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The Question of Ultimate Meaning in Emmanuel Levinas

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1. THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF LEVINAS' APPROACH TO THE QUESTION OF ULTIMATE MEANING

The question of meaning in human living represents more than just a particular concern of the human being; it embodies an entire way of thinking and being by the questioner at stake in this question. A definite way of grasping the guiding presence of meaning in living already presupposes some basic familiarity with and confidence in the potentials of discerning beings and meanings. Thus the Socratic notion of philosophical thinking as the search for the intelligible meaning of living, as wisdom for the art of living, is tested by claiming the accessibility of a thoughtful response to the question of meaning in human living. In the final analysis, the very nature and the boundary of human thinking (of philosophizing) are in the balance in the pursuit of the question of ultimate meaning, in the hope of the emergence of ultimate meaningfulness in spite of the threat of ultimate meaninglessness, in demanding a visible ultimate horizon for being a human being and for all that which is.

It is understandable, though not necessarily acceptable, then, that the exacting demands of thinking about ultimate meaningfulness and ultimate meaninglessness (at least at times) distract from and benumb, rather than focus on and awaken, the courage to think, the will to endure the dangers of questioning in the midst of uncertainties and unpredictabilities. A general paralysis of the search can be treated quite comfortably by administering some solutions of final '-isms' (skepticism, fideism, dogmatism, utopianism, agnosticism, irrationalism): the genuine daring of thinking, however, cannot be restored by adopting instant answers, by despairing about even without having tried the venture of thinking, i.e., the attention to that which calls forth thinking, the unfathomable 'fact' that there are beings and that human beings can say something about them, that they can find meanings in the midst of beings even when exposed to nothingness, anxiety, and despair. Thus the struggle with the question of ultimate meaning brings with it the exposure of the innermost potentials and the highest ambitions of the thought of a thinker.

An example of this exposure can be found in the courageous confession and intellectual honesty of J.-P. Sartre claiming that 'atheism is a cruel and long-range affair: I think

I've carried it through' (Sartre, 1969, p. 158; see also pp. 159, 156–157, 64–65, 63, 61, 16). The higher a thought dares to venture, the more vulnerable it becomes. Can there be a higher ambition of thinking than the exploration of ultimate meaning and reality, of the ultimate, though always receding, horizon of human living? The essence of this way of thinking is not identical with the expression and explanation of personal commitment to an ultimate meaning; it rather consists in the daring exposure of personal conviction in dialogue, in upholding the same sense of direction of lived meaning in private as well as in public. This 'maieutic method' of thinking, the search for wisdom according to the Socratic nature of dialogue, is quite 'dangerous' because, as Kierkegaard observes, it 'incites the listener to independent thinking and therefore does not draw any conclusion, but leaves a sting' (Kierkegaard, 1960, p. 120). The exploration of the ultimate meaning of living ought to be rooted in a hermeneutics of facticity, in the attunement to the fullness of concrete living because the 'weight' (thus the meaning) of living is included in living; it is not something added to it from the outside (Heidegger, 1985, p. 100). The attention to the question of ultimate meaning is not a distraction from but a participation in daily living, in the 'ethos' of being a human being in the contemporary world.

The phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas is distinguished by the courage to think about the ultimate questions and about the primordial ethical dimension of human reality; it does not shy away from exploring the ultimate meaning of human living. His analysis of the nature of transcendence, of the historical function of the notion of Being, and his existential hermeneutics of human relationships and of temporality go beyond the pretensions of intellectual indifference towards and distantiating from the final existential questions (e.g., the idea of God, the nature of the ethical demand in human living, the affirmation of ultimate meaningfulness). Contemporary philosophical reflection often claims to be divested from ultimate certitudes, from 'metaphysical' commitment as well as from decisions about 'religious' faith. It is legitimate to wonder regarding the etiology and the semiology of this intellectual 'sobriety' and volitional 'neutrality'. Is this deconstruction (*Abbau*) of the Socratic (metaphysical) task of thinking the sign and symptom of the end(ing) of philosophy (e.g., in the sense of M. Heidegger)? Or, it may be asked more than just rhetorically, is this distancing rather a manifestation of the 'poverty' of philosophy already proclaimed by K. Marx? Is the philosophical 'silence' about God and ultimateness a cultural deference to sacred (even theological) wisdom or the celebration and reenactment of the phenomenon of the 'death of God' discovered by Nietzsche's Zarathustra? Can the rejection of the metaphysics of consolation (the elimination of the transcendent meaning of the world due to its epistemological uncertainty) be overcome by restoring to the world its depth in some 'fragmentary immanence' as suggested by A. Camus (Camus, 1955, p. 34)? The ethical phenomenology of Levinas is not a victim but a survivor of the struggle with these questions that are becoming more and more compelling at the eclipse of Western rationality and cultural primacy. His thought intends to overcome the existential failures of the anonymity of thinking cultivated in the third person and rooted in intellectual or 'ideological' neutrality towards basic questions and convictions found in the conduct of life.

2. LIFE, WORK, AND PHILOSOPHICAL BACKGROUND

The basic insights of Levinas into the question of ultimate meaning belong to the very nature and the main thrust of his philosophical thinking. The background and the main principles of the existential, phenomenological hermeneutics of Levinas include the analysis of the axiological dimensions, of the meaning-seeking and meaning-giving potentials of the human being, of the human way of dwelling in the world with other human beings and things of nature. The recognition of this background shows the way to the 'place' of the question of ultimate meaning in his thought as a whole.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in 1906, in Kaunas, Lithuania. His orthodox Jewish family background provided him with Talmudic culture. His childhood was influenced by the Hebrew Bible as well as by reading the writings of Pushkin and Tolstoy (Spiegelberg, 1982, p. 612). During his youth in the Ukraine he saw one of the great historical events of this century, the Russian revolution. In 1923 he moved to France and became a French citizen in 1930. He studied philosophy at the University of Strasbourg (1923–1930) and audited the lectures of E. Husserl for two semesters (1928–1929) at the University of Freiburg where he also encountered M. Heidegger. He was drafted into the French army in 1939 and was a prisoner of war. He lost his Lithuanian family as victims of the Nazi extermination of millions of Jews. Thus he personally experienced the great historical evil and catastrophe of the twentieth century. He taught philosophy at the University of Poitiers, at the University of Paris-Nanterre, and (since 1973) at the Sorbonne (Levinas, 1985, p. viii). Levinas is one of the greatest philosophers in France today; he is regarded as a seminal and original thinker. His stature within the phenomenological movement is comparable to that of J.-P. Sartre, P. Ricoeur, and J. Derrida; his thought is the focus of renewed attention in Europe as well as in America.

The most comprehensive bibliography of and on the works of Levinas is R. Burggraeve's *Emmanuel Levinas: Une bibliographie primaire et secondaire (1929–1985)*, (Burggraeve, 1986). The two most important treatises of Levinas, also available in English translation, are *Totalité et infini* (1961) and *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974). These seminal works and his writings which follow (many of them available also in English translation), are the most essential not only for the understanding of his ethical phenomenology but also for the exploration of his position on the question of ultimate meaning: *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930); *De l'existant à l'existence* (1947); *Le temps at l'autre* (1947; 1979); *Et découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (1949); *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972); *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (1982); *Ethique et infini* (1982); *Transcendance et intelligibilité* (1984); *Collected Philosophical Papers* (1987). An extensive interview with Levinas dealing with key aspects of his system of thought and helpful basic studies of his philosophy can be found in R.A. Cohen's collected volume *Face to Face with Levinas* (Cohen, 1986). A substantial presentation of the philosophical ideas of Levinas is included in H. Spiegelberg's historical review of the phenomenological movement (Spiegelberg, 1982, pp. 612–649). The best first introduction to Levinas' entire work is the text of his conversations with P. Nemo; it is an excellent and concise explanation of his thought (Levinas, 1985, pp. 21–122).

The main questions at the core of the phenomenology of Levinas are not the creation of merely abstract speculation or intellectual alternatives and possibilities reached by the interpretation of great philosophical texts; his philosophical bibliography reflects an existential biography, a struggle with the great existential experiences of the times. His very first readings and early education, the study of the Russian classics (Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevski) and of the great writers of Western Europe (Shakespeare), and his familiarity with the Bible as the book of books lead him to the discovery and understanding of philosophy as the search for the meaning of life; they prepared him for Plato and Kant (Levinas, 1985, pp. 22, 117). He makes a clear distinction between philosophical (reason) and Biblical (faith) tradition; Biblical texts cannot be mixed with philosophical arguments. Any connection between them or their 'harmony' comes about not by means of reconciling the two traditions but because 'every philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences, and because for me reading the Bible has belonged to these founding experiences' (Levinas, 1985, p. 24). His reflections on the origins of the religious dimension of his thought emphasize a clear line of demarcation between philosophical and confessional texts, between their methods of exegesis and separate languages (Cohen, 1986, p. 18). The development of his thought was shaped by his initiation into Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, the Cartesians, and Kant during his studies at Strasbourg. However, the more significant influence on him during this time was the discovery of Durkheim's theory of 'levels of being' and H. Bergson's concept of time (i.e., his affirmation of the 'ontological' priority of the duration irreducible to linear, homogeneous time) (Levinas, 1985, pp. 26-28). Levinas later was exposed to and broke with Hegel's phenomenology under the influence of F. Rosenzweig's critique of the Hegelian philosophy of totality. According to Levinas, the thought of Hegel is the 'supreme expression' of the Western tradition (Levinas, 1987a, p. 128), the culmination of the philosophical nostalgia for totality (Levinas, 1985, pp. 75-76). He keeps a distance from the philosophy of Nietzsche because he (Nietzsche) undermines the universal intuition of truth and because of the political uses of Nietzschean ideas (Levinas, 1987a, p. 47).

The most decisive influence on Levinas' thinking, according to his own account, was phenomenology, the encounter with E. Husserl and M. Heidegger. 'Indeed, from the point of view of philosophical method and discipline, I remain even today a phenomenologist' (Cohen, 1986, p. 14). He regards phenomenology as the methodical disclosure of how meaning comes to be, of how it emerges in our becoming conscious of our intentional rapport with the world. This discovery of meaning in lived experience represents the most fundamental contribution of Husserl to modern philosophy. Thus phenomenology recovers the origins of meaning in our life-world (*Lebenswelt*) (Cohen, 1986, p. 15), and not in the theorizing attitude of idealistic (e.g., neo-Kantian) philosophy. Husserl's notion of intentionality, the directedness of consciousness to things and to the world in a meaning-giving and meaning-receiving encounter, contributes to the ethical thought of Levinas, to his way of understanding values as well as the relation to the other. Value is not the modification of beings by knowledge; it 'comes from a specific attitude of consciousness, of a non-theoretical intentionality, straightforwardly irreducible to knowledge' (Levinas, 1985, p. 32). M. Heidegger, according to the judgement of Levinas, altered the

course of Western philosophy. 'I think that one cannot seriously philosophize today without traversing the Heideggerian path in some form or other' (Cohen, 1986, p. 15; see also Levinas, 1985, p. 42). He regards Heidegger's *Being and Time* as one of the five finest books in the history of philosophy (the others being Plato's *Phaedrus*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Bergson's *Time and Free Will*) (Levinas, 1985, pp. 37-38), as the most far-reaching development of the potentials of the phenomenological method. He admires the methodological (direct, irreducible aspect of the phenomena) as well as the thematic (analysis of death, anxiety, nothingness) aspects of the existential analysis and recognizes the significance of Heidegger's fundamental thesis that Being is not a being (the ontological difference); he is less enthusiastic, however, about the later phase of his development (e.g., the exegesis of Hölderlin) because it strays away from phenomenology and seems to become 'much less verifiable' than his earlier work (Levinas, 1985, p. 42). In spite of his sharp criticism of Heidegger's thought, an integral part of his own existential hermeneutics, Levinas acknowledges the value of Heidegger's 'new way of reading the history of philosophy' and his ability to discover and develop what has remained unthought in the thought of the great philosophers (Levinas, 1985, pp. 43-44). The main principles and the basic insights of Levinas' phenomenological philosophy are at stake and at work in the following reflections on his way of thinking about the question of ultimate meaning.

3. MAIN INSIGHTS INTO THE QUESTION AND AFFIRMATION OF ULTIMATE MEANING

3.1 *The Primacy of the Ethical*

The question of ultimate meaning is situated at the very core of the thought of Levinas; it is an essential element of his affirmation of the primordially of the relation of one human being to another, of the recognition of the irreducible otherness and transcendence of the other as neighbor, and, in the final analysis, the manifestation of the infinite, of absolute otherness and presence. The sense of ultimateness (and thus the boundary of understanding, the meaning of ontology, and the meaning of Being), that is, the 'place' of ultimate structure or situation, is harbored and cultivated (nurtured) in the concreteness of the relation to the other, in the proximity of infinity, of God or absolute transcendence, in the 'social relation' of justice, and not in the totalizing claims of conceptualization and speculative alternatives. This recovery of the primacy of the ethical (of life, of the lived relation with the other) represents a subversion of the primordial notion of Being, of the imperialism of the cleverness (and thus of the ideological potency) of the empty abstractions of conceptual frameworks.

These insights constitute more than an experience of the Western confusion about the sense of ultimateness, of the loss of the peace of the abundance of life and Being; they indicate the courage to think further than and thus to venture across the sense of despair and self-entrapment of the prevailing attitudes in at least some forms of contemporary philosophy and culture. This new economy or order of thinking goes beyond the frustrations of mere criticism of or nostalgia about the past (reduced to a fixed notion of tradi-

tion); it recovers the sense of ultimateness as the presence of something infinite, of something truly great, in the finite, in the proximity and overabundance of the life of human presence, in the facing of absolute otherness, in the call and the demand of the neighbor, in the horizon of true presence, in the ethical relation (Levinas, 1987a, p. 136; 1985, p. 109; 1981, p. 149). The question of ultimate meaning, then, is something that ought to be recognized as being 'otherwise than Being,' that is, otherwise than a neutral ontological theme; it is, in its ultimate situation, an ethical awakening and demand that is connected with the access to the idea of God and with the relation to the other. The principle of absolute transcendence and the phenomenological ethics of the 'face' (of human presence), key insights of Levinas' thought as a whole, are also the main source of his affirmation of ultimate meaning, of the recovery of a post-ontological sense of ultimateness.

3.2 *The Idea of Meaning Leads to the Notion of God*

The crisis of meaning (especially the insecurity about the definition of ultimate meaning) and the pervasiveness of the 'sense' (feeling) of absurdity are connected with the question of God; the confusion about ultimate meaning is part of the skepticism about ultimate being. According to Levinas, the crisis of meaning (fulness) is 'experienced by our contemporaries as the crisis of monotheism' (Levinas, 1987b, p. 89). The celebration of the phenomenon of the 'death of God' (described by Nietzsche and rediscovered by others after him) is a proclamation of the loss of unity, of the sense of an ultimate meaningfulness that guides all meanings. Cultural meanings (interpretations of the meaning of life, death, and of human activity) do not come about at random; they are formed in a dialogue with other human beings capable of signifying of themselves. Meanings, at the root of the pluralism of cultures, emerge in human interactions; they cannot be understood as multiple expressions of Being. Meaning is beyond or otherwise than Being. 'Absurdity is not non-sense, but the isolation of innumerable meanings, the absence of sense that orients them' (Levinas, 1987b, p. 89). The sense of absurdity, then, is the lack of the sense of meanings, an absence or eclipse of a sense of direction or horizon of particular meanings. The diverse cultural meanings are not ultimate, not horizontal, not directional; they are merely fragmented meanings and the broken 'pieces' of a unity, of a possible horizontal wholeness.

The phenomenon of the 'death of God' (the crisis of metaphysical monotheism), according to Levinas' explanation, consists in the loss of the influence of the transcendent, supernatural idea of God over the human being. The removal of God from the life of the human being (cultural atheism) merely accompanies the loss of the sense of the world ordained to God. The sense of the genuine transcendence of God remains unexplained and even obscured by the reduction of the idea of God to a force within a system of reciprocities, by the moralizing interpretation of divine interventions in history. Thus the relation to God as absolute transcendence, as the relation to absolute alterity, is undermined. Here Levinas is suggesting that the idea of God was merely used in this way in order to derive or safeguard meaningfulness, to account for a sense of meanings that orients all meanings.

The main thesis of Levinas subverts this order of understanding; it wants to derive

(not to presuppose) the idea of God (ultimate meaning) from the analysis of sense, (meaning. Levinas' thesis, the 'new' understanding of the connection between ultimate meaning and the idea of God, is stated quite clearly in his conclusion: 'We do not think that the meaningful could do without God, nor that the idea of being or of the being (entities could be substituted for him, so as to bring meaning to the unity of sense without which there is no sense' (Levinas, 1987b, p. 90). This sense, however, cannot be described starting with the idea of God based on egoistic, subjectivistic concerns of the self. For Levinas, it is sense, the meaning that orients all meanings, that ought to be analyzed and that leads to the notion of God harbored within it. The idea of ultimate meaning, then, at least for Levinas, is connected with the idea of God and not, at least not ultimately, with the notion of Being (ontology). The question of ultimate meaning is essentially a question of ethics beyond ontology.

3.3 *Absolute Otherness and Presence*

Levinas' attention to the question of God is focused on the idea of God as absolute transcendence, as the infinite, as the totally other and on the nature of the relation (access) of the human being to God. His insights contribute to the purification of the notion of God and to the discernment of the way to the recognition of (response to) God in the concreteness of the relation to the other, to the neighbor. Absolute transcendence becomes manifest in the face (in facing); the infinite leaves a trace in the finite. The idea of God, then, is not grasped by objectifying thinking; it cannot be recognized by mythical or mystical ventures (pretensions, approaches). 'The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face' (Levinas, 1969, p. 78). The relation with the infinite other, with the transcendent, is a social relation as the 'place' of its appeal and solicitation. Thus the 'proximity of the other,' of the neighbor, is 'an ineluctable moment of the revelation of an absolute presence ... which expresses itself' (Levinas, 1969, p. 78). This epiphany solicits us in the face of the stranger, of the widow, of the orphan; the absolute presence reveals itself, solicits us by the destitution of these faces. Thus the relation with the metaphysical is an ethical comportment; it is not a thematization. 'God raises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered to men' (Levinas, 1969, p. 78). This also indicates that our possibility of welcoming (taking in, accepting) God in our fellow human being goes further than the thematization of objects. Thus according to Levinas, 'There can be no 'knowledge of God'' separated from the relationship with men. The other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God' (Levinas, 1969, p. 78). Theological concepts remain 'empty and formal frameworks' without their ethical signification (Levinas, 1969, p. 79). It is quite significant that these ideas of Levinas about God are intrinsically connected with his main thesis on the primacy of the ethical according to his main works (Levinas, 1969; 1981). He regards the relation of one human being to another (the phenomenon of 'facing') as the 'irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest' (Levinas, 1969, p. 79). He calls the idea of the infinite 'the ultimate structure' (Levinas, 1969, p. 80) and identifies the face to face ('facing') as 'an ultimate situation' (Levinas, 1969, p. 81; see also 1981, p. 160).

These ideas belong to the very core of Levinas' philosophy. The ethical (

primordiality in 'facing') is the manifestation, the presence of the depth and fullness of 'reality' (life). The relation to absolute transcendence, to the infinite, is not the result of thematization but, rather, of the manifestation of the presence of absolute transcendence in the proximity of the other as the face to face, in the infinite ethical exigency of the face to face. This primordiality cannot be reduced to a concept, though it is possible to conceptualize (formally, in an empty way) about it. Thus the ultimate sense of transcendence is guided by the 'face to face' like the understanding in E. Kant's system is 'guided' or made possible by the object, by the given 'something.' Thematization and objectifying thinking cannot discern the noesis without a noema; they can not be witnesses to the manifestation of absolute otherness, of presence, without falsifying otherness, transcendence, and presence.

Ultimate meaning, according to Levinas' way of thinking, is found not by means of a system of formal and empty concepts, but by recognizing the primordial ethical demand in the face of the other (you shall not kill), in the relationship of justice with other human beings as something more primordial than any other way of relating to others and to the world. The ultimate, absolute transcendence, the ultimate structure and situation of all meaning, becomes manifest in the face (proximity) of the other, in the sense of absolute otherness and presence. The idea of the infinite, of absolute transcendence (and thus the relation, the access to God), comes to the human being as the overflow of (absolute) presence in facing the other, in the ethical relation of justice as the enactment of the truly metaphysical. The ultimate meaning, the meaning that gives a sense of direction to all meaning, then, according to Levinas' phenomenology of the face and principle of absolute transcendence as reflecting his final position on this issue, is God. This understanding of ultimate meaning, it may be acknowledged, raises some basic questions about and opens up a new horizon on the very idea of God in philosophical discourse and theological reflection.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT OF LEVINAS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All the main ideas (transcendence, infinity, alterity, absolute transcendence, the face, the primordiality of the ethical, the sense of goodness as being otherwise than Being, justice, God as absolute transcendence) of Levinas' philosophy are at stake in his understanding of ultimate meaning. The assessment of his conclusions about and of his contributions to the question of ultimate meaning, then, represents a critical reflection on the nature, boundaries, and limitations of his way of thinking. The final, concluding phase of this study is not a review of but, rather, a questioning dialogue with his insights into the discernment and affirmation of ultimate meaning.

The main strength of Levinas' way of thinking consists in its ability and willingness to affirm ultimate meaningfulness, and thus in overcoming the contemporary gravitation towards meaninglessness and the indifference of official public discourse towards the ultimate questions. The greatest danger of postmetaphysical thinking may not be the deconstruction or destruction of the historically established understandings of ultimate meaning (and even of ultimate being) but, rather, the refusal of or the 'neutrality' towards the ethical imperatives (the lack of commitment to any concrete form of) ab-

mate meaning and understanding. The urgency of living and the primordiality of the ethical responsibility for the other (a guiding principle of Levinas' phenomenology) include a new sense of transcendence at the 'end' of the Western tradition of philosophy; they open up an alternative way of thinking about the ultimate horizon of human living, and bring about a recovery of hope against the intimations of despair.

Levinas' affirmation of ultimate meaning is not identical with positing some speculative idea or possibility as an unavoidable hypothesis for explaining beings and the life of the human being. His recognition of ultimate meaning is concrete, existential, and ethical-hermeneutical; it is an interpretation of the fullness of being a human being in the world, of the primordial experience of existence. The analysis of transcendence, of the notion of infinity, and of the relation to the other, in the last phase of discovery, leads to the recognition of God as the 'concrete' form of ultimate meaning. These ideas are quite valuable for rethinking the entire question of God, especially in the light of the separation of the 'idea' of Being (of *esse*) from the philosophical concept of God as claimed by Heidegger (Kovacs, 1990).

There are also some methodological lessons or conclusions that can be drawn from Levinas' approach to the study of ultimate meaningfulness. The exploration of the question of ultimate meaning cannot be reduced to the examination of idealized, theoretically produced concepts of meanings; it ought to return to and thus find the root of philosophical reflection in the prephilosophical (prereflective) experience, in lived and yet unthematized meaningfulness. Philosophical reflection and conceptualization are indispensable for the clarification of the ultimate horizon of human living and understanding; they, however, remain sterile agitation of the mind about great subjects when they lose their roots in living, in some form of pretheoretical experience, in the lived world.

The question of ultimate meaning is not (abstract) epistemological, but essentially ethical-metaphysical in nature. It belongs to the 'ethos,' to the way of living of the human being, to the guidance of the art of living. The very 'idea' of ultimate meaning, the sense of direction in living, therefore, is axiological as well as religious. The nature of and the search for ultimate understanding, then, go beyond the boundary and methodology of philosophy.

The ideas of Levinas on the phenomenon of transcendence and on 'facing' the other are an essential part of but do not develop a full, comprehensive perspective on the question of God (Levinas, 1981, pp. 151-158; 1985, pp. 136-138). They mainly give some indications about it by means of showing that the total otherness of the other culminates in (leads to the recognition of) some absolute transcendence (infinity, presence) called 'God'. It may be seen, however, in the light of even these fragmentary reflections, that the way to God is traced not through the elements of the sensuous or physical world (not through things) but, rather, through the life of 'facing,' through the recognition of the primordial and unmediated imperative of the other as 'face,' as 'facing' me. The way to God is not argumentation, but recognition; it is not cosmological (in the sense of classical metaphysics), but ethical and phenomenological. The ethical relation with the other is the source of meaning.

The idea of absolute transcendence in Levinas can be related thematically to the thesis

of M. Buber that the relationship of the human being (temporal Thou) to God (eternal Thou) is inseparable from the relationship of the human being with other human beings (from the Thou-attitude towards others) (Buber, 1958, pp. 116, 123–124, 136–137). The idea of God comes to mind, then, not as a response to a cosmological question but as the source of and the responsiveness to the ethical concern, as the horizon of ethical questioning. The notion of presence is not a physical 'here I am' (not a location) but the ethical relation of urgency ('here I am, send me'). Levinas indicates some references about this in the Hebrew Scriptures (Levinas, 1981, p. 149). The thought of Levinas may be quite helpful (it may be therapeutic) in tracing the way to the sense of absolute transcendence, to ultimate meaningfulness.

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