *qua* beings and God. In short, onto-theology supports the radical replacement of religion, giving priority to consciousness and cognition as necessary and sufficient conditions to comprehend God. In Kant’s words, “ontotheology describes a kind of theology that aims to know something about the existence of God without recourse to scriptural or natural revelation through mere concepts of reason

consciousness of self, there is already a split.” See Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 112.

19 Concerning the philosophy of religion from ancient times to the twentieth century, see *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, 5 vols., ed. G. Oppy and N.N. Tsakakis (London and New York: Routledge 2013).

20 Immanuel Kant coined the term “onto-theology,” but it was Heidegger who introduced it to the context of the relation between theology and ontology. Kant remarks that the belief that one can actually “strive for a supposed contact with God” involves a “kind of madness.” See Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. A. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 169–70. In parallel, Heidegger points out that the onto-theological constitution of metaphysics brings God into philosophy, leaving to be answered the question of how the deity enters into philosophy. In Kantian thought, there is a return to onto-theology “in which it determines the idea of God where God is posited as the totality of reality.” See E. Levinas, *God, Death and Time* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 154.

21 One of the most “dangerous” pitfalls of onto-theology is the danger of “reducing God to another familiar object of our worldly experience which is a constant reality and threat in so much of theology and church life, often exploding into public life in the form of fundamentalism.” See A.K. Min, “Naming the Unnamable God: Levinas, Derrida and Marion,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60.3 (2006): 114.

alone.”²² By contrast, for Heidegger, “ontotheology is a critical term used to describe a putatively problematic approach to metaphysical theorizing”, something that, as Heidegger claims, “is characteristic of Western philosophy in general.”²³ Influenced by Western tradition, Heidegger “tries to turn existence into entities which can be understood and mastered through technological drive.”²⁴ According to Levinas, onto-theology “consists in thinking of God as a being and in thinking being on the basis of this superior or supreme being.”²⁵ Levinas considers onto-theology as a misleading theory since it “corrupts our thinking about God,” and thus we need to “think God without Being.”²⁶ From the moment that God came into philosophy, we can speak of onto-theology, in which world and being are always “apprehended and comprehended by thinking.”²⁷ According to Heidegger, “the comprehension of being in its truth was immediately covered over by its function as the universal foundation of beings, by a supreme being, a founder, by God. The thinking of being, being in its truth, becomes knowledge (*logos*) or comprehension of God: theology.”²⁸ However, when “being is immediately approached in the form of a foundation of beings, it comes to be named God”: this is onto-theology.²⁹ The more thinking and logic are developed, the more we

22 See M. Halteman, “Ontotheology,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, viewed 14 October 2019).

23 See S.R. Uttley, “‘Exorcising the Curse of Sisyphus’: English Catholic Education and the Possibility of Authenticity: A philosophical Study after Heidegger, Derrida, Lonergan and Boeve,” unpublished PhD thesis (Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University, 2016).

24 See S. Minister. and J. Murtha, “Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion,” *Philosophy Compass* 5.11 (2010): 1029.

25 See Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 160. Sometimes Levinas refers to God using Platonic terminology: The Good/God. Levinas claims that “the Good is, in spite of us” (M. Dimitrova, *In Levinas' Trace* [Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011], 42). By this statement he means that even if God exists, He does not exist as most people think, but it is impossible to comprehend (as beings) how God evaluates human situations and issues.

26 See note 16.

27 See, Levinas, *God, Time and Death*, 167.

28 *Ibid.*, 123.

29 *Ibid.*, 123. Several thinkers contend that Levinas does not intend to negate Heidegger's ontotheological insights entirely, but rather to recast them, since he himself inserted God into conversation as well, albeit within an extremely different framework: through the face-to-face relation. For instance, A. Peperzak claims that Levinas has no intention to reject or to ‘destroy’ Heidegger's thinking on ontotheology, but to criticize it as a “a manifestation

can speak of onto-theology. We can say that onto-theology is parallel to fundamental ontology.³⁰ The image of God alone cannot be construed without beings' power of comprehension. People throughout history did not have the power of comprehension because they lacked technology, and only in modern times, with modern technology, can they construe the image of God. Thus, onto-theology needs a neo-technological culmination of modernism in order to reveal itself. We can infer that, according to onto-theology, there is no God without beings and no beings without God. God as *Θεός*, the supreme infinite Being, is signified by beings, and beings are signified by God. In western (Anglo-Saxon) philosophy of religion, onto-theology is the mediator between God and beings (*όντα*) *qua* beings. The Heideggerian being is an impersonal power leading "to an account of history as impersonal destiny."³¹ The ethical stance of Levinas "is not an instrumental contract that the self of will to power [...] makes to defend itself against the other and to launch its self-aggrandizing onslaught on the freedom of the other,"³² but an infinite command of goodness.

Meaning,³³ in onto-theology, does necessarily have to be. Thought and comprehension are inseparable from meaning. To be

of the natural egoism which constitutes the elementary form of [immanent] life." See A. Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 10.

- 30 By choosing this mode of thinking, that is, by considering God with the power of knowledge and comprehension, we inevitably reduce God's essence into beings. This is a huge mistake, as God, according to Levinas, is irreducible to human knowledge and *Physics*. R. Scruton, in support of this thesis, notes that not only subjects but God is unrelated to objects and physical laws. It is only objects that follow these laws. This is the reason why Levinas prefers the term "humans" rather than "beings": "Look for them [i.e. subjects] in the world of objects and you will not find them. This is true of you and me; it is true too of God. *Physics* gives a complete explanation of the world of objects, for that is what "physics" means. God is not a hypothesis to be set beside the fundamental constants and the laws of quantum dynamics. Look for him in the world of objects and you will not find him." See R. Scruton, *The Face of God: The Gifford Lectures* (London: Continuum, 2012), 166. However, Levinas would have taken this a step further, clarifying that not only cannot God be understood by the laws of quantum physics, He cannot be understood directly by subjects either.
- 31 R. Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century* (London-New York: Routledge [kindle paperback edition], 2003), loc. 4733.
- 32 Ibid. loc. 4905.
- 33 Levinas gives proper attention to meaning in his work *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. B. Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 152-171.

meaningful is a necessary and sufficient condition for being. That is, being necessarily must confirm thought and knowledge. All these characteristics of fundamental ontology imply that we cannot speak of God outside the framework of onto-theology. However, ethical philosophers raise several objections to the arguments discussed above. For ethical thinking, in general, God must be understood (if we ever can understand God) beyond onto-theology.³⁴ What is more, according to Levinas, "it is from a certain ethical relationship that one may start out on this search."³⁵ Deriving from Plato's view that

34 This is a very interesting point that requires further consideration. Even Levinas, who vehemently rejects ontotheology, which gives priority to rationality and teleology of reason (see D.F. Courtney, "The Teleology of Freedom: The Structure of Moral Self-Consciousness in the Analytic," in *The Teleology of Reason: A Study of the Structure of Kant's Critical Philosophy* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014], 248-291), "apologizes" to God and to himself because even outside ontotheology, he attempts to speak about the Infinite (that is God) by expressing his thoughts and insights, even if he provides ethical implications. See Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. A. Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 30-50. For instance, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Levinas uses in the title the relative pronoun *who* (who comes to mind). Thus, even if he wants to provide arguments against ontotheology, he indirectly attributes human definitions to God since the relative pronoun *who* is referring to humans: men and women. In the second chapter of the above work he claims, "not to philosophize is still to philosophize" (*Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 55). Even if Levinas clearly rejects ontotheology by saying that the problem with ontotheology, that is finally a kind of rational theology, is that "in thematizing God [and attributing Him human conditions such as mind, voice, thinking, logic etc.] Theology has brought Him into the course of being" (*ibid.*), he himself admits that he is obliged by speech to express his opinion that there is no opinion about God. However, he claims that in saying that there is no opinion about God we are already expressing our opinion. This view is expressed by several thinkers who claim that Ontotheology is inseparable to God-talk and God-discussion in order to accept or raise questions about His essence and His relation to human beings. For instance, J.W. Robbins alleges that we cannot escape Ontotheology even though we do not accept it. Ontotheology together with the issue of death of God cannot be overcome in no way since they are necessary and sufficient condition for a possible God-talk. Inventing and using the term "God" in any science, we automatically adopt ontotheology as a subsidiary factor for a God-talk. "For, the endeavor at overcoming remains trapped within ontotheology, and what is worse, it confuses this trap as the problem when in fact it is the very clue needed for thinking otherwise." See J.W. Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 3.

35 See Levinas, *God, Time and Death*, 125.

“Good³⁶ [by which Levinas presumably means the divine supreme God] is beyond being,” Levinas builds up the structure of his “radical alterity.”³⁷ As he points out, there is an urgent need to distinguish philosophy from theology, for “to philosophy belongs being and to Theology there is faith, revelation and God.”³⁸

It is worth noting that even though this chapter analyses and compares Levinas’s and Kierkegaard’s views regarding God, and how beings are interrelated to God, we need to begin with Heidegger in order to better understand the vital role of Sameness and Otherness. Onto-theology gives priority to Sameness, tying logic to the relation between God and people. Thinking of God starts from beings and returns to the beings themselves. In this way, the Same presses the Other to be absorbed and return to Sameness, all the while without revealing itself. Thus, the Other depends on the Same, even while it is addicted and integrated into the latter. The Other, according to onto-theology, is trapped by the Same, unable to escape.³⁹ However, according to Levinas, Otherness is a separate version of one’s self which has never been adopted or absorbed by Sameness. In parallel, only through one’s relation to the Other can one find God:

To be oneself is already to know the fault I have committed with regard to the Other. But the fact that I do not quiz myself on the Other's rights paradoxically indicates that the Other is not a new edition of myself; in its Otherness it is situated in a dimension of

36 See below Levinas’s definition of Good: “The Good invests freedom - it loves me before I love it. Love is love in this antecedence. The Good could not be the term of a need susceptible of being satisfied, it is not the term of an erotic need, a relationship with the seductive which resembles the Good to the point of being indistinguishable from it, which is not its other, but its imitator. The Good as the infinite has no other, not because it would be the whole, but because it is Good and nothing escapes its goodness.” See E. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Netherlands: Springer, 1991), 187, n. 8.

37 See *ibid.*, 16; J. W. Robbins, “The Problem of Ontotheology: Complicating the Divine between Theology and Philosophy,” *The Heythrop Journal* 48 (2002): 142.

38 See J. W. Robbins, “The Problem of Ontotheology,” 147. Even though Levinas stops short of admitting that his work is theological, there are several similarities between his work and Karl Barth’s “theology of language,” especially when he tries to explain the notion of the Saying. See Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 147-170.

39 See Kearney ed., *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4790.

height, in the ideal, the Divine, and through my relation to the Other, I am in touch with God.

(Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 1)

Levinasian Prioritizing of Ethics as First Philosophy over Onto-Theology⁴⁰

It is [for Levinas] a question of attaining, via the royal road of ethics, the supreme being, the truly being [...]. And this being is man, determined as face in his essence as man on the basis of his resemblance to God. Is this not what Heidegger has in mind when he speaks of the unity of metaphysics, humanism and onto-theology? [...] 'The Other resembles God.' Man's substantiality, which permits him to be face, is thus founded in his resemblance to God, who is therefore both the Face and absolute substantiality.
(J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 142)

It is crucial to unpack the Levinasian notion of God outside the context of onto-theology. Before discussing Levinas's arguments concerning God and His relation to human beings, we have to understand why he considers ethics as first philosophy⁴¹ and how we can approach the relations among ethics, knowledge and philosophy of religion.

40 Several thinkers who study Levinas agree with this statement. Some of them, however, instead of ethics, use Levinas's phrase "Metaphysics precedes Ontology" to explain the differences between Heideggerian ontology and Levinasian ethics. See E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, tr. A. Lingis (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 42. For instance, J. Grondin maintains that, mistakenly, "driven by its will to power and its egoism, ontology is transformed into first philosophy". He continues with the observation that Levinas, "in order to combat [without infringing – as Levinas's intention is not to infringe on or entirely skip over Heidegger's ontology, but rather to put priorities between ontology and metaphysical ethics] its ontological imperialism proposes a terminological inversion: the primacy of the Same becomes that of the other, and ontology's primacy is transferred to ethics." See Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 244. Here Grondin analyses metaphysics as ethics and not as a science which investigates Being as Being nor as the fundamental ontological event of our existence.

41 That is to say, "Being only discovers itself by its being called [and not by its will] by the call [and not the will] of the other. Thus, before being comes responsibility, which implies a more originary origin than being itself." See Robbins, "The Problem of Ontotheology," 146.

Levinas, in his renowned article “Ethics as First Philosophy,”⁴² raises several objections against traditional classical knowledge, explaining that there are various disadvantages to the ontological basis behind knowledge which is explained by analytical thinkers merely as experience and apprehension. The problem, as he points out, is that the classical notion of knowledge starts from immanence: “The ideal of rationality begins to appear as the immanence of the real to reason.”⁴³ The problem Levinas observes can be traced to a mistaken approach to freedom of knowledge which, according to classical tradition, is *essentially* the inspiration for the mind where (Hegelian) wisdom of first philosophy is reduced to spirit as self-consciousness.”⁴⁴ “It is to be found in the concept of consciousness with the interpretation of *cogito* given by Descartes,”⁴⁵ something that has been described by Husserl as intentionality – “consciousness of something.”⁴⁶ Also, for Levinas, experience mistakenly expressed by western analytical thought as “collective and religious experience.”⁴⁷

42 R. Kearney and M. Rainwater (eds.), *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 124-135.

43 Ibid.

44 G.L. Aronoff, *Guilt, Persecution and Atonement: Moral Responsibility in Loewald and Lévinas* (unpublished PhD thesis, Concordia University Press, 2010), 148, n. 295.

45 See Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 125. It is important to consider briefly what is the main difference between Levinas and Descartes regarding their views on God, as both affirm the existence of God but within different metaphysical frameworks. Although Descartes admits that there is a God who is absolute and infinite, he “employs causal and ontological arguments to demonstrate that there is a God.” See R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London-New York: Routledge, 1988), 139. Levinas, who agrees with Descartes on several points, especially on the proposition that a subject has different thinking of his self and different thinking of his finitude, as well as the belief that “infinity is the positive notion in terms of which the notion of man’s finitude is understood” (ibid., 142) underlines that one major difference with Descartes is that Levinas does not care to provide ratiocinative arguments on what it is to be God because we cannot say what God is at all. At this point I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, who patiently gave me specific directions on how I can reflect Levinas’s terminology on God, *illegitimacy* and transcendence, as well as differentiating Levinas’s perspective on God from other thinkers who, while admitting the existence of God, try to explain His existence with rational exegesis, something that Levinas sees as absolute madness, maintaining that we cannot compare or think of infinity with our finite mind.

46 R. Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 125.

47 Ibid.

Levinas argues that Husserl's claims concerning intentionality and self-consciousness are based on a faulty foundation.⁴⁸ According to Husserl, "knowledge is a 'filling out' that gratifies a longing for the being as object causing the world to be rediscovered as *noema*,"⁴⁹ where self-consciousness is a necessary and sufficient condition of knowledge. As Husserl points out, "All acts generally — even the acts of feeling and will — are 'objectifying' acts, original factors in the 'constituting' of objects, the necessary sources of different regions of being and of the ontologies that belong therewith."⁵⁰ For Levinas, "reduced consciousness rediscovers and masters its own acts of perception and science as objects affirming itself as self-consciousness and remains a *non-intentional* consciousness of itself."⁵¹

48 Levinas agrees with the Husserlian dyadic relationship as a fundamental locus of concern and responsibility. He also admits that his philosophical thinking on the 'Other' derived from Husserl's idea that "the Other is the condition of correctness of my world and that each transcendence, including the transcendence of the outer world, exists for me and is comprehensible to me only by virtue of the transcendence of the Other." However, for Husserl, "both the Other and Transcendence are constituted in my immanence, whereas Levinas refuses to consider the Other as my *Alter Ego*" (See Dimitrova, *In Levinas' Trace*, 19-20). The Other calls me, teaches me how to transcend my potential into Infinity. Thus, I cannot escape responsibility and morality, which precede both my freedom and my decisions against my neighbor. In parallel, a second major problem with Husserlian phenomenology of the Other, as Levinas claims, is that Husserl insists on the fact that the relation to the human Other be understood as a relation of knowledge; in fact, Levinas argues, the Other can be understood as a relation of being: "our intuitive grasp of the other depicts him or her as a center of intentionality and hence as *alter ego*, as a sensuous-conscious subject" (See H. Jodalen and J. Vetlesen [eds.], *Closeness: An Ethics* [Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997], 5). Levinas discusses Husserl's view on intentionality of consciousness and his method of Intuition by inferring that they provide an overall evaluation of phenomenology: noesis-noemata are revealed through the horizon of intentionality of consciousness, that is, the latter is inseparable from the former. See E. Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. A. Orianne (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 37-52 and 65-96. However, for Levinas, both terms lack an ethical standpoint. Levinas argues that we need to take a step forward, from intuition of essence to the philosophical intuition of existence: "Philosophical intuition must not be more directly characterized without mentioning the phenomenological reduction which introduces into the realm of phenomenology" (*ibid.*, 135).

49 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 127.

50 E. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R.B. Dixon (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), section 117.

51 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 127.

Thus, Levinas suggests “a consciousness of consciousness, indirect, implicit and aimless without any initiative that might refer back to an ego.”⁵²

Levinas also discusses another term, duration. By duration, Levinas means “a consciousness that signifies not so much a knowledge of oneself as something that effaces presence or make it discreet.”⁵³ This duration in phenomenological analysis remains “free from the sway of the will,”⁵⁴ and the most crucial thing is that which continues to be “absolutely outside all activity of the ego.”⁵⁵

Levinas thus initiates, in contrast to Husserl, not an ontological but a transcendental phenomenology of the face where “the proximity of the other is the face’s meaning” – there is a “face to face steadfast.”⁵⁶ In contrast to the classical notion of knowledge, Levinas argues that (ethical) knowledge lies in the Other “prior to any knowledge.”⁵⁷

The Other (*l’Autre*) thus presents itself as human Other (*Autrui*); it shows a face and opens the dimension of height, that is to say, it infinitely overflows the bounds of knowledge. Positively, this means that the Other puts in question the freedom which attempts to invest it; the Other lays him – or herself bare to the total negation of murder but forbids it through the original language of his defenseless eyes

(Levinas, *Transcendence and Height*, 12).

52 Ibid., 127.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 130. I would agree with Grondin’s claim that “the Other is always a face, which can never be reduced to an idea I may have of it.” See Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 244-245. This statement can be justified if we look carefully at Levinas’s phrase: “the way in which the other presents itself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me, we here name *face*.” See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50. For Levinas, in parallel, “the Other, *Autrui*, is not simply an *alter ego*, an *appresented* analogue of myself. He and I are not equals, citizens in an intelligible kingdom of ends...There is between us, an absolute difference. The Other is he to whom and in virtue of whom I am subject, with a subjectivity that is heteronomy, not autonomy, and hetero-affection, not auto-affection. The Other is not the object of my concern and solicitude.” See Bernasconi and Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas*, 140.

57 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 130.

To answer another crucial question concerning the relation between Christian ethics⁵⁸ and Levinas's ethics, for Levinas, the Other becomes my neighbor, not in the same manner as the Christian dictum 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' but through a primordial concern about the Other, that is, "the Other becomes my neighbor precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility and calls me into question."⁵⁹ For Levinas, responsibility exceeds the notion of Being as we know it in the Heideggerian *Being and Time*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* or in other contemporary thinkers.⁶⁰ Being according to Levinas is of less worth than people's relations to each other. Responsibility is beyond being and beyond being's immanence.

Responsibility goes beyond being. In sincerity, in frankness, in the veracity of this saying, in the uncoveredness of suffering, being is altered. But this saying remains, in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice

58 Even though there are hundreds of discrepancies between Christian ethics and Levinas's ethics, Christian thought derives several principles and aspects from Levinas's thought. See specifically A. Peperzak, "The Significance of Levinas's Work for Christian Work," in J. Bleochl (ed.), *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 184-99. One of the most crucial discrepancies between Levinas and Kierkegaard is the term *kenosis*, that is, abandoning everything and everyone for the sake of the Other. This term is explored in particular by Kierkegaard's Christology. See D.R. Law, *Kierkegaard's Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). 64-153.

59 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 131.

60 For instance, in Descartes the self is the *I* of the *cogito* (*cogito ergo sum*); the center of consciousness leading to self-awareness and intentionality. In Spinoza and several analytic philosophers, *being* is enriched by additional emotions, desires, autonomy and freedom as well as second-order volitions, something that it lacks in animals. In Hume, the character of beings is like a container of ideas and expression that are expressed in language and self-consciousness. With Husserl the being is embedded in the world within a noematic-noetic framework explored as intentionality. In Heidegger this embeddedness in the world is mainly practical and emotional, with being's attributes and conditions returning to itself. And finally, with Hegel, being is totalized and thematized, taking its power and consciousness to its core and depending on its interiority. With Hegel's notion of the self, history ends. "Hegel explicated the progress of reason in history that coincides with God's self-development toward absolute consciousness. Thus, for him, God becomes Absolute Reason or *Geist*, the totality of reality." See R. Urbano, "Approaching the Divine: Levinas on God, Religion, Idolatry and Atheism," *Logos* 15.1 (2012): 66.

without reserve, without holding back, and in this non-voluntary – the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage, but possibly elected by the Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one.

(E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 15)

Despite the fact that Levinas agrees with Sartre's expression of "existence precedes essence," he provides a different notion of freedom⁶¹ and responsibility from that of Sartre's "sincerity."⁶² Levinas contends that responsibility matters if and only if it goes beyond one's commitment to the Other, before being devoted to oneself, even before being. In short, for Levinas, ethics precedes ontology,⁶³ and

61 According to Levinas, freedom is a characteristic that is misused, especially in Western contemporary philosophy. By necessity it is related to human rights and free will. If I have freedom, I am free to express my opinion without any coercion. However, Levinas provides a different view on "Westernized" freedom, which is relevant solely to reason and power: "In a civilization which the philosophy of the same reflects, freedom is realized as a wealth. Reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power" (Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 50).

62 Concerning similarities and discrepancies between Levinas and Sartre on God, subjectivity and politics, see C. Howells, "Sartre and Levinas," in Bernasconi and Wood (eds.) *The Provocation of Levinas*, 91-99. The most profound discrepancy between Levinas and Sartre is that the latter, in his work *Being and Nothingness*, as an Atheist, prefers the Greek model of knowing, in which he contends that the encounter between the *I* and the other person is an event of cognition, where selfhood becomes another piece of "furniture" in a mere procedure of intentional objects. See J-P Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H.E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 344-58). On the contrary, Levinas, as a Jew, comes from the Biblical tradition where the Other is quite relevant and important to ethical subjectivity of the pace of my life. The Other appears as a "naked image" where she eternally seeks me to heal her wounds. As G.L. Bruns correctly puts it, "for Levinas, the ethical subject is defined by a responsibility that is *prior* to any rational deliberation executive decision; it is an anarchic responsibility prior to the kind of commitments that rational subjects [...] know how to contract or refuse or hedge with loopholes and provisos." See G.L. Bruns., "On the Coherence of Hermeneutics and Ethics: An Essay on Gadamer and Levinas," in B. Krajewski (ed.), *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics* (California: California University Press, 2004), 34.

63 As M. Ruti correctly states, "this [relational] way of envisioning subjectivity is one reason that Levinasian phenomenology has played such a crucial role in recent ethical theory, for Levinas sought to understand precisely what it means to proceed from ethics to ontology rather than the other way around." See M.

transcendence⁶⁴ precedes immanence.⁶⁵ In contrast to Sartre, responsibility for Levinas is “stemming from a time before my freedom”.⁶⁶ It is the excellence of ethical proximity⁶⁷ — before any

Ruti, *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, Other, Ethics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 2.

64 According to Levinas, “the transcendence of God is his actual effacement, but this obligates us to men.” See W. Large, “The Name of God: Kripke, Levinas and Rozenzweig on Proper Names,” *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology* 44.3 (2013): 331.

65 At this point, I raise objections to those who believe that there are two different meanings of the Other in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*. For instance, Large insists that immanence is related to transcendence, and that there would not have been transcendence without first analyze immanence. And this is necessary and sufficient condition to understand both God and human beings. See William Large, “The Two Meanings of the Other in Lévinas' *Totality and Infinity*,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 42 (2011): 243-254. Large claims that “the other meaning, which is much less well-known, but which I believe is its true meaning, is the Other of immanence and interiority” (ibid., 243). Levinas, however, makes it clear in his work *Entre Nous* what he means by asymmetrical relationship: “The relationship from me to the other is thus asymmetrical, without noematic correlation of any thematizable presence. An awakening to the other man, which is not knowledge” (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 168). Thus, from my point of view, immanence has nothing to do with ethical transcendence, as the former is about rational beings and knowledge, and the latter about infinite God. They cannot be related to or considered together. Immanence, as an ontological term, deals with beings *qua* beings and knowledge of beings. Transcendence, as an ethical term, deals with God. I agree with A. Kin, who notes that for Levinas, “it is especially the encounter of a particular kind of Other, the hungry, that shakes up our ordinary ontotheological consciousness in its complacency, closure, and arrogance, break the circle of immanence that imprisons us in mystification, deception, and ideology, and open a break or fissure in the epic of being in the direction of the beyond where another mode of transcendence can appear” (Kin 2006: 101). I would also agree with Grondin's statement that for Levinas, all ontological thought is one of immanence, of the same present in all individuals, leveling over differences. But [on the other hand metaphysical [ethical] thought is one that discovers the transcendence of the Other which exceeds all my effort to understand it” (Grondin, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 244).

66 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 131.

67 Proximity is a crucial term in Levinas's thought. It is related to sensibility in accordance with the matter of surprise. It has nothing to do with knowledge and cognition since it strives to get to know the other not through experience but mainly as a trace. Levinas states that sensibility “is itself exposed to alterity [...] is the *for-the-other* of one's own materiality; it is the immediacy or the proximity of the other [...] a relation not of knowing but of proximity,” where the latter is defined as an “anarchic relationship with a singularity without the mediation of any principle, any ideality” (Levinas *Otherwise Than Being*, xxvi, 74, 100).

present. The most crucial and vital difference between Levinas and Sartre (and the above Christian dictum) is that, for Levinas, “responsibility for my neighbor dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past [...] to which nothing in the rigorously ontological order binds me [...] an immemorial freedom that is even older than being.”⁶⁸

Though Levinas started his philosophical thought from phenomenology, he abandoned the Husserlian observation of beings that focused mainly on a metaphysical transcendence of what he calls “Ethics as first philosophy”.⁶⁹ For Levinas, philosophy of the Other echoes to infinity and the idea of the divine Other, whether or not this Other is God or the other person. However, Levinas insists that we can only see God and communicate with Him through his trace, that is, the promise of openness to the other. R. Urbano correctly states that for Levinas, “God is disclosed to man at the moment the person responds to the call of the Other. This responsibility for the Other attests to the presence of God.”⁷⁰ However, I would add that this “presence” must be considered as indirect, since God’s presence is impossible to our finite minds. “This is why the face, in contrast to Hegel, is primordial and irreducible and it cannot be totalized, as the infinite, i.e. God comes to epiphany there.”⁷¹ What matters at all for Levinas is not onto-theology but “the vulnerability of the eye of the other,”⁷² who commands you “Thou shalt not kill.”

The first word of the face is “Thou shalt not kill.” It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a “first person” I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.

(Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 89)

Responsibility for the other – the face signifying to me “thou shalt not kill,” and consequently also you are responsible for the life of this absolutely other – is responsibility for the one and

68 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 131-32. For a study of immense importance concerning the immemorial time, see Dimitrova, *In Levinas’ Trace*, 37-48.

69 Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4718.

70 Urbano, “Approaching the Divine,” 59.

71 Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4902.

72 *Ibid.*, 4902.

only. The one and only means the loved one, love being the condition of the very possibility of uniqueness [...] The alterity of the other is the extreme point of the "thou shalt not kill" and, in me, the fear of all the violence and usurpation that my existing, despite the innocence of its intentions, risks committing.

(Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 168-169)

According to Levinas, "to separate God from onto-theology" is to reexamine the notion of meaning.⁷³ As Levinas states (alongside several postmodernist French thinkers such as Derrida⁷⁴ and Jean-Luc Marion),⁷⁵ in order to escape from onto-theology and its quasi-

73 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 127.

74 Concerning similarities and discrepancies between Levinas and Derrida, see J.D. Caputo, "Adieu-sans Dieu: Derrida and Levinas," in Bloechl (ed.) *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 276-312. A variety of secondary literature is dedicated to discussions on God, infinity, metaphysics and selfhood between Levinas and Derrida (Baird, "Whose *Kenosis*?" 423-37; R. Bernasconi, "'Only the Persecuted': Language of the Oppressor, Language of the Oppressed," in A. Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1995), 77-86; idem, "Levinas and Derrida: The Question of the Closure of Metaphysics," in R.A. Cohen (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas* (New York: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1986), 181-202; D. Boothroyd, "Off the Record: Levinas, Derrida and the Secret of Responsibility," *Theory Culture and Society* 28 (2011): 41-59; A.K. Min, "Naming the Unnamable God: Levinas, Derrida and Marion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 60.3 (2006): 99-116; M. Papastephanou, "Onto-Theology and the Incrimination of Ontology in Levinas and Derrida," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31.4 (2005): 461-485; H. Zaborowski, "On Freedom and Responsibility: Remarks on Sartre, Levinas and Derrida," *The Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000): 147-165.

75 Derrida and Marion also raise several objections concerning the God of onto-theology. For instance, Marion claims that "the God of ontotheology is only an idol." See J-L Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. T.A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); idem, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. T.A. Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). However, Marion applied a different theoretical framework in discussing the philosophy of the other and selfhood, criticizing Levinas that he did not escape from ontology (or ontotheology) even if he provided an alternative to the phenomenology of Husserl's egology and Heidegger's Ontotheology. On this issue, see C.M. Gschwandtner, "The Neighbor and the Infinite: Marion and Levinas on the Encounter between Self, Human Other, and God," *Continental Philosophical Review* 40 (2007): 231-249, esp. 233-37, where Marion expounds a vehement critique of Levinas's endeavor to destroy the self by giving absolute dominance to the other. Gschwandtner on p. 234 cites Marion's phrase that Levinas's "[insistent] sincerity phenomenologically destroys the terms of the ontological difference," imposing such a dramatic reduction of the Self that it is placed in danger of elimination. For Marion, therefore, this "obedience to the ethical

immanent characteristics, we need to decenter the subject from fundamental ontology and take into consideration “forms of thought different from intentionality.”⁷⁶ Levinas observes that “to think God outside of onto-theology [is] to think no longer on the basis of positivity.”⁷⁷ Otherness must be separated from Sameness so that the former is not continuously absorbed by the latter. In this way, ethical relationship is no longer subjugated by onto-theology or “from the thinking of being”.⁷⁸ Levinas calls for reconsidering knowledge and the manifestation of thinking beings. Unlike the Greeks, who categorized knowledge within a tautological framework, Levinas considers that meaning does not need manifestation of being; i.e. not merely to be, but to *become*, since Levinas does not want to erase or reject being (ontology), but he insists on giving priority to the ethical term *becoming*, where the “I,” as subject, needs the Other to become. Levinas raises objections to the onto-theological idea which prioritizes a power of being that invites God to come to our minds through logic and comprehension. Levinas opposes this concept with a metaphysics of the good and the face-to-face intersubjective relationship⁷⁹ “wherein a nameless universal Being does not have final sway.”⁸⁰ Levinas sees Heideggerian ontology as an “ontology of power which is tempted to relate to the other by murder.”⁸¹ Instead,

infinite would identify, in the new phenomenological reduction, he who oversteps the ontological difference” (ibid.). Thus, for Marion, this insistence in Levinasian ethics that “the self is defined by its responsibility to the neighbor who is always prior to the self” (ibid., 243), increases the danger of Self’s elimination.

76 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 149.

77 Ibid., 167.

78 Ibid., 127.

79 Even though Levinas’s concept of the face-to-face relationship derives from Husserl and Heidegger (his predecessors and mentors), it has nothing to do with reciprocal and symmetrical intersubjectivity (Dimitrova, *In Levinas’ Trace*, 27). We may assume that Husserl’s phenomenology is an ontology, and Heidegger’s fundamental ontology is a phenomenology, both trying to thoroughly analyze the Greek term *physical*. Levinas contends that he has taken a step forward, proposing that the main topic of his thinking is metaphysical. As J. Llewellyn correctly infers in his article “Levinas, Derrida and Others Vis-à-Vis,” in Bernasconi and Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas*, 136: “It is metaphysical because it is ethical. And it is ethical not because he aims to present a code or a metaphysics of ethics.” Llewellyn also adds that “ethical is older than justice... [and] prior to all structures of being-with” (ibid., 137).

80 Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4737.

81 Ibid., loc. 4759.

Levinas proposes a different dialectic, focused on defending the ethical community of the other. Levinas insists on the phrase 'thou shalt not commit no murder':

To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension absolutely. Murder exercises a power over what escapes power. It is still a power, for the face expresses itself in the sensible, but already impotency, because the face rends the sensible. The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique 'matter' possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely, and therefore does not oppose them but paralyzes the very power of power. The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.
(Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198)

However, killing in Levinas's work is not real or pragmatist but ethical. He is not interested in criminology or facts related to the penal system. Levinas focuses on the ethical crime of the Other:

If the resistance to murder were not ethical but real, we would have a perception of it, with all that reverts to the subjective in perception. We would remain within the idealism of a consciousness of struggle, and not in relationship with the Other, a relationship that can turn into struggle, but already overflows the consciousness of struggle. The epiphany of the face is ethical. The struggle this face can threaten presupposes the transcendence of expression.

(E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199)

Ethically speaking, Levinas claims that we need to escape onto-theology by reconsidering meaning. However, the question that demands further consideration is this: How can we approach meaning without infringing on it in order to speak of God outside of onto-theology? In analytic philosophy, a number of thinkers give priority to immanence where meaning seems to be *doxic*, expressing a logical exposition. In the Western tradition, logical thinking is fundamental, characterized by the verb 'to be.' Everything which is logical, *thetic* and analytical posits itself as reflecting to immanence and is in itself presence, therefore revealing onto-theology. This tradition derives from the Greeks, who focused on profound and fundamental experience, bringing God into onto-theology through a logical being

qua being. The meaning of philosophical thought is drawn from *cosmos*. In Heidegger, the Same, which is the rational and the meaningful, is what really matters.⁸²

Levinas, on the other hand, tries to manifest whether Ethics is a necessary and sufficient condition to justify God outside onto-theology. The answer is yes, if and only if we find a means to speak about meaning “without reference to the world, to being, to knowledge, to the Same.”⁸³ Ethics can provide this means, signifying a *transcendence* that would not be interpreted with analytical, *thetic* and *doxic* arguments in presence. Levinas considers the possibility, “to transcend oneself toward the other, to go from the Same to the Other without the Other being absorbed and adopted by the Same. If the same can contain the Other then the Same has triumphed over the Other.”⁸⁴ However, Levinas contends that if transcendence is focused on appropriation (as Husserl claimed), it remains phenomenological immanence. The in-itself indicates the triumphant truth of the Same over the Other, suppressing all ethical transcendence.⁸⁵ For Levinas,

82 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 135.

83 Ibid., 137.

84 Ibid., 141.

85 It is worth noting that for Levinas there are two different views of subjective truth: (a) the triumphant truth and (b) the persecuted truth. Both terms are invented and discussed by Kierkegaard, as Levinas notes in his work *Proper Names*, ch. 8: “Kierkegaard: Existence and Ethics,” 1996b, pp. 66-74. Levinas explains that the triumphant truth, as Kierkegaard calls it, derives from idealism, and especially from the Hegelian dialectic of egocentric orientation of the subject. Truth triumphs, as Hegel explains, by “letting the human subject be absorbed by the Being that this subject uncovered. Idealism claimed that the unfolding of Being by thought allowed the subject to rise above itself and hand over its last secrets to Reason” (ibid. 66). This line of thought, in brief, culminates in the triumph of absolute Being and Reason, which both empower the self to be nominated as the core center of meaning and all reality. The self is universal and alone controls and commands everything through totalization and apprehension of Being: “Being was the correlate of thought” (ibid., 67). On the other hand, Levinas credits Kierkegaard’s contribution in presenting a counter-argument against the above idealistic proposition. He proposes that subjectivity is irreducible to objective being (ibid., 68). Hence, truth must not be considered as a triumphant perfect realization of Being which totalizes experience, but as a “belief linked to a truth that suffers” (ibid., 69): as truth persecuted. By persecution, Kierkegaard means that “it is through suffering truth that one can describe the very manifestation of the divine: simultaneity of All and Nothingness, Relation to a Person both present and absent -- to a humiliated God who suffers, dies and leaves those whom he saves in despair. A certainty that coexists with an absolute uncertainty-to the point that one may

the phenomenon of transcendence (of the infinite) is based on "the responsibility of the neighbor," an aimless meaning without vision.⁸⁶ Levinasian ethics gives priority not to *doxic* ontological criteria but to paradoxical transcendence toward the Other and not toward the Self. Levinas strongly favored the subversion of phenomenological immanence, turning to the phenomenon of enjoyment which does not credit "self-constituting or the primacy of the same over the other" but rather "the privilege of the other over the self."⁸⁷ For Levinas, "paradox inscribes the glory of the infinite in the relationship called intersubjective."⁸⁸ Hence, Levinas states that we can speak of God escaping onto-theology if and only if the Other as a nonthematizable, invisible interlocutor reveals prior freedom and essence in our intersubjective self. Ethics cannot be interpreted as knowledge of being and comprehension; instead, it is the relationship between me and the other, the neighbor. However, in contrast to the Christian Triadic God,⁸⁹ the neighbor comes to me first without any

wonder whether that Revelation itself is not contrary to the essence of that crucified truth, whether God's suffering and the lack of recognition of the truth would not reach their highest degree in a total *incognito*" (ibid., 69). However, Levinas notes a problematic point in Kierkegaard's discussion of the distinction between triumphant and persecuted truth. He contends that Kierkegaard's contribution to existential philosophy and his correct critique on Hegel and Idealism leaves out something crucial: responsibility. Levinas underlines that "[True] Subjectivity is in that responsibility and only irreducible subjectivity can assume a responsibility. That is what constitutes the ethical. To be myself means, then, to be unable to escape responsibility" (ibid., 73), an idea that is marginal in Kierkegaard's thought. Thus, persecuted truth for Levinas starts from Kierkegaard but ends with responsibility for the Other who chases me, eternally driving me into infinity. And the Other "is the poor, the destitute, and nothing about that Stranger can be indifferent to it [...] and I am responsible for the very one who commands me." (ibid., 74).

86 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 142.

87 Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4815, 4819.

88 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 162.

89 Levinas would strongly reject views such as: "the clearest personal expression of religion and the view of God as Trinity (Τριάς) exists in the relations that make us persons [...] The search for meaning in Christian spirituality is enacted primarily by entering into relationship with Christ and the Blessed Trinity [...] God the Father corresponds to our carbon relations because the Father is the creator of the carbon universe" (K.A. Bryson, "The Ways of Spirituality," *Sophia Philosophical Review* X.2 (2017): 11). Such a direct communication with God reduces God to our minds and therefore we then speak of onto-theology. For Levinas, the 'face of God' is irreducible to finite human beings. The structure of spirituality depends neither on rational theology (as in several Christian

specific criteria or preconditions. Levinasian ethics is beyond freedom and essence; rather, it is about responsibility and reciprocal authenticity. Ethical relationship is a responsibility for the other. “It is not a disclosure of something given but the exposure of the me to another, prior to any decision.”⁹⁰ In parallel Levinas states that ethical relationship, in contrast to onto-theology, is “a responsibility that obsesses, one that is an obsession, for the other besieges me, to the point where he puts in question my for-me, my in-itself, to the point where he makes me a hostage.”⁹¹ Thus we can infer that autonomy, in Levinas’s view, can be marginalized. What matters in this sense is heteronomy.⁹² The latter is ultimate the former is not, as

doctrines such as Catholics and Protestants) nor on ascetic contemplation (i.e., Orthodoxy). For Levinas, when the Holy is reduced to the Sacred, we are left with idolatry and rational theology which are both unacceptable. See Levinas, Part II: “Transcendence, Idolatry and Secularization,” in his work *God, Death and Time*, 163-66.

90 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 187.

91 Ibid., 138. The term ‘hostage’ is mistakenly construed by some thinkers as they confuse it with the modern term prisoner or being taken violently by someone, i.e. slavery or servitude. By saying that ‘I am eternally hostage toward the Other’, Levinas means that responsibility precedes freedom and autonomy: “a responsibility that obsesses, one that is an obsession, for the other besieges me, to the point he makes me a hostage” (ibid.). As Saracino correctly underlines, “as hostage for-the-Other, the subject is called to care for the Other in non-totalizing ways, that is, by the way of gestures of justice, generosity and sacrifice” (M. Saracino, *On Being Human: A Conversation with Lonergan and Levinas* [Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003], 96).

92 Concerning the difference between autonomy and heteronomy, Levinas gives priority to heteronomy: he states that “subjectivity, as responsible, is a subjectivity which is commanded at the outset; heteronomy is somehow stronger than autonomy here, except that this heteronomy is not slavery, is not bondage [...] The responsibility for the other comes from the hither side of my freedom” (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 111, 114). See further comments in A. Strhan, *Levinas, Subjectivity, Education*, 2012, 73-94. J. Raz, in addition, defines autonomy by claiming that “the autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives” (J. Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986], 369). For Levinas, this statement would be correct to define autonomy, but lacks ethical content. If the autonomous person is the author of his life, controlling his own destiny, egology and ontology appear to a high degree. If all my thought is focused on how to build and maintain my personal pursuit of happiness above all, this is for Levinas Ontology. Autonomy produces an equal-to-thought status (Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 180) whereas the Other is inevitably marginalized for the sake of self-interest and

heteronomous ethics is assumed in infinite responsibility. In parallel, *eros* and *agape* (love)⁹³ are “breaking out of monadism and the egocentric predicament, where the self *agapeically* goes towards the other as other.”⁹⁴ The self is for the other and not the other for the self. In this sense, difference or *différance*⁹⁵ of the other as hostage⁹⁶ gives priority to religion and ethics to speak of God outside onto-theology, since the I (ὁ ὢν) depends on the Other as an interlocutor, and not the Other on the I. Thus the I, according to Levinas, must be transformed into the accusative case: “me.” “Me” needs someone else in order to exist; it cannot be alone. “Me” (in accusative case)⁹⁷ needs

Sameness. Levinas develops his thought concerning autonomy and its integration into reason in his work *Entre Nous*, ch. 15: “Uniqueness,” 190-91.

93 When Levinas was asked about the difference between Eros/love and *Agape*, he confessed: “I do not think that *Agape* comes from Eros [...] Eros is definitely not *Agape*, that *Agape* is neither a derivative nor the extinction of love-Eros. Before Eros there was the Face; Eros itself is possible only between Faces. The problem of Eros is philosophical and concerns otherness [...] I have a grave view of *Agape* in terms of responsibility for the other” (Levinas *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 113). Eros has a dramatic nostalgia which remains to presence. Levinas contends that love as *agape* has more ethical and metaphysical repercussions. For Levinas, “love [as *agape*] desires not a nostalgic return to stasis but reaches out instead towards the other and ultimately towards a future: the impossibility or failure of fusion is the very positivity of love” (S. Sandford, *The Metaphysics of Love: Gender and Transcendence in Levinas* [London: The Athlone Press, 2000], 97).

94 Kearney (ed.), *Continental Philosophy in the 20th Century*, loc. 4924, 4932. Concerning the phenomenology of Eros, see P. Moyaert, “The Phenomenology of Eros: A Reading of Totality and Infinity,” in Bloechl (ed.) *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 30-42.

95 The term *différance* is developed by J. Derrida and it is adopted also by Levinas in order to explain the importance of transcendence over immanence. In deconstruction and post-modern philosophy, according to Derrida, subject must be decentered and must be replaced by intersubjective conditions beyond knowledge and logic. Differ, according to Derrida, means to differ from itself. For Derrida, *différance* is not an analytical concept or even a word. It is not what we represent to ourselves as beings. “It is the nonfull, nonsimple origin: it is the structured and differing origin of differences” (Kearney and Rainwater [eds.], *Continental Philosophy Reader*, 449). “It is a trace of something that can never present itself; It is a trace that lies beyond what profoundly ties fundamental ontology to phenomenology” (ibid., 459). Levinas insists that in this way we can speak of God outside onto-theology.

96 As Levinas states, “for all eternity, the *I* were the first one called to this responsibility; non-transferable and thus unique, thus *I*, the chosen hostage, the chosen one. An ethics of the meeting—sociality. For all eternity, one man is answerable for another” (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 227).

97 Levinas writes, “Everything is from the start in the accusative. Such is the exceptional condition or unconditionality of the self, the signification of the

the Other as an equal interlocutor⁹⁸ in order to be meaningful. According to Levinas, “pre-reflective, non-intentional consciousness would never be able to return to a moral realization of this passivity. The non-intentional is from the start passivity and the accusative [is] its first case (me and not I).”⁹⁹ One must speak in me and not in I. As Blaise Pascal observes, the I is “hateful”;¹⁰⁰ “one has to respond to one’s right to be.”¹⁰¹ We can assume that Levinas is in favor of a transcendence, in the sense of “the awaiting without something awaited.”¹⁰² Such a transcendence “without aiming and without vision” tends to speak of God or to see God outside onto-theology.¹⁰³

In this sub-chapter, I do not intend to delve into the ontological sphere. Rather, I seek to explain Levinas’s ethics through criticism of fundamental ontology and onto-theology. In ethics, as Levinas observes, the concept of the ontological “I” urgently needs to be changed to the accusative case “me”; and as Levinas states, “no one could replace me.”¹⁰⁴ An ethical *I-Thou* relationship, as well as the relationship between an individual and God, needs not to be systematized. Instead, each one relates to the other through responsibility. However, a relation between two people is direct, while the relation between a human and God is indirect. According to Levinas, “the absolutely other is the Other (Autrui). He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say you or we is not a plural of the I. I, you - these are not individuals of a common concept [...] Alterity is possible only starting from me [and not from “I” or ego].”¹⁰⁵

pronoun self for which our Latin grammars themselves know no nominative form.” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 112).

98 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 4-9. By the term “ethical interlocutor,” I do not mean a procedure where the other will be absorbed by sameness. Dialogue and equal response in Levinasian ethics is not the same as the connection of *parole* and *langue* to language. In Levinas’s ethics, by saying that the other must be equal interlocutor we mean that the Same allows the Other to show her otherness in an equal procedure without coercion, [Hegelian] power or [Husserlian] noematic-horizontal intentionality.

99 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 129.

100 B. Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1958), Part I, 1, 2, c. 1, section 4.[44], v. 455.

101 Kearney and Rainwater (eds.), *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 130.

102 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 139.

103 *Ibid.*, 139.

104 *Ibid.*, 152.

105 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39-40.

The "Holiness of the Holy": Otherness Precedes Asceticism

Levinas speaks about the Other in the context of the "ethics of holiness." The holy is a significant concept in Levinas's thought. Derrida reports a short conversation with Levinas where the latter said: "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy."¹⁰⁶ The idea of sanctity or holiness has not often been discussed by scholars interested in Levinasian ethics.¹⁰⁷ Yet throughout his works, Levinas insists on distinguishing the holy from the sacred.¹⁰⁸ In his usage, the term "holiness" is similar to "desacralization." His intention was to deconstruct the meaning of the term "sacred," since he saw it as reduced to mystical theology, something unacceptable in his eyes.¹⁰⁹ Levinas criticizes several

106 J. Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. P-A., Brault and M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

107 Two articles of immense importance on Levinas's interest in sanctity can be found in J. Hansel, "Utopia and Reality: The Concept of Sanctity in Kant and Levinas," *Philosophy Today* 43.2 (1999): 168-75 and J. Caruana, "Levinas's Critique of the Sacred," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 42.4 (2002) 519-34. For Levinas, sanctity has an allegoric meaning and has nothing to do with idolatry. Levinas integrates the concept of sanctity with death. As he himself mentions, sanctity appears metaphysically and ethically when "the death of the other can have priority over my own death," precisely when "the death of the other matters more than my own." Thus we can call this procedure sanctity, which derives from biblical ethical law (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbGaXEqxSvU>: 46:40-47:04).

108 Levinas rejects the notion of religion as sacred for the same reason that he abhors mysticism. Both terms support immanence and ignore the direct separation of God and humans.

109 For Levinas, God is neither an idea nor a being, not because there is a kind of mystical knowledge that we (as humans) do not have the rational ability to surpass, but mainly because there is a "brick wall" between me as a finite human and God as infinite transcendence. Beyond this wall there is something I cannot think of, I cannot see, because of my "personal stupidity" (Large, "The Name of God: Kripke, Levinas and Rozenweig on Proper Names," 322). However, when Large says "stupidity," he does not mean that humans are stupid or disabled, but he means that humans' rational and finitude *logos* cannot explain what it is to be God because they are of different essences. According to Large, there are three possible ways to think of God: as an idea, as a being or as a word. He then claims that the first two alternatives for Levinas are impossible since God is transcendence and cannot be reduced to immanence. However, according to Large, Levinas accepts the fact that God can be named as a word. It would seem quite absurd to allege that God is a word, but what Large means by the phrase "God is a word" is that God is a name and not a description. In

sociologists who were unable to distinguish between the notions *le sacré* and *le saint*.¹¹⁰ Additionally, he refers to Plato¹¹¹ in order to show that holiness is of immense importance for ethics, not as a theological term but as an ethical one.¹¹² Levinas defends the thesis that the sacred, as well as mysticism, strengthen immanence and the ego's conditions, thus slipping away from transcendence and infinity.

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. It is a great glory for the Creator to have set up a being who affirms Him after having contested and denied Him in the glamorous areas of myth and enthusiasm; it is a great glory for God to have created a being

Judaism, the word God cannot be described by presenting ritual attributes to God. Rather, the safest path to approach God is the prohibition of decorating His essence with cosmic attributes. Thus, we can infer that the allegoric reference to God as a word can only be construed as responsibility for the Other. Levinas queries: "Does not the transcendence of the name of God in comparison to all thematization become effacement and is not this effacement the very commandment that obligates me to the other man?" (Levinas Levinas, "The Name of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts," 124). To express God's name, what matters is the Other; when I address the Other – even someone lowly – I address God. "As the stranger passes, so too does God" (Large, "The Name of God," 331). Therefore, I would strongly agree with Large's implication that "the word 'God' names for Levinas is the ethical responsibility for the Other. It does not name a being with certain properties or attributes, nor an idea necessary for human freedom" (ibid. 332). The terms stranger, meek, humble and hostage are used a number of times by Levinas. On the crucial role of and encounter with the stranger, see particularly R. Bernet, "The Encounter with the Stranger: Two Interpretations of the Vulnerability of the Skin," in Bloechl (ed.), *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 43-61; R. Bernasconi, "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien," in Bloechl (ed.) *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, 62-62-89.

110 E. Levinas, "Secularism and the Thought of Israel," trans. N. Poller. in *Unforeseen History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004) 113; idem, *Otherwise Than Being*, 11-14.

111 It is worth noting that Levinas was a great admirer of Plato's philosophy, expressing his gratitude for how he had developed the history of philosophy, theology and ethics by saying that "Philosophy is Platonic." (Levinas *Alterity and Transcendence*, ix).

112 See comments on Plato in Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 23.

capable of seeking Him or hearing Him from afar, having experienced separation and atheism.

(Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 15-16)

Levinas shares with Plato and Kant a distrust of any religious experience for the sake of the uniting of transcendence. For Levinas, reconciling the sacred with the holy is a ridiculous endeavor, as the former relates to ritual concepts and the latter to transcendence. According to the analytic thinker Durkheim, the sacred is a “catchword meant to capture the totality of religious experience.”¹¹³ In parallel, another analytic thinker, Bataille, contends that “everything leads us to the conclusion that in essence the sacramental quality of primitive sacrifices is analogous to the comparable element in contemporary religions.”¹¹⁴ Levinas reproves both of these scholars by promoting a more ethical intuition. He explains, as a Jewish thinker,¹¹⁵ that Judaism “consists in understanding this holiness of God in a [different] sense [than analytic thinkers] that stands in sharp contrast to the numinous meaning of this term, as it appears in the primitive religions wherein the moderns have often wished to see the source of all religion.”¹¹⁶ In ordinary speech, according to Levinas and Buber,¹¹⁷ the meaning of sacred is imbued with power and cosmic

113 J. Caruana, “‘Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy’: Levinas on Ethics and Holiness,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 34.4 (2006): 563.

114 G. Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. M. Dalwood, (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1962), 22.

115 It is worth noting that Levinas never proclaimed himself as a Jewish theologian, but rather a thinker who comes from a Judaic and Talmudic angle, where his texts run parallel with his philosophical (not religious) works. Scholars such as S. Rosenberg, S. Wygoda, C. Chalier and D. Banon have revealed the importance of Levinas's thought for the understanding of Judaism today. Concerning the contribution of the above thinkers as regards Levinas's Jewish thought throughout his works, see E. Meir, “Hellenic and Jewish in Levinas' Writings,” *Veritas* 51.2 (2006): 79-88.

116 E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. S. Hand (Baltimore: Athlone Press and John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 14.

117 A comprehensive article on Buber and Levinas is R. Bernasconi's “‘Failure of Communication’ as a Surplus: Dialogue and Lack of Dialogue between Buber and Levinas,” in Bernasconi and Wood (eds.), *The Provocation of Levinas*, 100-135. It is obvious that Levinas disagrees with Buber's enthusiastic intention to imbue reciprocity to the I-Thou relation. Levinas intends to link heteronomy and transcendence, claiming that the autonomous is primarily linked to ontology, isolating the subject to itself absorbing otherness and the face of the other is being subordinated to Hegelian totalization. See Levinas, *Of God who Comes to*

religious experience, something that God does not welcome.¹¹⁸ It is only with sanctification as holiness that religion can find genuine expression. Rational individuation must be transformed into moral separateness through the holiness which can only be found in ethics. Levinas hence insists on the transformation of the sacred through an ethical perspective into holiness or sanctification:

The numinous or the sacred envelops and transports man beyond his powers and wishes. ...The numinous annuls the links between persons by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them, an order in which they lose themselves.

(Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 14)

Levinas thus tries to argue that what matters is not a ritual sacred experience, which is merely an action in the world, but rather an ethical holiness which exceeds ontological practices. On the one hand, holiness for Levinas is the only way to access (genuine) religion. On the other hand, the sacred consists of “a seething subjective mass of forces, passions and imaginings.”¹¹⁹ Once the sacred rite separates the finite self from the divine, there is no possibility for the self to be called from the other as she loses her identity. This dissolution affects the relationship between the ‘me’ and the other and thus the ego/being returns into itself.

What we need, in Levinas’s eyes, is a massive return to desacralization through ethics. For Levinas, the ethical character of the holy is the nonrational surplus that emerges not from ontological practices but from anarchy. Holiness and ethics stem from the same anarchic source.¹²⁰ As Levinas points out, “To say of God that he is the God of the poor, the God of justice, involves a claim not on his

Mind, 150: “[...] in Buber, the I-Thou relationship is frequently also described as the pure face-to-face of the encounter, as a harmonious co-presence as an eye to eye [...] In this extreme formalization the Relation empties itself of its ‘heteronomy’ and of its transcendence of association [...] There would be an inequality, a dissymmetry, in the Relation, contrary to the reciprocity upon which Buber insists, no doubt in error”.

118 M. Buber, “Dialogue,” in *Between Man and Man*, trans. R.G. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 15.

119 Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 102.

120 Caruana, “‘Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy’: Levinas on Ethics and Holiness,” 569.

attributes but on his essence.”¹²¹ Here Levinas means that the sacred is connected to attributes of God while the holy relates to His essence. In other words, it is holy that is transcendent and not the sacred. As Levinas states, on the basis of the Torah, we can assume that the sacred is equal to idolatry where, in contrast, holiness represents “the absolute opposite to idolatry”.¹²² For Levinas, idolatry has increased not because of the intervention of other gods, but because of moral indifference, as well as worship of the being itself. This is the reason that monotheism is so strictly observed in Judaism, because God in the Old Testament “does not give Himself over to human fantasies.”¹²³

From the Old Testament, however, we also learn that people become moral objects, not through their response and obedience to God's commandments, but by violating them. Man became a moral being after eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge and began to distinguish good from evil. Since then, he began imitating God and wanted to become the master of human fate. Levinas blames both Christianity and paganism for one and the same sin of idolatry. As paganism created its gods according to the norms of the time and began to pray to the forces of nature as gods, so Christianity created an image of God to befit human representations and began to pray in front of icons that replaced God or the Absolute Other. While in Christianity, man is the image and likeness of God and prayers begin with ‘my God’, the Hebrew God retains his position of exteriority – God is the Absolute Other, God is Transcendence that even could not be named. Levinas insisted that Transcendence could not be contained within the ideas of it, nor could it be embodied. For Levinas, true monotheism is not compatible with my belief in myths or with idolatry.¹²⁴

Does holiness affect us in our contact with the divine? In short, is holiness a channel in between the human and God? The answer,

121 Levinas, “Secularism and the Thought of Israel,” 116.

122 Idem, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, 58.

123 Idem, *Difficult Freedom*, 102.

124 Dimitrova, *Sociality and Justice*, 79.

according to Levinas, comes through negation¹²⁵ – neither/nor.¹²⁶ Levinas states that “the infinite who orders me is neither a cause acting straight on, nor a theme, already dominated, if only retrospectively, by freedom.”¹²⁷ He adds that “this detour is the enigma¹²⁸ of a trace we have called *illeity*.”¹²⁹ *Illeity* is a term coined by Levinas to indicate a special symbolic allegory. It contains three different words or endings in one word: *il* (he), *ille* (she) and *-ty* (it, as an object). Levinas’s use of this term aims at indicating “a way of concerning me (and not *I*) without entering into conjunction with me.”¹³⁰ In my view, the neologism *illeity* constitutes a counter to the Buberian I-Thou dyadic scheme,¹³¹ since, as Levinas says, “*illeity* lies outside the ‘thou’

125 Negation for Levinas plays a decisive role in understanding the subjectivity of persons. Not as Hegel understands negation, that is, as power and totalization through the dialectic of Master and Slave, but as “total negation, which spans the infinity of that attempt and its impossibility – is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the other face to face – is to be unable to kill” (Levinas *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 10). This inability to deny the other, the incapacity to negate her “noumenal glory [...] makes the face-to-face situation possible. The face-to-face situation is thus an impossibility of denying, a negation of negation” (ibid., 34-35).

126 See D. Braine, “Negative Theology,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, viewed 15 October 2019).

127 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12.

128 Levinas prefers the term *enigma* over than Kierkegaard’s *silence*, to develop his argument regarding God’s trace in the world. For Levinas, the interconnection between God and humans is an *enigma*, that is, God’s trace which can be found only through the face of the other: “The semantics of the enigma breaks out of the order of autonomous thought, whereby the enigmatic as such becomes visible only as a trace – which means that it cannot be expressed by a direct representation of language (i.e., the sign or the signifier). The enigma is, according to Levinas, always older than, it is presupposed by, the intellectual cognition; but it cannot be reduced to a coherent system” (M.T. Mjaaland, *Autopsia: Self, Death and God after Kierkegaard and Derrida*, trans. B. McNeil [Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008], 127). Concerning Levinas’s view on enigma as an ethical phenomenon, see Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 1987, 61-73.

129 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12.

130 Ibid., 12.

131 From my point of view, A.K. Min correctly points out that “the true Infinite is revealed and accessible only as *illeity*, neither as a [Buberian] *Thou* of unmediated dialogue nor as an [Husserlian horizon] object of thematization” (Min 2006: 102). Concerning the notion of Husserl’s concept of horizon, see J. Mensch, “Life and Horizon”, *Sophia Philosophical Review* XI.2 (2018), 7-18. Min borrows two phrases from Levinas’s work *God, Death and Time*: that the true Infinite is revealed only as “a way of concerning me without entering into

and the thematization of objects.”¹³² Levinas goes on to say that “the *illeity* in the beyond-being is the fact that its coming toward me is a departure which lets me accomplish a movement toward a neighbor”.¹³³ In parallel, Levinas contends that *illeity* “is excluded from being, but orders it in relation to a responsibility, in relation to its pure passivity, a pure 'susceptibility': an obligation to answer preceding any questioning which would recall a prior commitment, extending beyond any question, any problem and any representation, and where obedience precedes the order that has furtively infiltrated the soul that obeys.”¹³⁴

Ultimately, what is the connection between holiness and *illeity*? Levinas claims that “*illeity* overflows both cognition and the enigma through which the Infinite leaves a trace in cognition. Its distance from a theme, its reclusion, its holiness, is not its way to effect its being (since its past is anachronous and anarchic, leaving a trace which is not the trace of any presence), but is its glory, quite different from being and knowing.”¹³⁵

The call of the other is holy and dramatic. The drama of being can be overcome by holiness through the face of the other. Levinas tries to present a “battle” between me, the Other, and God outside ontotheology,¹³⁶ between an ontological drama and an eschatological

conjunction with me” (Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 285) or as “the non-phenomenality of the Other who affects me beyond representation, unbeknownst to me and like a thief” (ibid. 201). Thus, Levinas clearly separates his thesis from Husserl’s Ontology. In parallel, contrary to Buber’s *I-Thou*, Levinas stresses that “there is no initial equality [...] Ethical inequality: subordination to the other, original diacony: the first person accusative and not nominative” (H. Jodalén and J. Vetlesen [eds.], *Closeness: An Ethics* [Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997], 48, 52, n. 2). Another reproach that Levinas has against the Buberian I-Thou relationship is that it seems quite symmetrical and reciprocal; those two terms are unacceptable in Levinas’s philosophical approach.

132 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 12.

133 Ibid., 13.

134 Idem, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, 128.

135 Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, 183.

136 Levinas, as a Jewish thinker, derives several times from Talmudic aspects. Levinas underlines that “monotheism would thus be asserted in its absolute vigour without it being from the onto-theological perspective” (Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, 164), but the essence of God (*En-Sof* in Talmudic writings, which means infinity, God) “is hidden away more than any secret, and no name must name it” [...] “not even the end of the smallest letter”

one, where both dramas can only be surpassed by an ethical 'intrigue' — not an ethical experience¹³⁷ — where holiness (as ethical sanctification) tries to escape from the ritual-cosmic sacred. In parallel, in order to understand the holiness of the other, we can say that it is not me who knocks on the door of the other human so he will open it to me; rather, the other already finds me prior to freedom and autonomy. The other's presence "hits me straight on with the straightest, shortest, and most direct movement".¹³⁸ In parallel, Levinas connects the prohibition of the sacred with the directness of the face of the other with its proximity.

The comprehension of God taken as participation in his sacred life, an allegedly direct comprehension, is impossible, because participation is a denial of the divine and because nothing is more direct than the face to face, which is straightforwardness itself [...]. There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men.

(Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78)

The straight line between me and the Other's uprightness forbids me to participate in the sacred; it sobers me.

(Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, 94)

In conclusion, we can infer that holiness is an ethical tool for Levinas to shape his intuition about the indirect connection between humans and God and humans with the Other. In contrast to the materialistic experience of the sacred, holiness awakes the self, outside of the subject, in a process of ethical individuation. One of the most difficult things for the self is to achieve awareness of his holiness towards God and towards the Other. We come closer to meeting this challenge only through the progressive paradox of Ethics.

(ibid.). For Levinas only the "act of thinking of the Absolute which never reaches the Absolute is infinite and never-ending" (ibid.).

137 J. Caruana, "The Drama of Being: Levinas and the History of Philosophy," *Continental Philosophical Review* 40 (2007): 251-73.

138 Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 95.

Is Asceticism a Necessary and Sufficient Condition in
Levinasian Ethics?

In this paper I argue that the term “asceticism” in Levinas’s thought differs from the use of the term in the Patristic and Thomistic traditions. While Aquinas and several orthodox Fathers of Eastern Christianity contend that asceticism begins and derives from a Man-God affirmation, Levinas raises severe objections to this approach. For Levinas, *kenosis*¹³⁹ has its starting point not with God’s direct mediation between subjectivity and human beings, nor the Greek *μίμησις* (imitation), but with the movement towards dispossession. This movement is revealed in the Biblical kenotic approbation from me (in the accusative) to the Other, who appears as a trace of God before my freedom and my subjectivity.

For Levinas, we can speak of asceticism only regarding human affairs when a person, emptying herself for the sake of the other, sacrifices her inner narcissism in favor of the otherness which precedes freedom and autonomy.¹⁴⁰ Thus, we can infer that asceticism is necessary and sufficient condition if and only if it is focused on the face-to-face relation without absorbing otherness into itself.¹⁴¹ As R. Cohen correctly states, “the only alterity sufficiently other to provoke response, to subject the subject to the subjection of response is the absolute alterity of the other person encountered in the excessive immediacy of the face-to-face”.¹⁴² In brief, asceticism is useless and empty of spiritual concreteness if it returns to the subject.

At the same time, Levinas rejects any conversation about asceticism and self-emptiness related to infinity and

139 Baird, “Whose *Kenosis*?,” 423-37.

140 Levinas, in his work *Entre Nous*, chapter four, *A Man-God?*, 60, wonders: “How can I expect another to sacrifice himself for me without requiring the sacrifice of others? How can I admit his responsibility for me without immediately finding myself, through my condition as hostage, responsible for his responsibility itself. To be me is always to have one more responsibility.”

141 Ibid., 58, in which he reminds us, through a Biblical verse (Jeremiah 22:16) that what matters, in approaching God, can be achieved only through the face of the Other: “He judged the cause of the poor and needy... Was not this to know me? saith the Lord.” Ben-Pazi’s view on forgiveness and reconciliation among human beings is quite connected to individuals’ *kenosis* for the sake of the other. See H. Ben-Pazi, “Levinasian Thoughts on Witnessing: Forgiveness, Guilt, and Reconciliation,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 35.3 (2016): 345-58.

142 R.A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 139.

Transcendence.¹⁴³ It is impossible, philosophically speaking, to develop or predict an “idea of a self-inflicted humiliation on the part of the Supreme Being, of a descent of the Creator to the level of the Creature; that is to say, an absorption of the most active activity into the most passive passivity”.¹⁴⁴ Levinas also wonders whether God, who manifests Himself in the world through his covenant, can Himself become present in the time of the world? Levinas’s answer is no, because time in God’s essence is immemorial, and we can seek Him only through the face of the Other as a trace and proximity. Moreover, Levinas rejects divine ascetic onto-theology of Western tradition because “the Infinite cannot incarnate itself in a *Desirable*, cannot, being infinite, enclose itself in an end. It solicits through a face. A *Thou* is inserted between the *I* and the absolute He. It is not history’s present that is the enigmatic interval of a humiliated and transcendent God, but the face of the Other.”¹⁴⁵

The meaning of ascetic *kenosis* in Levinas’s thought, as opposed to onto-theological and Christological perspectives, can be grasped only if we construe Levinas’s ethics from an anthropological angle. As R.D.N. van Riessen correctly contends, “as a Jewish thinker Levinas relates the *kenosis* of God and the self-emptying of the subject to each other without reference to the figure of Christ”.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, A. Wells underlines that for Levinas a “non-immanent ethical interaction can occur without the Absolute Paradox (i.e., the God-man, Christ). One need not be Christian to recognize the Other’s transcendence. Every Other, on Levinas’s reading, is sufficiently enigmatic to force a break with immanence.”¹⁴⁷

143 In this case, Transcendence is God, an absent God, which has no direct involvement with human affairs. E. Meir, in his work “Hellenic and Jewish in Levinas’s Writings,” 83, states characteristically that “direct contact with Him is absent; the mediation of reasons and of a teaching, of the Torah, is required. In this way, a place is created for consciousness and knowledge. The idea of a God who does not forgive in place of the other man is parallel with the Cartesian idea of the infinite, much appreciated by Levinas. God is not powerful, but powerless, His *kenosis* is the humility of leaving His trace in the Other, without forcing man to respond.”

144 Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 53.

145 *Ibid.*, 58.

146 Van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas’ Hermeneutics of Kenosis*, 174.

147 See A. Wells, “On Ethics and Christianity: Kierkegaard and Levinas,” *The Heythrop Journal* 52 (2012): 71. In addition, Wells continues his discussion about Levinas’s exteriority of the subject by saying that “Levinas has shown that one does not need the Absolute Paradox (i.e., Christ) to establish ethical relations

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that asceticism begins with the ethical metaphysics of Otherness. On the one hand, Levinas agrees that humility is a starting point for decentering the subject, but he holds that what is crucial is to begin with the other and not with the self. In contrast, onto-theology, which derives from ancient Greek tradition, insists on consciousness and intentionality, that is, placing individualism prior to relationalism. Therefore, in analytic and continental philosophical traditions, as well as contemporary religious tradition, asceticism gives priority to consciousness as well as to the dominance of the subject, who reflects and apprehends its own validity through its esotericism. Thus, historicity of the subject as an enclosed-self unit echoes narcissism and its capability to comprehend the essence of God within the self alone.

Following Hegelian totality and Heideggerian manifestation of being *qua* being, subjectivity became cemented within an epistemological framework, which seems quite sufficient to proclaim itself absolute. In addition, Descartes's *cogito* has been considered as the culmination of cognitive dominance over metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics. On the other hand, post-Hegelian critique on the thinking subject influenced various analytic and continental thinkers across Europe. Postmodernity offers another view based on ethical metaphysics and intersubjectivity as well as on faith and religion. Emmanuel Levinas, for his part, introduced a new understanding of ethics, arguing that it is the Other who gives meaning to the ascetic self and not the opposite. Overcoming the notion of self-reflection of the thinking subject, Levinas proposed an alternative notion of subjectivity, claiming that what really matters is the moral responsibility for the Other. For Levinas, God commands me through the face of the Other, but it is my responsibility to understand and answer. I suggest that Levinas initiated a new dialectic on asceticism: an infinite intersubjective called by the Other as the trace of God.¹⁴⁸

with others. Every Other, according to Levinas, is enough of an enigma, enough of a paradox, to force a break with immanence – i.e., every Other has the power to force the subject to relate to something outside itself" (ibid., 58).

- 148 R. Gibbs, in his monograph *Correlations in Levinas and Rosenzweig* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), chapter 4: "God speaks with Human Language," 92-100, analyzes the above argument, that is, that God's presence-in-the-world cannot be sustained or adopted in Levinasian Ethics, but can be seen, through the unseen, only as a trace, through human intervention as "the

Let us conclude with the words of R.D.N. van Riessen, who noted that to grasp Levinas's notion of ascetic *kenosis*, we need to recall Jewish tradition: "the concept of *kenosis* [in the Jewish tradition] sees God's absence as an event which is painful but at the same time creates space for human action."¹⁴⁹

language of the meek, the orphan and the humble." This concept has been called by other scholars "Levinas's a-theism". They do not mean necessarily a lack of a Supreme Being outside universal norms, but mainly, as W. Large points out in his article "Atheism of the Word: Narrated Speech and the Origin of Language in Cohen, Rosenzweig and Levinas," *Religions* 9 (2018): 1, that "God is no longer interpreted as a being necessary to understand the existence of a rational universe; the monotheistic God is neither a being nor an idea, but the living reality of speech. What menaces the reality of God is not whether God exists, or is intelligible, but the externality of language without a subject."

149 See Van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis*, 11.