

ETHICS WITHOUT EXIT: LEVINAS AND MURDOCH

by BOB PLANT

Hearts open very easily to the working class, wallets with more
difficulty. What opens with the most difficulty of all
are the doors of our own homes.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*

. . . there is no debt to acquit. From the outset,
I am not exonerated. I am originally in default.

—Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*

IN HIS RECENT ARTICLE “Emmanuel Levinas and Iris Murdoch: Ethics as Exit?,” C. Fred Alford highlights a number of insightful comparisons—and many important contrasts—between the respective conceptions of ethics proffered by Levinas and Murdoch. Alford’s avowed objective is to “criticize Levinas sympathetically,” or to “disrupt” what has come to be known as “the Levinas Effect” and the tendency of many commentators to make Levinas “become everything to everyone.”¹ Given what one commentator calls “the facile ‘postmodern’ temptation to lump together all differences under the general rubric of the ‘Other,’”² Alford’s objective is, I believe, wholly commendable. (As Arthur Schopenhauer pithily remarks: “the man who is everyone’s friend is no one’s friend.”³) Nevertheless, in the following discussion I want to “disrupt” Alford’s own reading of Levinas; not, I hope, to make the latter simply a conduit for saying “whatever. . . . [I] wanted to say in the first place” (p. 24), but to present a fuller picture of Levinas’s singularly difficult, evocative and often puzzling philosophy. I shall do this by critically responding to and developing a number of points

Alford explicitly raises. To what extent my reading of Levinas aligns him with Murdoch, I leave for others far better qualified to assess.

Let us be clear from the start, Levinas is—as Hilary Putnam rightly notes—a “moral perfectionist.”⁴ But this is *not* to say that Levinas’s work is “otherworldly.” Although Alford does not use this latter term, it is clearly implied in his analysis. Thus, contrasting Levinas and Murdoch, he remarks that, “like Levinas, Murdoch’s goal is to go beyond the limits of the self. Unlike Levinas, Murdoch is content to remain within a world of beings” (p. 37), and likewise, that Murdoch wants us to “climb the ladder of love only high enough to be free of their vanity and egoism, but never so high as to leave the world behind” (p. 38). According to Alford, “the other is an abstraction for Levinas. . . . Only at a distance is the other abstract enough to remind us of infinity” (p. 25)—indeed, a “barely contained passion for otherness, exit, and transcendence runs through Levinas” (p. 40). In a similar vein we are told that, for Levinas, “the self is remarkably real, a tangible fleshy thing . . . and a barrier to infinity,” and it is “for this reason, . . . a shattering experience is necessary, like that of Saul on the road to Damascus, an experience that does not bring me closer to my deliverer. . . . Only this can open me up—not to reality, but to infinity” (p. 38). More pointedly still, Alford asserts: “Levinas was never interested in the concrete reality of the other person, whose fleshy reality can only get in the way of transcendence” (p. 37). Thus, although he acknowledges that Levinas “often writes about ethical relationships as though they were real relationships with real people” (“what is not true is that Levinas is talking about some Other more august and transcendent than real other people . . . we know the infinite only through other people”), Alford nevertheless defends his own “turning to Murdoch” on the grounds that she is “a theorist who remains strictly within the realm of everyday life, finding there subtleties of knowing, caring, and being that Levinas believes come only by way of the infinite” (p. 34).

While Levinas’s attitude toward the “everyday” or “ordinary” is hardly transparent (after all, the imperative of the other’s face is said to come “from most high outside the world”⁵), Alford overstates the “otherworldly” aspect of the former’s ethics. Against the allegation that Levinas was “never interested in the concrete reality of the other person,” it should be duly noted that he explicitly maintains that the “body does not happen as an accident to the soul”⁶—not least because the “elevation of human identity to the rank of transcendental subjectivity does not annul the effect which the penetration of metal can have,

as a knife point or revolver's bullet, into the heart of the I, which is but viscera."⁷ Moreover, what "concerns me" about the other is "all his material misery," and thus the ethical imperative "is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him."⁸ Elsewhere Levinas insists that "a subject is of flesh and blood . . . is hungry and eats," and it is *this* that renders them "capable of giving the bread out of . . . [their] mouth."⁹ In summary:

[T]he body is the very condition of giving, with all that giving costs. . . . the psyche of the subject is the one for the other, the one having to give to the other, and thus the one having hands for giving. Human subjectivity is of flesh and blood. . . . It is here a question of being torn out of oneself in a giving that implies a body, because to give to the ultimate degree is to give bread taken from one's own mouth.¹⁰

Finally, it should not go unnoticed that Levinas extends the meaning of "face" to encompass the "whole sensible being, even in the hand one shakes" (*OS*, p. 102), and it is in this sense that "the whole human body is . . . more or less face."¹¹ Corporeality (finitude, vulnerability, and so on) is therefore central to Levinas's conception of subjectivity, the other *and* ethical responsibility.

As suggested above, Levinas's account of ethics does indeed contain a "perfectionist" dimension, but neither does this warrant Alford's anxiety. For Levinas's self-avowed "utopianism"—including what he sees as the "miracle" (*IRB*, pp. 59, 111) or "unreasonableness"¹² of ethical concern—has its roots *within* the realm of "ordinary," "everyday" life. (Again, we should not forget that the simple "courtesy" [*IRB*, pp. 49, 106] of the "after you,"¹³ hospitable "welcome" [*TI*, p. 170],¹⁴ and "bonjour!"¹⁵ are three of Levinas's most cherished tropes.) Elucidating this "utopianism" further Levinas claims that the "ideal of saintliness is presupposed in all our value judgements," and then proceeds:

There is no politics for accomplishing the moral, but there are certainly some politics which are further from it or closer to it . . . the liberal state is more moral than the fascist state, and closer to the morally ideal state. There is a utopian moment in what I say; it is the recognition of something which cannot be realized but which, ultimately, guides all moral action. . . . There is no moral life without utopianism. (*PM*, pp. 177–78)

The precise relationship between Levinas's "utopian" ethics and the gritty realm of political action is complex (and perhaps not entirely satisfactory), but a few general observations will be useful at this juncture.

The first thing to note is that the ethical and political (including their corresponding "Biblical" and "Greek" inspiration¹⁶) are not simply *opposed* in Levinas's work, but rather presented as *mutually parasitic* upon one another. Of course, there are moments when Levinas seems to lament the existence of politics—as Jean-Jacques Rousseau bemoans the emergence of society.¹⁷ But without the call for worldly justice the ethical would be utterly (and *unethically*) abstract and "otherworldly." The ethical may always emerge imperfectly, but that is not because it would be more at home *somewhere other than* in the world of politics and justice ("there is no model of transcendence outside of ethics" [*GDT*, p. 194]). The imperfectibility of ethics is, paradoxically, its perfection. For what makes the ethical *ethical* is its incessant self-reproach for not being ethical *enough*.¹⁸ With these points in mind, let us now return to Alford's reading.

Focusing (perhaps too much) on Levinas's early account of the anonymous rumblings of the *il y a*, Alford claims that, for Levinas, the "other is my exit, my release, my salvation. Here finally is an exit from being" (p. 33). But this cannot be quite right. First, because the notion of "salvation" *of any sort* is fundamentally at odds with the general spirit of Levinas's ethics. (We will return to this in a moment.) And second, because it is not at all clear that the dichotomy between ethics and ontology is rigidly maintained by Levinas. Thus, for example, he suggests that the "imperative" of the other is "a question that one can situate *at least on the same level* as the famous question of being, around which all of philosophy in the West developed." Levinas then rhetorically inquires: "*within* this priority of being, this insistence on oneself, isn't there something like a threat against all others, a war inherent in this affirmation of oneself?" (*IRB*, p. 105, my emphasis), and likewise, that one must ask "oneself whether that responsibility for the other, which is madness in a way, in not the human vocation in being?" (*IRB*, p. 250). Ethics, we might therefore say, "interrupts" (or "rises up in") Being *from within*.¹⁹

Now, this "interruption" can be seen most clearly in Levinas's account of the relationship between the "I" (subjectivity), the singular other (ethics), and the *other* others (justice or politics). For,

everything that takes place here “between us” concerns everyone. . . . Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient “I-Thou” forgetful of the universe. . . . *The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other—language is justice . . . the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.* The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger . . . *the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me.* (TI, pp. 212–13, my emphasis)

That is to say, “in reality, the relationship with another is never uniquely the relationship with the other: from this moment on, the third is represented in the other . . . in the very appearance of the other the third already regards me” (GCM, p. 82). According to Levinas then, the relation to both the singular other and the “third party” *must* be understood in terms of the demand for worldly justice. Although he does have a tendency to focus on the relationship with the singular other (an emphasis which often looks somewhat “otherworldly”), here Levinas explicitly tells us that such a relationship is—though in a quite specific sense—a *fiction*. Levinas’s preoccupation with the “uniqueness of the *other man*” is *not* therefore “a repudiation of politics.”²⁰ For, if

there was only the other facing me, I would say to the very end: I owe him everything. I am for him. . . . I am forever subject to him. My resistance begins when the harm he does me is done to a third party who is also my neighbor. It is the third party who is the source of justice, and thereby of justified repression; it is the violence suffered by the third party that justifies stopping the violence of the other with violence. (GCM, p. 83)

In short, the “Other’s hunger—be it of the flesh, or of bread—is sacred; only the hunger of the third party limits its rights.”²¹

In his 1965 essay “Enigma and Phenomenon,” Levinas writes: “Someone unknown to me rang my doorbell and interrupted my work. I dissipated a few of his illusions. But he brought me into his affairs and his difficulties, troubling my good conscience” (BPW, p. 68). While Alford is right to identify something important in this passage, his synopsis is, I believe, insufficient. Alford thus provides the following gloss:

Though you live a satisfying existence in your apartment, something is missing from your life, and your encounter with the face at the door reminds you of what it is: the rest of the world, one that extends to

infinity. . . . The face of my neighbour at my door renders me guilty as one who has done less than he could. (pp. 26–27)

Explicitly or otherwise, both Levinas and Alford allude to “guilt” here, but the latter reduces this to one’s sense of moral *inadequacy*. Without doubt, such inadequacy is a significant and recurrent theme in Levinas’s work. Nevertheless, there is a much deeper sense of guilt at work here—as can be seen, for example, when Levinas remarks: “The other haunts our ontological existence and keeps the psyche awake. . . . Even though we are ontologically free to refuse the other, we remain forever accused, with a bad conscience.”²² Interestingly, Alford gets closer to this when, citing a favourite passage of Levinas’s from Pascal’s *Pensées* (“ . . . ‘this is my place in the sun.’ Here is the primitive model for the usurpation of the whole earth”²³), he remarks: “It sounds like Rousseau talking about the advent of private property, only for Levinas it is not property, but the individual’s belief that he owns himself that spoils things” (p. 26). In order to ascertain the significance of Levinas’s thoughts here, let us follow Alford’s suggestion and briefly recall Rousseau’s account.

In “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” we are initially presented with a quasi-Pyrrhonian narrative of “natural man” whose “first care [was] that of self-preservation” and whose life was, like the animal, “limited . . . to mere sensations.”²⁴ For Rousseau (unlike Levinas) this primitive self-concern is not to be scorned. On the contrary, it is *sociality* and the awareness of others that ultimately corrupts the blithe animality of “infant man.” According to Rousseau then, “from the moment one man began to stand in need of the help of another . . . equality disappeared, property was introduced . . . [and] slavery and misery were soon seen to germinate” (pp. 214–15). Along with society “each became in some degree a slave even in becoming the master of other men.” In short, “there arose rivalry and competition on the one hand, and conflicting interests on the other. . . . All these evils were the first effects of property . . . Usurpations by the rich, robbery by the poor, and the unbridled passions of both, suppressed the cries of natural compassion” (pp. 218–19). Thus “natural compassion” was eventually smothered by the need to compete with our neighbors—this competitive drive finding its impetus in the emergence of a sense of property inaugurated by the “first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, bethought himself of saying *This is mine*” (p. 207).

There are clearly profound differences between Rousseau and

Levinas—not least concerning the latter’s resolute antinaturalism. Nevertheless, the concurrence between Rousseau and Pascal on the injustice of claiming “this is my place in the sun” or “this is mine” finds more than an echo in Levinas’s insistence that, *by my very being*, a murderous “exclusion” or “exiling”²⁵ of the other occurs. Rousseau’s rhetoric of “usurpation” is thus radicalized by Levinas as follows: “This is in fact the question one must ultimately pose. Should I be dedicated to being? By being, by persisting in being, do I not kill?” (*EL*, p. 120), and likewise:

One has to respond to one’s right to be. . . . My being-in-the-world or my “place in the sun,” my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? . . . A fear for all the violence and murder my existing might generate. . . . It is the fear of occupying someone else’s place. (*LR*, p. 82)²⁶

The “troubling” of “my good conscience” (*BPW*, p. 68) thus hinges on the primordial fact that “the *Da* of my *Dasein*” is “already the usurpation of someone’s place.” My “bad conscience . . . comes to me from the face of the other who, in his mortality, uproots me from the solid ground where, as a simple individual, I stand and persevere naively—naturally—in my stance” (*EN*, p. 148)²⁷—indeed, Levinas will insist that it is to *this* extreme point that “Pascal’s ‘the *I* is hateful’ must be thought through” (*AT*, p. 22).

The relevance of all this for Alford’s account (and specifically his suggestion that “the face at the door reminds you of what it is: the rest of the world, one that extends to infinity. . . . The face of my neighbor at my door renders me guilty as one who has done less than he could”) lies in Levinas’s brief sketch of a phenomenology of “home” in *Totality and Infinity*. A few key themes are worth highlighting here.²⁸

Insofar as the home provides a place of “withdrawal from the elements,” it represents a break with “natural existence” (*TI*, pp. 153, 156). But this taking-refuge is more significant than a mere sheltering from natural forces. For in the subject’s “recollecting” itself in the “dwelling,” both “labor and property [become] possible” (perhaps with Descartes’s *Meditations* in mind,²⁹ Levinas describes the “window” as that which “makes possible a look that dominates” [*TI*, p. 156]). The “raw material” of the natural world thus becomes “calmed in possession” (*TI*,

pp. 158–59). The primary understanding of “home” would therefore appear to be “egoist” insofar as it is first “hospitable for its proprietor” (*TI*, p. 157). Understood as a “project of acquisition” the home does not yet, it seems, constitute “violence” because here acquisition and possession concern “what is faceless” (*TI*, pp. 162, 160). But this domestic good conscience is, Levinas suggests, little more than a fantasy. For “possession itself refers to more profound metaphysical relations,” namely “the other possessors—those whom one cannot possess—[who] contest and therefore can sanction possession itself” (*TI*, p. 162). The issue is not then primarily about the home as “hospitable for its proprietor,” but about the “welcome [that] the Home establishes,” or my knowing how to “give what I possess” and thereby “welcome the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him” (*TI*, pp. 170–71). In other words:

The chosen home is the very opposite of a root. . . . The possibility of the home to open to the Other is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows. Separation would not be radical if the possibility of shutting oneself up at home with oneself could not be produced without internal contradiction as an event in itself, as atheism. (*TI*, pp. 172–73)

These points can be summarized as follows: In order for a thing (an everyday object, for example) to become a possession *for me* it must also be possible for *another* to possess it.³⁰ In a similar—though rather more significant—way, the home’s being made “hospitable for its proprietor” (that *I* can occupy *this* site as home) refers to *other* possible proprietors. Indeed, it is this possibility to which the other’s face gestures when accusing me of “usurping” the place of another. My-dwelling-here can therefore be said to be necessarily “haunted” by the ghosts of others “whose presence is discreetly an absence.”³¹ As such, Levinas maintains, “my” home can never be described as thoroughly “intimate” or “calm,” never a total “secrecy” or “refuge”³²—indeed, not even as wholly *mine*.

What Alford thus derives from Levinas’s remarks in “Enigma and Phenomenon” (“Someone unknown to me rang my doorbell and interrupted my work . . . he brought me into his affairs and his difficulties, troubling my good conscience”), is not wholly improvident, but it is incomplete. For one’s private “good conscience” is *already* disturbed by the (scemingly) “faceless” objects of domestic life. In other words, before the doorbell even rings, my home is *already* “haunted.”

Contrasting Levinas's position with the Hegelian concept of "mutual recognition," Alford claims that while "Dialectic requires dialogue, contact, even struggle," according to Levinas "across the infinite space that divides us there can be little human contact" (p. 27). He then proceeds: "I serve the other, but I am not attached to the other, in the sense of needing or desiring the other. . . . Attachment as need for others, as the desire for particular others . . . is absent in Levinas" (pp. 28–29), and finally: "For Murdoch, the fundamental moral problem is the tendency of the ego to erase the reality of others. Her solution is love" (p. 35). Again, Alford's reflections are not straightforwardly erroneous. But the allegation that we simply do not find "contact," "desire," and "love" in Levinas's work is misleading, as I shall illustrate with just a few key passages.

As we have already begun to see, according to Levinas it is the potential for self-sacrifice that constitutes the "meaning of the human adventure" (*AT*, p. 227). In the realm of pure animality (much like the realm of naive domesticity), one's interests move circularly from self to world and back again. In other words, Being is marked by its continual recuperation, replenishment and nostalgic homeward-ness. Such a model is thus marked by what Levinas describes as the "interestedness" of "need."³³ But the other is precisely the one who disrupts this economy of satisfaction, interjecting the exuberance of "desire"³⁴ into the (apparently) egological narrative. Henceforth the interhuman relation can be "considered from another perspective,"

[as] concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire which carries us beyond the finite Being of the world. . . . God, as the God of alterity and transcendence, can only be understood in terms of that interhuman dimension which, to be sure, emerges in the phenomenological-ontological perspective of the intelligible world, but which cuts through and perforates the totality of presence and points towards the absolutely Other. (*EOL*, pp. 56–57)

Need opens up a world that is *for me*: it returns to itself. Even a sublime need, such as the need for salvation, is still a nostalgia, a longing to go back. A need is return to self, the anxiety of the I for itself, egoism. . . . In Desire the I is borne toward the Other (*Autrui*) in such a way as to compromise the sovereign self-identification of the I, for which need is only nostalgia. . . . The movement toward the Other (*Autrui*), instead of completing me or contenting me, implicates me. . . . The Desirable does not gratify my Desire but hollows it out, and somehow nourishes me with

new hungers. . . . The Desire for the Other (*Autrui*), which we live in the most ordinary social experience, is the fundamental movement, a pure transport, an absolute orientation, sense. (*BPW*, pp. 51–52)

This emphasis on “desire” thus enables Levinas to speak of a movement toward the other which never seeks a return; an absolute gratuitousness or a “pure” gift which disrupts the economy of Being. *Desire*, in order to be worthy of that title, must be distinguished from *need* insofar as the former maintains its own insatiability.³⁵ And to illustrate, Levinas relates desire to a specific type of sensibility: the touch of the caress, “where the subject who is in contact with another goes beyond this contact. . . . what is caressed is not touched, properly speaking”:

It is not the softness or warmth of the hand given in contact that the caress seeks. The seeking of the caress constitutes its essence by the fact that the caress does not know what it seeks. This “not knowing,” this fundamental disorder, is the essential. It is like a game with something slipping away, a game absolutely without project or plan, not with what can become ours or us, but with something other, always other, always inaccessible, and always still to come. . . .³⁶

The desire for the other thus subverts ontological being-in-the-world by denying the subject its “needful” intentionality and nostalgia.³⁷ (On a related point, we should also note that Levinas does *not* disengage *le Dire* [the *Saying*] from *le Dit* [the *Said*] as radically as Alford suggests.³⁸ Rather, *Saying* is the nonreducible *movement-toward-the-other* that leaves its trace in even the most unethical *Said*. While Levinas bemoans the fact that “language as *Said* has [in traditional Western thought] been privileged, to the exclusion or minimizing of its dimension as *Saying*,” he readily acknowledges that “there is no *Saying* that is not the saying of a *Said*.” The point is that *Saying* is “not reducible to the thematization and exposition of a *Said*” [*OS*, p. 141].³⁹ In short, what interests Levinas is [contra Alford] *precisely* language as “contact” [*BPW*, p. 80] with the other.)

On the question of “love”—something which Alford praises in Murdoch but, by implication, thinks is lacking in Levinas—extreme caution is required, not least because Levinas expressly warns against “the self-sufficient ‘I-Thou’ forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love” (*TY*, p. 213). Indeed, his reservations concerning the “society of love” (*EN*, p. 20) are pertinent here. For

what remains problematic about the relation between lovers is their tendency toward exclusivity—and thus their wilful forgetting of the “third party.” In the face of the lover one tends to see *only* the lover—the lover’s face is saturated with its own intimate significance. But at the heart of the love relation lays an easily neglected sacrificial injustice insofar as one always loves the beloved “to the detriment of another.” *If* there were only two (you and I), our relation could indeed be described in terms of the intimacy of “love.” But we are *not* alone; there is a third party who also demands love, and who is therefore “wounded” by *our* “amorous dialogic” (*EN*, p. 21). Thus, Levinas concludes, insofar as “the lover and the loved one” exist *as though* they “were alone in the world . . . love is not the beginning of society, but its negation” (*EN*, p. 20). But it seems to me that Levinas’s caution here—extreme though it may be—is not a simple *denial* or *repudiation* of love. Rather, he is warning against the apolitical seductions of love; the temptation to withdrawal from the gritty realm of worldly responsibility into the refuge of love’s intimacy. Far from constituting an abstract, otherworldly attitude, Levinas (whether or not he overstates the case) is actually drawing attention to the otherworldly dangers of *love itself*.

On Alford’s account, the “absence of attachment in Levinas . . . reflects a passionate commitment to exit,” for, the “other is my exit, my release, my salvation. Here finally is an exit from being” (pp. 30, 33). While Levinas does refer to “*escaping* from being” (*EL*, p. 59), given what we have already seen, this “escape” cannot constitute any sort of “salvation.” On the contrary, Levinas insists that “the subjective” is irrevocably “knotted in ethics” (*EL*, p. 95). Alford is thus correct to conclude—from Levinas’s frequent evocation of *The Brothers Karamozov*¹⁰—that there is “no tragedy in Levinas. . . . Guilty man is not tragic man,” and likewise that Levinas’s “idealization of guilt is incompatible with tragedy” (p. 39). (It would, for example, be mistaken to join with Baudelaire and lament “the tyranny of the human face.”¹¹) If there were any conceptual space in Levinas’s account for lamentation or nostalgia—either of a religious or Rousseauesque “fall” from innocence—then one might indeed speak of “tragedy” here. But there is no preexistent “I” *to which* the ethical disruption “happens.” For, this “is an ethics that does not presuppose some sort of ontological layer as its substance. The ‘me’ [*moi*] implied in this intrigue is a fissured subject. . . . There is no refuge for this subject . . . no possible escape . . . there is neither shelter nor screen” (*GDT*, pp. 195–96):

The responsibility for the other . . . is the contracting of an ego . . . identity gnawing away at itself—in a *remorse*. Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. I have not done anything and *I have always been* under accusation—persecuted. (*OTB*, p. 114, my emphasis)

Given that Levinas does not seek salvation or liberation from his “ghosts,” we must be clear about the sense of “remorse” he has in mind. The burden of guilt is not merely of ancient origin, but “preoriginal” or “immemorial” (*BPW*, pp. 116, 60),⁴² and this is why the traditional theological “promise . . . of the ‘Happy End’” (*PM*, p. 175) must be called into question. For in the “augmentation of guilt,” Levinas insists, “there is no rest for the self” (*BPW*, p. 144).⁴³ Let us here recall that, to be “in the first person” (*LR*, p. 82) is *already* to be a trespasser because, simply through my being-in-the-world, I am guilty of *taking another’s place*. This is why we must attempt to think outside the idea of an acquired “guilt complex” (*GDT*, p. 178) and beyond the inherent economics of traditional theological notions of guilt. Instead, Levinas asks us to conceive of “a debt in the *I*, older than any loan” (*EN*, p. 227)⁴⁴; that is, of “a guilt . . . before having taken any decision or having accomplished any free act, and consequently before having committed any offence from which this responsibility might have flowed” (*GCM*, p. 170).⁴⁵

“What is an individual if not a usurper?” Levinas thus inquires, “what is signified by the advent of conscience, and even the first spark of spirit, if not the discovery of corpses beside me and my horror of existing by assassination?” (*DE*, p. 100).⁴⁶ By his own admission, both Levinas’s personal life and philosophy are “dominated” by the “memory of the Nazi horror” (*DE*, p. 291). One must therefore read his work as a sustained attempt to respond to the question: “can we speak of an absolute commandment after Auschwitz? Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality?” (*PM*, p. 175). For it is the death camps that ultimately drive his vocabulary of *radical* guilt—which is, after all, nothing less than the “guilt of the survivor.”⁴⁷

Alford thus rightly asks of Levinas: “Must any contact with the real other exploit the other? And if our answer is yes, then what sort of human relationships shall we have in this world?” (p. 36). What, in the final analysis, are we to say in response to this crucial question? Of course, Levinas does not offer ethical formulae or practical advice, but

that was never his objective. What he does offer, I think, is a powerful, often compelling, if not always entirely transparent reminder that I cannot “feel myself innocent” (*GCM*, p. 91), and that in the “relationship to the face of the other there are precisely no assurances” (*IRB*, p. 145)⁴⁸ and no “escape” (*EOI*, p. 63).

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3. Arthur Schopenhauer, *On Human Nature*, sel. and trans. T. B. Saunders (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918), p. 123.
4. Hilary Putnam, “Levinas and Judaism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 36.
5. Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. 103; hereafter abbreviated *OS*.
6. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996), p. 168; hereafter abbreviated *TI*.
7. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 43; hereafter abbreviated *GCM*.
8. Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (California: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 52; hereafter abbreviated *IRB*.
9. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), p. 77; hereafter abbreviated *OTB*.
10. Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 188; hereafter abbreviated *GDT*. See also Levinas, *GCM*, p. 163. Following Levinas’s phenomenology of the “dwelling” in *Totality and Infinity*, Jacques Derrida makes much the same point concerning the “home” and “hospitality” in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 102; *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 26–28, 54–56; *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 61.
11. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 97; hereafter abbreviated *EI*.

12. Levinas claims that the human is an “unreasonable animal” because it “cannot not admire saintliness . . . that is, the person who in his being is more attached to the being of the other than to his own” (“The Paradox of Morality: an Interview with Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. Andrew Benjamin and T. Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* [London: Routledge, 1988], p. 172; hereafter abbreviated *PM*).
13. See Levinas, *EL*, p. 89; *OTB*, p. 117; *GDT*, p. 138; *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 91, 103; hereafter *BPW*; *Alterity & Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 107; hereafter *AT*.
14. See also Derrida, “A Word of Welcome,” in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, pp. 15–123.
15. See Levinas, *IRB*, pp. 47, 59, 211–12.
16. See *ibid.*, pp. 67, 133, 214.
17. Levinas read Rousseau during his incarceration as a prisoner of war. On at least one occasion Levinas (echoing Rousseau) exalts “the goodness of everyday life” over the failure and corruption of “every [political] attempt to organize the human” (*AT*, p. 107).
18. See Levinas’s remarks on democracy in *PM*, p. 175.
19. See Levinas, *IRB*, pp. 53, 119, 113. Levinas’s “philosophy rests upon a prephilosophical experience” insofar as “the things that we have within our horizon always overflow their content” (*IRB*, p. 159).
20. Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 195; hereafter abbreviated *EN*.
21. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Scán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. xiv; hereafter abbreviated *DF*.
22. Levinas, “Ethics of the Infinite,” in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp. 63–64; hereafter abbreviated *EOI*.
23. Blaise Pascal, *The Pensées*, trans. J. M. Cohen (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1961), §231. Michel de Montaigne similarly warns: “. . . no profit can be made except at another’s expense . . . let anyone search his heart and he will find that our inward wishes are for the most part born and nourished at the expense of others” (*Essays*, trans. J. M. Cohen [Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin, 1958], p. 48).
24. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in *The Social Contract & Discourses*, trans. G. D. H. Cole (New York: J. M. Dent, 1930), p. 207.
25. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Scán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 82; hereafter abbreviated *LR*.
26. See also Levinas, *IRB*, pp. 53, 92, 98, 128, 225.
27. See also Levinas, *OS*, p. 48; *GCM*, pp. 169, 171, 175.
28. For a more detailed analysis—with specific reference to Derrida’s recent work—see my “Doing Justice to the Derrida-Levinas Connection: A Response to Mark Dooley,” forthcoming in *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 29 (2003).

29. See René Descartes, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach (Middlesex, U.K.: Nelson and Sons, 1976), p. 73.
30. See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), p. 92; *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy (2d bk.: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989), pp. 171, 201, 206; Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 153–54.
31. Levinas, *EOL*, p. 63; *TI*, p. 155.
32. See Levinas, *TI*, pp. 153, 154, 156, 158.
33. See Levinas, *BPW*, pp. 51, 55; *TI*, p. 117.
34. *BPW*, p. 51; see also pp. 52, 55, 76.
35. See Levinas, *El*, p. 92; *BPW*, pp. 44–45, 76–77; *TI*, p. 63.
36. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), p. 81. Regarding the ethics of touch see also Silvia Benso, *The Face of Things: A Different Side of Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 160, 162f.
37. See Levinas, *El*, pp. 32, 61, 67–69.
38. See Alford, p. 30.
39. See also Levinas, *NTR*, p. 48; *GDT*, p. 151; *BPW*, pp. 112–13; *OS*, pp. 142–43.
40. See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov I*, trans. David Magarshack (Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin, 1967), p. 339.
41. Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose and La Fanfarlo*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1996), p. 53.
42. See also Levinas, *GDT*, p. 162.
43. See also Levinas, *TI*, p. 84; *AT*, p. 106; *GDT*, pp. 195–96, 208–9.
44. See also Levinas, *GDT*, pp. 12, 20, 138, 161, 193, 195; *IRB*, pp. 52, 55–56, 192, 204, 225.
45. As John D. Caputo puts it, Levinas has “installed bad conscience as a kind of structural feature of ethical life” (“The End of Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. H. LaFollette [Oxford: Blackwell, 2000], p. 116).
46. See Levinas, *IRB*, p. 164.
47. See Levinas, *IRB*, pp. 124, 126; *GDT*, pp. 12, 17; *LR*, p. 291. Compare with Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 59, 62. Derrida has written much recently on this aspect of Levinas’s work.
48. See also Levinas, *IRB*, p. 175.