THE CONSTELLATION SUBJECT-WOMEN-GOD IN THE ETHICS OF LEVINAS[1]

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ABSTRACT

Emmanuel Levinas was born one hundred years ago and today his work in philosophy as well as his Talmudic readings enjoys increasing attention in research in philosophy, literature, science of religion, theology and other fields. The aim of my paper is twofold: 1) to indicate the relevance of his works for scholars in the Old Testament and Jewish literature, and 2) to do this by contributing to the theme the relation between gender issues in Levinas and his "God". My line of argument will consist of the following movements. First the hermeneutic fibre of human existence needs to be described. The totalitarian tendency of human existence will be explained with reference to the philosopher's earliest works and it will be shown that his life project in philosophy was a quest for an ethics that does not originate in the hermeneutic condition. Secondly, attention will be given to strategies that Levinas adopted in search for an escape from a totalitarian existence. Special attention will be given to the position given to women in this regard. It will be shown why Levinas later abolished this strategic analysis of femininity. Thirdly I shall argue that the role that Levinas intended for women in his thought was later given to his philosophical notion of God. The particularity of this notion will be described by indicating the Jewish (Exodus and Mysticism) and "Greek" (Plato and Heidegger) origins of it. The ethico-political implications of this idea of God will be elaborated on by using Levinas' central notions of testimony, prophecy and saintliness.

INTRODUCTION

You might be tempted to ask me, in the words of Tertullian: "What does Athens

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[1] This article is a revised version of my paper "Gender and 'God': ethics as limit of wisdom in Emmanuel Levinas" presented at the annual conference of the Old Testament Society of South Africa (13-15 September 2006) of which the theme was "Wisdom and Gender". In order to preserve the introductory aspect of this essay, I have opted to maintain the oral character and to relegate the finer detail of the analysis to the abundant footnotes.

have to do with Jerusalem?"[2] Why listen to a Greek, a philosopher, at a Hebrew – an Old Testament – conference?

The immediate reason for my participation today is the hundredth anniversary of the birth of one of the twentieth century's most remarkable philosophers, Emmanuel Levinas. Whereas he never accepted the title "Jewish philosophy" for his work, it is common knowledge that he was inspired by his Jewish faith and erudite knowledge of the Old Testament and Talmud in the writing of his philosophy. It would not be wrong to consider his work as part of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the texts of the Old Testament, though one would have to be very precise on how the relation between philosophy and religion is handled in his work.[3]

The question of the relation between Athens and Jerusalem represents the background for the current discussion. This question, in a multitude of different avatars, could be considered also the main question of the work of Levinas. This holds true not only because he has two corpuses of publications – philosophy and Talmudic readings. It is also true – and this is what I am interested in here – *within* his philosophical work.

TWO SOURCES OF MEANING

That this is indeed the case could easily be indicated by what I consider one of the most important statements by the philosopher about the intention of his life's work:

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[2]   "Quid ergo Athenis et Hierosolymis?" (Tertullianus n.d. articulum VII,9).

[3]   Bringing clarification on this subject has been one of the main aims of my paper "Giving up your place in history. The "position" of Levinas in philosophy and Jewish thought" (Wolff 2007) of which the current essay could be considered to be an extension. Whilst the two articles could be read independently, they have been written to compliment each other.

> I would maintain, contrary to Heidegger, that philosophy could be
> ethical as well as ontological, it could be at the same time Greek
> and non-Greek in its inspiration. These two sources of inspiration
> coexist like two different tendencies within modern philosophy and
> it is my personal aim to try to identify these two origins of meaning
> – *der Ursprung des Sinnhaften* – in the relation between people.[4]

I am not sure that Levinas was always consciously aware that this was indeed
his "personal aim"; but it is certainly true that his whole work could
retrospectively be read from the angle of the questions: "Where does all
meaning come from?" and "What is the nature of all meaning?"

The citation above indicates two sources of meaning. The first is Greek, that
is, philosophical; it is ontological and has been explored most impressively by
the person who is for Levinas the most Greek of all philosophers, Martin
Heidegger. Contrary to appearances the long tradition of Greek or Western
thought on ethics also falls into this category, the reason for this being that this
tradition of thought reduces ethics to knowledge or bases ethics on knowledge,
that is, it makes ethics dependent on the ontological source of meaning (cf.
Wolff 2007, §V). The second source is "non-Greek". This ambiguous term
suggests probably only secondarily Hebrew, but primarily, as Levinas tried to
argue, a non-philosophical, that is, an otherwise than ontological, or an ethical,
source of meaning. Textual examples testifying to this source of meaning are
few and far between in Western thought (if we take Levinas' reading to be
valid), but he knew of another inspiration for reflection on this matter, of which
the most salient example is the non-ontologically founded, never-ending

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[4]   "Je maintiendrais, à l'opposé de Heidegger, que la philosophie peut être éthique
aussi bien qu'ontologique, elle peut-être en même temps grecque et non grecque dans
son inspiration. Ces deux sources d'inspiration coexistent comme deux tendances
différentes au sein de la philosophie moderne et c'est mon but personnel d'essayer
d'identifier ces deux origines du sens – *der Ursprung des Sinnhaften* – dans la relation
interhumaine" (Levinas [1981]1997:129). All translations are my own.

590   E. Wolff

discourse on ethics, that is Rabbinic Judaism. Levinas hopes to be for the ethical source of meaning, what Heidegger has been for ontology: someone who could lead us back to the source. Now, this non-Greek meaning could be translated into Greek, and this is what Levinas undertook: he wanted to develop a discourse on ethics that is not founded in ontology *but still* audible and credible as a philosophical discourse. This he did, not by justifying the use of the Old Testament or the Talmud as philosophical texts, since this would integrate them into a discourse of ontology. He does this as is stated in the citation, by distinguishing, *in the relation between people*, the two sources of meaning: if we consider what a human being is for another, we could understand what the two distinct kinds of meaning are.

THE MEANING OF THE OTHER HUMAN

I have said that the schema presented just now could be used *retrospectively* to inform a reading of Levinas' philosophical project. But at the beginning of his philosophical career, Levinas did not know what schema or form his work would take. Nor did he know, from the outset, what had to be interrogated in order to give birth to his philosophy.[5] All he had was a question. The name of this question is "de l'évasion", on escape (which is the title of his 1935 article – see Levinas [1935]1982). What presented itself to Levinas as question for philosophical contemplation was a question of escaping what seemed an inescapable given of our human condition (as he interprets Heidegger's ontology): human beings exist in such a way that every aspect of existence is a

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[5]   In the terminology of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger [1927]1993:§2) the "Befragtes" of the question – that which the philosopher enquires into – was not yet known. Identifying the *Befragte* is, as we shall see, one of the major issues Levinas was grappling with after the Second World War; his study of the erotic relation and femininity is an attempt to identify it.

form of understanding. Existing understandingly means to embrace everything around oneself into a synthesised totality of understanding; understanding is com-prehension, that is, seizing or possessing. This in turn is the basis of an existence in power.[6] But understanding is not only something *done by* human beings that exist; it is also something *happening to* human beings because they exist. The ontological condition of the human being boils down to being attached to *being* (*Sein, être*), being drawn along by *being*. The totalising or totalitarian tendency thus inscribed in the fibre of the human condition thus pertains to *theoria*, but also to *praxis*.[7] Even ostensibly innocent philosophical notions such as Heidegger's *Miteinandersein* (being with one another) and ideas about the possibility of fusion in interpersonal relation reflect this totalitarian tendency. Both of these ideas are ways of considering human relations as a

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[6]   Cf. how Levinas characterizes the mode of existence of *Dasein* in Heidegger in his 1932 essay "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie" (of which an adapted version appears in Levinas 1967[1998]:53-76): "Being-in-the-world is a dynamic mode of existence. Dynamic in a very precise sense. It's all about *dynamis*, possibility. Not the possibility in the logical and negative sense of 'absence of contradiction' (empty possibility); but concrete and positive possibility, the kind that one expresses by saying that one *can do this or that*, that one has possibilities with regards to which one is free." // "'Etre-dans-le-monde' est un mode d'existence dynamique. Dynamique dans un sens très précis. Il s'agit de la *dynamis*, de la possibilité. Non point de la possibilité au sens logique et négatif en tant qu''absence de contradiction' (possibilité vide); mais de la possibilité concrète et positive, de celle qu'on exprime en disant qu'on *peut ceci ou cela*, qu'on a des possibilités envers lequelles on est libre" (Levinas 1967[1998]:66). One also finds the same idea in Merleau-Ponty: "Consciousness is originally not an 'I think that', but a 'I can'." // "La conscience est originairement non pas un 'je pense que', mais un 'je peux'" (Merleau-Ponty 1945:160). According to Levinas possessing, knowing and seizing are synonymous with or derivatives of this original capability or possibility ("Posséder, connaître, saisir sont des synonymes du pouvoir." – Levinas [1947]1998a:83)

[7]   While Levinas had already made the connection between a certain kind of ontology (*theoria*) and a political *paxis* in his seminal article of 1934 (Levinas [1934]1994), the preceding argument is developed by Levinas in his articles of the 1950s, especially "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?"(1951), "Le Moi et la Totalité" (1954) reprinted in Levinas 1991:12-22 and 23-48 respectively and "La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini" (1957) reprinted in Levinas 1967[1998]:165-178. These essays are considered the preparatory work for Levinas' 1961 book, *Totalité et infini*.

collectivity facilitated by a neutral third term in which the essential otherness or alterity of the other human (which I shall discuss hereafter) is negated by subsuming it under a general term.[8] The question driving Levinas' philosophy is the question of escaping from this ontological condition; it is the question of finding a meaning in the interpersonal relation that is non-ontological in nature.

From right after the Second World War this quest begins to take form: one reads between the lines of Levinas' work two conditions for answering this initial question, namely, (1) that a source of meaning is needed that *transcends* our ontological condition, that means that he searches for a meaning that *imposes* itself on the human being despite and independent from all meaning derived from the human being's ontological existence. While working towards an answer to this question, Levinas comes to the conviction that this kind of transcendent meaning (2) would come from the other *human* being and that this meaning would be *ethical* (instead of ontological) in nature.

Between 1946 and 1951 then, Levinas explored a number of phenomena in search of a transcendental meaning: fatherhood or fertility (1946),[9] literature (1947),[10] art (1948),[11] dialogue (1949).[12] Amongst these are also to be found his "phenomenological"[13] studies of femininity.

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[8]   For Levinas' criticism of Heidegger's and Buber's notions of *Mitsein* and *Miteinandersein*, see for instance (Levinas [1947]1998a 19, 88f and [1947]1998b:161f). Evaluating the validity of this criticism would go beyond the aim of the present essay; such an evaluation would surely have to start by confronting Levinas' criticism of Heidegger with the important analysis of *Mitdasein* in *Sein und Zeit* (Heidegger [1927]1993:165).

[9]   Cf. Levinas [1947]1998a:85-87.

[10]   Cf. "L'autre dans Proust" reprinted in Levinas 1975:149-156.

[11]   Cf. "La réalité et son ombre" reprinted in Levinas 1994:107-127.

[12]   Cf. "La transcendance des mots. A propos des biffures" reprinted in Levinas 1987:197-203.

[13]   Whilst Levinas worked in a style clearly reminiscent of phenomenology, strictly speaking, what is discovered in femininity is not of the order of an intentional object; in fact, femininity (Levinas would claim) is a form of reversed intentionality – hence the necessity to write "phenomenology" between inverted commas.

THE FEMININE, EXPLAINING THE OTHER[14]

If the above expounded ontological condition of the human being is correct and exhaustive, then positing someone as a woman, becoming conscious of femininity, and the erotic relation of a man to a woman, would all be types of ontological knowledge. And indeed, Levinas' contemporaries Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, both working in phenomenology, would concur with this idea.[15] Levinas never denies that the relation to a woman (or to any human being for that matter) is ontological. But he claims that there is something of vital importance that exceeds the ontological relation to a woman, something that could be learned from a proper study of femininity as we encounter it in the erotic relation: it describes to us a situation in which the human being can find himself[16] without being ontologically determined, since it is a relation with

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[14]   What is at stake in the following section is the place of femininity in the economy of Levinas' argument and in his philosophical development. For this reason I limit my discussion to his first analyses of femininity in *Le temps et l'autre* and *De l'existence à l'existant*.

[15]   See for example Merleau-Ponty's markedly ontological reading of the erotic relation: "The erotic perception is not a *cogitatio* that aims at a *cogitatum*; rather, it aims at an other body through a body, it produces itself in the world and not in a consciousness. "// "La perception érotique n'est pas une *cogitatio* qui vise un *cogitatum*; à travers un corps elle vise un autre corps, elle se fait dans le monde et non pas dans une conscience" (Merleau-Ponty 1945:183) and his notion of metaphysics seems much closer to that of the first Heidegger than to that of Levinas when he states further on: "Metaphysics – the emergence of a beyond nature starts with the opening to an 'other', it is everywhere and already in the proper development of sexuality." //   "La métaphysique – l'émergence d'un au-delà de la nature commence avec l'ouverture à un « autre », elle est partout et déjà dans le développement   propre de la sexualité" (Merleau-Ponty 1945:195). Cf. also Merleau-Ponty's remarks (1945:216) on the caress.

[16]   For the purposes of this discussion, I retain Levinas' use of the male gender for the phenomenologist. His gender stereotyping in these analyses has been thoroughly examined and criticized by others (see the excellent overview by Stella Sandford, 2002). It is, however, important not to get bogged down in the (legitimate) criticism of this phenomenology of the feminine, to the extent that its place in Levinas' path of thinking is lost. The aim of this part of his work is still a polemic against the whole of Western philosophy, and probably above all, against Heidegger, as could be derived from the following declaration: "The phenomenological description that, by definition could not

alterity or otherness. In this we shall see that femininity is the positive response to the question: "Does there exist a situation in which the alterity of the other appears in its pureness?"[17]

In voluptuousness or the erotic experience or even just in the caress "I don't pose another existent [i.e. human being from the ontological perspective – EW] in front of me, I pose the alterity".[18] Levinas claims that the erotic relation is quite different from the one described by Husserl in the famous fifth *Cartesian mediation,*[19] according to which the perception of the body of the other arouses in me a conclusion as to the symmetric existence of that body, that is, that the other body is a human being like myself. But the "posing" of the other as other that Levinas is speaking about is actually something happening to me: the happening of alienation (cf. [1947]1998a:80), that is, of alterity "alterising" itself. There is thus no fusion between me and my beloved:[20] instead of becoming one, our most profound duality comes to the fore: "The pathos of

quit the light [of intelligibility – EW], i.e. the human being that is [ontologically spoken – EW] alone, confined to his/her solitude, aguish and the death-end, whatever the concomitant analyses of the relation with the others might be, doesn't suffice."// "La description phénénologique qui, par définition ne saurait quitter la lumière, c'est-à-dire l'homme seul enfermé dans sa solitude, l'angoisse et la mort-fin, quelles que soient les analyses de la relation avec autrui qu'elle apporte, n'y suffit pas" (Levinas [1947]1998b:145). The phenomenology of the erotic relation will show how the ontological solitude of the human being is disturbed.

[17]   "Existe-t-il une situation où l'altérité de l'autre apparaît dans sa pureté?" (Levinas [1947]1998a:77)

[18]   "je ne pose pas un autre existant en face de moi, je pose l'altérité" (Levinas [1947]1998a:80). The active verb, "pose", used by Levinas here, is unfortunate, since what actually happens is that the subject is confronted with alterity in such a way that the alterity is *undergone* by the subject. On the contrary, alterity is not something that is posed, but is rather received, as will be seen from the rest of the discussion.

[19]   Translated in French by Levinas, assisted by G Peiffer. This question is practically absent from *Sein und Zeit*; Heidegger apparently recognizes the existence of the other without reflecting extensively about the matter.

[20]   This is the crux of Levinas' analyses: being is not one as has been claimed by Western philosophy since Parmenides – there is an original plurality of sameness/identity and alterity that doesn't allow for any common denominator or fusion (cf. Levinas [1947]1998a:78, 83).

voluptuousness lies in the fact of being two."[21] And it is this event of alterising in the erotic relation that characterises, for Levinas, femininity: "The way of existing of the feminine is to hide itself, and the fact of hiding itself is precisely shame".[22] It is because of this withdrawal of that with which I am undeniably in contact that the feminine escapes from or rather exceeds relations of power, possession or knowledge.[23]

The subject is thus touched, invaded or even injured by the otherness of the other;[24] the subject continues its ontological existence, but is decisively disturbed by something that is not of its own doing or of its own nature. And

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[21]   "Le pathétique de la volupté est dans le fait d'être deux" (Levinas [1947]1998a:78).

[22]   "Le façon d'exister du féminin est de se cacher, et ce fait de se cacher est précisément la pudeur" (Levinas [1947]1998a:79). This is a key passage to understand how God takes over from femininity in Levinas' philosophy – compare later femininity "hiding" itself with the "withdrawal" of God (or illeity).

[23]   "The movement is thus in the opposite direction" // "Le mouvement est donc inverse" (Levinas [1947]1998a:81). Instead of my ontological existence aiming intentionally at the other and thus giving meaning to the other (as in the perspective of Merleau-Ponty referred to above), for Levinas the alterity of the other is aimed at me and thus gives meaning to me. Hence the future or to-come character of the other: the erotic relation "is the relation with alterity, with the mystery, i.e. with the future, with that which, in a world where everything is there, is never there, with that which could be absent when everything is there. Not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity." // "C'est la relation avec l'altérité, avec le mystère, c'est-à-dire avec l'avenir, avec ce qui dans un monde, où tout est là, n'est jamais là, avec ce qui peut ne pas être là quand tout est là. Non pas avec un être qui n'est pas là, mais avec la dimension même de l'altérité." (Levinas [1947]1998a:81, text corrected by adding the comma before the second "avec". Cf. also Levinas [1947]1998b:163. The future or eschatological aspect of alterity is one of the guiding themes in my twin essay "Giving up your place in history. The "position" of Levinas in philosophy and Jewish thought" (Wolff 2007)

[24]   "Where no possibilities are possible any more, where one cannot 'can' any more, the subject is still subject by eros. Love is not a possibility, it is not due to our initiative, it is without reason, it invades us and injures us and still, *I* survive in it." // "Là où tous les possibles sont impossible [as also in the case of death, cf. Levinas [1947]1998a:98], là où on ne peut plus pouvoir, le sujet est encore sujet par l'eros. L'amour n'est pas une possibilité, il n'est pas dû à notre initiative, il est sans raison, il nous envahit et nous blesse et cependant le *je* survit en lui" (Levinas [1947]1998a:81-2).

this is where the analysis of femininity leads us: "The intersubjective space is initially asymmetrical".[25]

This is a very important conclusion: the relation with the other is concluded to be non-reducible to ontology, more than a totality of being, always withdrawing, and asymmetrical. But there is no more indication of what the meaning of this is. In *Le temps et l'autre* ("Time and the other"), and even less clear in *De l'existence à l'existant* ("From existence to the existants"), it is only a part of the argument. The analyses of femininity disappear after 1947 to appear only again in 1961 in *Totalité et infini* ("Totality and infinity") where it only follows after the principle argument of the book had been formulated, and in the context of which it should be understood and then disappears again afterwards. In my opinion this reappearance is odd and not evident to relate to the principle argument of the book.[26]

What is said about the feminine, or rather, the basic "phenomenological" structure of the confrontation with the alterity of the other, continues to be the concern of Levinas. It is only in 1951 that he makes a discovery that can better describe the relation between people, whilst *maintaining* what has been learned from femininity about its asymmetry.[27] This discovery, that would henceforth be the most characterising element of Levinas' thought, is the face of the other.

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[25]   "L'espace intersubjectif est initialement assymétrique" (Levinas [1947]1998b:163) and more developed: "The asymmetrical intersubjectivity is the space of a transcendence where the subject, while retaining its structure as subject, has the possibility of not returning fatally to itself [i.e. escaping to an encounter with what is outside of its identity, namely alterity – EW] // "L'intersubjectivité assymétrique est le lieu d'une transcendance où le sujet, tout en conservant sa structure de sujet, a la possiblité de ne pas retourner fatalement à lui-même" (Levinas [1947]1998b:165).

[26]   One could even ask if this reintroduction of the reflections on the erotic experience and voluptuousness and femininity is at all necessary in *Totalité et infini*: do these analyses contribute anything that had not been argued sufficiently and better by the discussion of the face of the other in the same book?

[27]   One gets the impression from reading the historical unfolding of Levinas' philosophical development that femininity had, to his mind, failed to provide a plausible source of non-ontological meaning.

In the face of the other, just as the lover with the beloved, one is asymmetrically situated. This asymmetry is due to the *meaning* of the other which is not ontological in nature, but *ethical*. The face of the other addresses an appeal to me that is completely independent of who that person is, of who I am and what the context is. Since this ethical appeal is associated with the non-phenomenalisable mortality of the other, Levinas often says that the asymmetric non-ontological alterity of the other means "thou shalt not kill". The other is thus principally my neighbour or brother (Levinas' terminology) to whom I can only respond and that in an ethical sense: I am infinitely responsible to the other. One should probably hear in this argumentative sequence not only the French etymological link (*répondre > résponsabilité*), but also what is audible only in Hebrew, namely the etymological link between other (*'achar*) and responsibility (*'acharjot*), since the other calls me because of his/her otherness to responsibility. The attempt to remain as obedient as possible to the appeals of all the others is the quest for justice.

I have insisted on the parallel structure between the feminine and the face. When Levinas reflects on the meaning of this presence of the other, he drew on two ideas from the history of Western philosophy in order to elucidate the structure by which the other signifies for the subject. The first of these is Descartes' notion of the idea of the infinite – that is the idea that comes to the mind of the finite subject but that is larger than that finite subject in such a way that Descartes was convinced that the subject could not give himself this idea.[28] The second notion that describes the structure of the meaning of the other for

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[28] The idea of the infinite is "the 'formal pattern', with the aim of sketching the structure of a non-reductionist relation between the self and the other" and "the idea of the infinite is the social connection." // "le 'dessin formel', dans le but d'esquisser la structure d'une relation non réductrice entre le même et l'autre" and "L'idée de l'infini est le rapport social." (Levinas [1967]1998:171-2). The idea is drawn from the third of Descartes' *Meditations*.

the subject is Plato's "good beyond being" (*to kalon epekeina tes ousias*).[29] What is of interest for Levinas in both of these formulas is the structure or form; they communicate *asymmetry and transcendence* with regards to the ontological existence of the subject. Levinas, however, fills them with new content by means of his phenomenological-like studies.

Of all the different aspects of Levinas' philosophy of the face and the other, I consider this the most important element to highlight for the current purposes. Both of these formulas that should direct our understanding of what is at stake in the otherness of the other and the way in which this otherness signifies, are drawn from contexts in which they refer to an *absolute transcendence* or *God*. And while Levinas is concerned here with a defence of ethics and the meaning of the other and the subject, God is not far away. The other signifies by an epiphany,[30] says Levinas.

GOD

But it would be incorrect to simply conclude that for Levinas God appears to us in the face of the other. The question of the relation between the other and what would be beyond it becomes one of Levinas' major concerns in the period of just after *Totalité et infini*.[31] It is exactly in this period that Levinas embarks on

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[29]   "The platonic formula that places the Good beyond being is the most general and most empty indication that guides [this research]" // "La formule platonicienne plaçant le Bien au-delà de l'être est l'indication la plus générale et la plus vide qui les guide." (Preface to Levinas [1947]1998b). This formula comes form book 6 of Plato's *Republic*.

[30]   See for instance Levinas [1967]1998:177: "I call *face* the epiphany of that which could present itself also directly to a Me and, in this way, also in an exterior way [i.e. as alterity – EW]" // "Nous appelons *visage* l'épiphanie de ce qui peut se présenter aussi directement à un Moi et, par là-même, aussi extérieurement."

[31]   The reason for this new development could be traced back, not only to Derrida's famous critical essay of Levinas' earlier work, "Violence et métaphysique" (1964) (reprinted in Derrida 1967), but also to some inherent difficulties in the Levinasian argument as developed by the author of *Totalité et infini*.

as project of the restoration of monotheism in philosophy.[32] Central to his exposition of this matter is his unpoetic neologism "*illéité*", illeity. If we want to understand the place of God in Levinas' later philosophy and the relation between God and the interpersonal relation, one would have to examine this notion. The term is derived from "il", French for "he" or "it" (the discussion below will suggest a slight preference for "it") and the postfix forming an abstract noun. Illeity is itness. And the discussion of illeity will advance still further what has been learned from femininity.

One could summarise the position captured in the term illeity (sometimes simply "il" is used as synonymous for it) with regards to our preceding discussion of the asymmetrical ethical relation between the subject and the other, by recourse to a short, somewhat Buberian, formula used by Levinas: "A You is inserted between the I and the Absolute It [or Illeity]."[33] This "absolute it" is not thing, but the second source of meaning of which Levinas spoke in our introductory citation: it (is) otherwise than being. Illeity is the condition for the irreversible asymmetry[34] between the subject and the other; it is the condition for the ethical significance of the face of the other. The face is like a trace left by illeity, that is, left by "something" that has always already withdrawn itself. Illeity is what passed in the other in such a significant way, that it invests the subject with the necessity to respond to it, without ever becoming touchable or perceptible to the subject. Or, using Levinas' own vocabulary, illeity, by the

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[32]   This is implied in the essay "La signification et le sens" in Levinas 1972:17-70 when Levinas provides a solution to what he calls "the crisis of monotheism" (Levinas 1972:40). In his series of lectures, collected under the title *Dieu, la mort et le temps* (God, death and time), Levinas calls his endeavour in philosophy the "unusual search for God without onto-the-ology" // "insolite recherche de Dieu sans onto-théo-logie" (Levinas 1993:237), i.e. a search for a philosophical monotheistic God, beyond the Heideggerian version of the death of God.

[33]   "Un Tu s'insère entre le Je et le Il absolu" (Levinas [1967]1998:216). Despite this Buberian formulation, one should guard against equating illeity as "absolute it" with the absolute Thou in Buber or Marcel.

[34]   Cf. Levinas [1967]1998:199, 214.

trace of the face of the other, *inspires* the subject, in fact, forms the subjectivity of the subject as a *prophet*, that is, as someone who can not but *testify* to this visitation of illeity.

But illeity is not only a strange sounding neologism. It is one of those notions that Levinas use to translate non-Greek into Greek, in this case to reintroduce monotheism into philosophy. Illeity is a sophistication of the structure by which the presence of the other signifies not only ontologically, but especially ethically. Illeity is therefore synonymous with infinity as Levinas borrowed it from Descartes; it is synonymous with *epekeina tes ousias* as he borrowed it from Plato. But now his notion used for describing the structure of signifying of the other is made more sophisticated by the use (or "translation") of Jewish sources or ideas about transcendence. Two references are crucial in this regard.

1.   In his discussion of illeity in *La trace de l'autre*,[35] Levinas explicitly refers to Exodus 33: God "shows himself only by his trace, as in chapter 33 of Exodus."[36] As God appears only when Moses is covered by God's hands or as God appears in the same text only from behind, that is, as already departing, so illeity always passes. In the same paragraph from *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* ("Discovering existence with Husserl and Heidegger"), Levinas insists that the other finds himself/herself in the trace of illeity, of the God that had been present and that this is the meaning of the idea that humans are the image of God in Genesis 1:27:[37] the *other* human is the

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[35]   Levinas [1967]1998:187-202.
[36]   "Il ne se montre que par sa trace, comme dans le chapitre 33 de l'Exode" (Levinas [1967]1998:202).
[37]   "The God that has passed is not the model of which the face would be the image. Being according to the image of God does not mean to be the icon of God, but to be located in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality retains all the infinity of his absence which is in the personal order itself." // "Le Dieu qui a passé n'est pas le modèle dont le visage serait l'image. Etre à l'image de Dieu, ne signifie pas être l'icône de Dieu, mais se trouver dans sa trace. Le Dieu révélé de notre spiritualité

image of God, because he/she is in the trace of the God that, in passing, signified the ethical imperative to which the subject has to respond. Being in the trace of illeity, (being the image of God) is the condition of the other as mortal or miserable (cf. Levinas 1988:74); it is saying in philosophical terms that the other is the poor and the stranger, the orphan and the widow.[38]

2. Levinas secondly finds inspiration for his notion of illeity in ancient prayers of Jewish mysticism in which the believer starts addressing God by the pronoun "you", but gradually changes to "it" or "he", and Levinas interprets this as a recognition of the passing of God, of the fact that God is not there to hold on to, even though the condition of the praying subject is decisively determined by his/her relation to the trace of God (Levinas relates this in 1982:102).

In these two ways illeity is the way by which God *signifies* (cf. Levinas 1993:113-114, 257; 1995:139). Levinas would agree with Aquinas that "what God is, exceeds all we understand about him",[39] provided that this excess is considered in the first place to be ethical. God is not; God is not contaminated by being (cf. Levinas [1974]1986:x); God signifies; God signifies, ethically, as trace in the face of the other.

RELATING THE TWO SOURCES OF MEANING

These are then the two sources of meaning: the one ontological, the other ethical; the one emerging from the interpreting existence of the subject, the other emerging from the way of signifying of the other in the trace of illeity. Being a human subject means to be always in the force field between these two

judéo-chrétienne conserve tout l'infini de son absence qui est dans l'ordre personnel même." Levinas [1967]1998c:202.

[38] Biblical parlance, often adopted by Levinas, as for instance Levinas [1947]1998b:162.

[39] "Illud quod Deus est, omne ipsum quod de eo intelligimus, excedere" (Aquinas n.d. q. 7 a.5-14).

sources of meaning. The name that Levinas gives for this mode of existence is prophecy or ideally saintliness. Prophecy and saintliness are ways of existence by which "I make myself the author of what I hear"[40] from the appeal from the other – the meaning of the other becomes so much mine, that it determines significantly my existence in such a way that I live to respond to this appeal, to be obedient to its command, to translate the ethical into the ontological. Evidently this response comes at a price: every attempt to translate the ethical appeal into ontological reality, every attempt to obey, is at the same time an "indiscretion with regards to the unsayable";[41] every translation is a treason (Levinas [1974]1986:17-18); every witness to God is a risk, or rather already an inevitable fate, in the direction of an idolatry or blasphemy.

But without this prophecy, this translation, there is no obedience. The ethical meaning needs ontological mastery to resound within reality (Levinas *ibid*). And that is what Athens has to do with Jerusalem. Athens, philosophy, should express Jerusalem, ethics. Jerusalem without Athens remains dumb or slides into the abyss of religious fanaticism in the name of God and the other; Athens without Jerusalem risks the evacuation of ethics, albeit in civilised forms of "man as a wolf for man" (Hobbes), of politics as continuation of war by other means.

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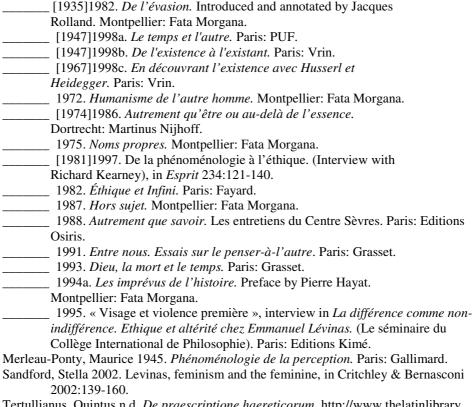Derrida, Jacques 1967. *L'écriture et la différence*. Seuil: Paris.

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[40] "je me fais l'auteur de ce que j'entends" (Levinas 1993:124).

[41] "indiscrétion à l'égard de l'indicible" (Levinas [1974]1986:19).

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