

“FOR YOU ALONE”:

A READING OF TRANSCENDENCE AND RELATIONSHIP IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS

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Abstract: The author, well known for his writings in practical theology and on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, presents a sustained spiritual-theological reflection on Levinas’ approach to transcendence and relationship. (Editor)

I am you, when
I am I.

To stand-for-no-one-and-nothing.
Unrecognized,
for you
alone.

(Paul Celan)¹

A principal concern of Levinas’ work is the face-to-face relation, “the proximity of person to person, the proximity of one’s neighbour, or the welcome we prepare for one another.”² Like other philosophers of dialogue and intersubjectivity (Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Luce Irigaray, for example³), his work is a sustained meditation on the importance of the relationship between the “self” and the “other.” What is distinctive in his

¹ *Ich bin du, wenn/ich ich bin.* (“I am you, when I am I”). It is with these lines from Paul Celan that Levinas introduces his key chapter, “Substitution” in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 99. The second verse is from Paul Celan, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Books), 233.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1.

³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribners/Collier, 1958); Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); Luce Irigaray, *To Be Two* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

reflections, however, is that inequality and asymmetry, rather than equality or mutuality, play a pivotal role in the relational encounter. Levinas always privileges You before me, You above me, You in front of me.⁴ It is as if transcendence magnetizes relation, always attracting and drawing me toward you, yet also resisting and refusing my assimilation of you. Reflecting on his work during a conversation, Levinas says the following, which I will then restate with slightly different words:

The principal task behind all these efforts consists in thinking the Other-in-the-Same . . . without thinking the Other as an other Same . . . The *in* does not signify an assimilation: the Other disturbs or awakens the Same; the Other troubles the Same, or inspires the Same, or the Same desires the Other, or awaits him.⁵

The principal task consists in thinking of the You-who-is-in-my-world. . . without thinking of You as simply another Me, as though You were the same as Me . . . The *in* does not mean assimilation. Rather, You disturb or awaken Me; You trouble Me, or You inspire Me, or I desire You, or I await You.

When I drift into myself, you come to disturb me, and I am awakened by your call to respond, to be-for-you. When I think all is well, you come to trouble me, and I find myself worrying and concerned for you. When I am caught in despair or indifference, you come to inspire me, and I am opened to a world of non-indifference. When I find myself coiled in anxiety, you come to arouse my desire, and I find myself yearning and waiting for you to come.

⁴ *Anteriority* – “before me”; *Superiority* – “above me”; *Exteriority* – “in front of me.” According to Paul Ricoeur, these three references delineate “the religious.” It is interesting that he does not speak of “interiority” or “within me.” See *Critique and Conviction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 170.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 80.

I am drawn by an inseparability that keeps me and you forever in relationship, what Levinas calls an “unrelenting relation.”⁶ I am “connected” by this inseparability that binds me to you, but this connection is never one of fusion, identification or assimilation. Rather, it is marked by a separation, or a difference, or an asymmetry between you and me. This asymmetrical character of the relational encounter is a key concern in Levinas’ writings. “If there is not this dissymmetry,” he says, “then no line of what I have written can hold.”⁷ Everything between you and me hinges on your uniqueness and difference from me rather than my identification with you. Levinas wants to preserve the other as unique, singular and separate, while at the same time maintaining a relation between the other and myself. And so we are led to wonder: What could it mean to speak of a relation that is marked at one and the same time by a separation and an inseparability? Or, what could it mean to speak of a relation between you and me that is also a non-relation? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says, “the description of this relation is the central issue of the present research.”⁸

Even though, like most of us, I know the experience of non-relation, I have tended to view this as a negativity, i.e., relation is good, non-relation is bad. However, Levinas has helped me understand that non-relation is not necessarily negative, that it can hold a surprising positivity – especially when relation and non-relation are not pitted against each other in opposition, as though one term were good and the other bad. The problem, I

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 295.

⁷ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 91.

⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

suspect, is that relation gets all the kudos and non-relation never gets a chance to speak its voice or its insight.⁹

In conversations with a measure of depth and intimacy, we often become aware of how separate the other is from me. I don't mean this in a negative sense, because this separateness is the very thing that provokes or lies at the foundation of our relation. After all, if we were all "one," we would know nothing of the other who is unique and distinctive. However, we are not "all one" – which means that, even in the most intimate relationships, there is still this undeniable and fundamental separateness that lies at the heart of our relational life. Without separation there would be no truth, no truth of you or me; there would only be the neutrality of all-absorbing, anonymous being. "Truth," says Levinas, "does not undo 'distance', does not result in the union of the knower and the known, does not issue in totality."¹⁰ Separation is important in the encounter with the other because it preserves the other from assimilation or fusion. "Transcendence refuses totality." Instead of the idea of totality, "there must be substituted the idea of separation resistant to synthesis."¹¹

And yet, we crave "oneness," harmony, peace. We crave an existence where there is no separation, no unsettlement, no rupture. All is well, we think, when all is One. All is well when all is at peace, at rest, at-one-ment. All is well when all is together, when there is no rupture or dissatisfaction between me and you – when we can, in effect, say that "I am" and "You are" such that there is no distinction between us, such that we are, finally – totally – One and the Same.

⁹ This, I suspect, is the problem underlying most binaries that bewitch our thinking – one pole in the relation always gains mastery or ascendancy over the other.

¹⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 60.

¹¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 293.

We hold in great esteem words like “mutuality” “reciprocity,” “equality,” “inclusivity,” “one-ness.” Maybe we need to also pay attention to words such as “separateness,” “asymmetry,” “difference,” “otherness.” Not as words of negativity (that is, contrary to all those “positives” previously named), but as words of excess and beyond, words of “excedence” and “transcendence,” *more than* and *other-than* – words that transcend the self-same quest for unity and sameness, words that open a gap-rift-rupture that signal the other’s refusal to be tamed by all-encompassing concepts such as oneness, identity, participation, totality. Rather, to be left always uncertain about ourselves, always implicated by what is other-than-me, always entangled by you and (in this sense) un-free and without autonomy, always marked and defined by the singular, the separate, the other one. According to Levinas, the ontology of Western thought has typically deadened the voice of the Other in preference for schemas of participation and totality:

Greek ontology . . . expressed the strong sentiment that the last word is unity, the many becoming one, the truth as synthesis. Hence Plato defined love – *eros* – as only *half*-divine, insofar as it lacks the full coincidence or unification of differences that he defined as divinity. [According to] this platonic ontology . . . love is perfect when two people become *one*. I am trying to work against this identification of the divine with unification or totality. Man’s relationship with the other is *better* as difference than as unity: sociality is better than fusion. The very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding in sameness.¹²

What interests me in Levinas’ reflections on the relation between me and you (“the same” and “the other”) is that he is profoundly concerned with *relation*, yet he distills a surprising “essence” of relation through his use of the word *separation*. He is not interested in abstract thought that

¹² Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, “Dialogue With Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Face To Face With Levinas*, Ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 22.

generalizes, envelops and assimilates. This type of thinking only serves to diminish or reduce *relation* by dissolving the singularity of the other, and yet it is this singularity that lies at the heart of the relational encounter. Only the singular, the separate, the unique, “the other” can defy the all-absorbing grasp of totalities. Every totalizing move is a move against relation and toward assimilation. The words which are most familiar to us in describing healthy relational encounters – “mutuality,” “reciprocity,” “participation,” “identification-with” – all these words are held in suspicion by Levinas, because he fears they are not striking enough to describe the relational encounter; that they do not let us hear the *non-relational* word.¹³ They do not let us hear the singular word spoken to me from a “separateness” that I am not part of. Levinas inserts into our relational vocabulary words we least expect, words like “separation,” “otherness,” “difference,” “singularity,” “alterity,” words that do not fit comfortably within our relational repertoire.

So what is Levinas doing here? Suppose we take for granted that mutuality and reciprocity are important in every relationship. “Yes, of course they are important,” we say. We know in our bones that they are important. We know how difficult it is to work toward healthy relationships that are mutual and reciprocal. Even though we can’t (and shouldn’t) take these words for granted, let’s suppose we could. I am suggesting this because I doubt we will hear Levinas’ word, “separation,” if we are all the time asking in the back of our minds, “what about mutuality, reciprocity?” I want to give Levinas’ thought its best chance to influence our relational

¹³ While Levinas writes appreciatively of Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue, he is also critical of Buber’s account of the “I-Thou” relation that is mutual, symmetrical and reciprocal. Levinas’ reflections on Buber’s work can be found, among other places, in *Outside the Subject*, 4-48; *Totality and Infinity*, 68-69; *Proper Names* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 17-39.

vocabulary. And if our relational vocabulary is linked in a fundamental way (as I believe it is) to our spiritual vocabulary, then this makes our listening to Levinas doubly important.

Let's begin with one of Levinas' typically dense and evocative sentences. "The same and the other maintain themselves in relationship and *absolve* themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated."¹⁴ Or again: "A relation in which the terms *absolve* themselves from the relation, yet remain absolute within the relation."¹⁵ The key words here (aside from relation) are *absolve* and *absolute*. If I were to translate these sentences, I would say something like: "I am in relation with you. Absolutely. I am in relation with you because of you. If you were not there, if you were not you, there would be no relation. Absolutely. You count, pre-eminently. However, if I am only in relation with you for my sake, then we have no relation; rather, there is only the self-same. Because I desire so much to be in relation to you, it is important that you are you. Therefore, I *absolve* you from "myself," from having to fulfill the conditions of *my* relationship with you. I *absolve* you from having to be reciprocal. I *absolve* you from having to make this relationship turn back on me, because I want it to turn on you . . . absolutely."

It has taken me numerous lines to say what Levinas says in one line. If I were to attempt a one-liner, I would say something like: "Every true relationship is structured by love." But of course, we all know this, so it doesn't really say much. Just like we all know that relationships are structured by mutuality and reciprocity, yet it seems to me that Levinas is holding the word "love" to its own flame; stretching love to see how far it

¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 102.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64.

will go, testing love to see if it really is love, holding love close to the flame of its own word to see if it really ignites. In other words, is my relationship to you so absolutely gratuitous that I absolve you from the relation, from the circle of exchange, from compensation or mutuality, from reciprocity toward me? This question sounds to me like it is hovering around a “definition” of the theological word, “grace” – absolutely amazing grace. It evokes the language of gift and self-donation, a self-giving that gives absolutely and absolves or *for-gives* the other’s indebtedness.

More and more I find myself resonating with a Levinasian sensibility that suffers little embarrassment linking the word “God” to the relational encounter.¹⁶ Indeed, this is where the word God counts most, rather than in the realms of belief or non-belief, theology or speculation, grand schemas or totalities. Rather, this word evokes in an exemplary way the experience of relation/non-relation or inseparability/separability. Levinas ties the word God to the word transcendence (or infinity). Transcendence, however, should not be read as the “more than” of the numinous or other-worldly (out-there or behind-there somewhere) but as the “more than” of relation. Relation is driven by what exceeds relation, which Levinas calls “desire.” In comparing the Greek tradition of speculative contemplation with the biblical tradition of revelation, Levinas says:

[For the Greek tradition], the opposites of repose – worry, questioning, seeking, Desire – are all taken to be a waste of repose, an absence of response, a privation, a pure insufficiency of identity, a mark of self-inequality. We have wondered whether the Revelation might not lead us to precisely this idea of inequality, difference and irreducible alterity which is “uncontainable”. . . a mode of thought which is not knowledge but which, exceeding knowledge, is in relation with the Infinite or God . . . Perhaps the attitudes of seeking, desiring and questioning do

¹⁶ Levinas writes: “We propose to call ‘religion’ the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (*Totality and Infinity*, 40). Or again: “For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community or concept or totality – a relation without relation – we reserve the term religion” (*Totality and Infinity*, 80).

not represent the emptiness of need but the explosion of the “more within the less”. . .¹⁷

What exceeds and yet binds relation is uniqueness, otherness, transcendence, infinity. In all of these terms that find their apex in the word “God,” Levinas is seeking a “non-allergic relation with alterity.”¹⁸ He says that all his efforts to speak in the name of God – in the name of “uncontaminated” transcendence – have led him to heights that exhaust him, that take his breath away. He speaks of the “breathlessness” of the climb “that is as steep as in ancient times”¹⁹ – an allusion maybe to the breathlessness of Moses ascending Mount Sinai. Levinas’ language is out of breath, almost expired, yet it is an exhaustion that is nevertheless inspired by the Most High who gives breath (cf. Gen: 2:7).

Perhaps it is not surprising that “the Most High” is a significant metaphor for Levinas that is linked to desire, separateness and holiness. “Desire is desire for the absolutely other . . . A desire without satisfaction which, precisely, understands the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other . . . the very dimension of Height: the Most High.”²⁰ “Height” (or distance or alterity) is linked to holiness, that is, as “separation” which is not absorbed into the world of immanence or the self-same. Indeed, as Susan Handelman notes, “*separation* is the root meaning of the Hebrew word for holiness – *kedusha*.” The rabbis refer to God as *Ha-Shem*, or “the Name” or “The Holy One Blessed be He” (*ha kodesh baruch-hu*) linking God’s name to holiness.²¹ Similarly, Adriaan Peperzak suggests that the

¹⁷ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 208.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 47.

¹⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, xlii.

²⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

²¹ Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 294, 282. See Levinas, “The Name

invocation of God's name expresses the holiness of God as "the absoluteness or ab-solution of the Other who ab-solves or separates himself from all sorts of union with anything else."²²

"Exteriority," says Levinas, "is not a negation, but a marvel."²³ "The emphasis of exteriority is excellency. Height is heaven. The kingdom of heaven is ethical."²⁴ Exteriority, separation, height – these are all words that Levinas places in service of the ethical relation. While these words come to him from a religious sensibility steeped in the Jewish people's relation to God, they nevertheless always refer to the relational and ethical encounter between human beings. The other comes to me from "on high" and calls out to me, breaks into my world as the singular one to whom I can respond and offer myself. Whereas "possession is preeminently the form whereby the other becomes the same by becoming mine,"²⁵ transcendence suggests an inability to possess, to own, or to dominate. Ethics requires this transcendence in the world that orients me toward you. The other person is "higher" than me, where height means this separation that resists reciprocity or symmetry between us. "To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master . . . to him whom one approaches as 'You' in a dimension of height."²⁶ Yet height is not power, as in "the high and mighty". Rather, height is encountered in the other person's lowliness and destitution that nevertheless rises above me with an ethical demand. "I can recognize the gaze of the stranger, the widow, and the orphan only in giving or in refusing

of God According to a Few Talmudic Texts," in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 116-128.

²² Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 31.

²³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 292.

²⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 183.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75.

. . .”²⁷ Levinas links transcendence and height with the vulnerable one or the stranger, who always stands outside our homely and closely-hugged truths, “who disturbs the being at home with oneself.”²⁸ While I can ignore this disturbance, the stranger nevertheless remains higher than me as the one who always places me in the position of the “accused” or the “questioned.” I lose the power of my own proud subjectivity and become instead the one who is called to respond, placed instead in the role of the servant, rather than the master. I lose the power to say “I” and am placed instead in the more receptive and responsive position of “Here I am” – “for you.” Levinas writes:

When in the presence of the Other, I say “Here I am!”, this “Here I am” is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen . . . The subject who says “here I am!” *testifies* to the Infinite. It is through this testimony . . . that the revelation of the Infinite occurs. It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorifies *itself*.²⁹

Levinas’ religious metaphors gain all their power and vividness as ethical urgings. Perhaps this is the way, Levinas suggests, “for the wisdom of heaven to return to earth.”³⁰ He speaks of God only because he knows that this word is inextricably inscribed in ancient stirrings that have to do with our salvation, with healing and redemption in the world, with relations of love and justice between us, with *shalom*. Similarly, without enlisting religious metaphors that serve to agitate our lives toward the other – such as the “holy,” the “transcendent,” the “Most High” – his ethical urgings would be but thin veneers lacking any sense of veracity or visitation upon us. As Maurice Blanchot notes: “The greatest transcendence, the transcendence of

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

²⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

²⁹ Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity : Conversations With Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 106-107.

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 158.

transcendence, is ultimately the immanence, or the perpetual referral, of the one to the other. Transcendence within immanence: Levinas is the first to devote himself to this strange structure . . . and not to let himself be satisfied by the shock value of such contrarities.”³¹

Not to be satisfied, particularly in an age that is “drugged by immanence” such that self-sameness, self-autonomy and self-participation have become the new opium of the people. We have sufficiently inoculated ourselves against the allergy of transcendence. Levinas writes:

The crisis inscribed in Ecclesiastes is not found in sin but in boredom. Everything is absorbed, sucked down and walled up in the Same . . . Vanity of vanities: the echo of our own voices, taken for a response to the few prayers that still remain to us; everywhere we have fallen back upon our own feet, as after the ecstasies of a drug. Except the other whom, in all this boredom, we cannot let go . . . The alterity of the absolutely other . . . a relationship to transcendence . . . because responsibility for the Other is transcendence that there can be something new under the sun.³²

Contrary to the opiates of immanence, Levinas wants to speak of the prescription of the divine. “Divinity keeps its distances,” Levinas writes.³³ Of which Blanchot comments: “All true discourse . . . is discourse with God, not a discourse between equals.”³⁴ To which Levinas says: “The absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man who could be absolutely foreign to me . . .”³⁵ In what sense? Because “the relationship between men is certainly the non-synthesizable par excellence.”³⁶ The other is separate and holy, unique and singular, a command and an appeal. The other is what I cannot possess or dominate, assimilate or absorb, domesticate

³¹ Maurice Blanchot, “Our Clandestine Companion,” in Richard Cohen, ed. *Face to Face With Levinas*, 48.

³² Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 12-13.

³³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 297.

³⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 56.

³⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

³⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 77.

or colonize. The other is what I cannot synthesize with myself, what I cannot know or appropriate, what I cannot blend or fuse with myself. “*Correlation does not suffice as a category of transcendence.*”³⁷ The other is the holy one, the infinite, transcendence – a “non-relation” – and yet, a non-relation that maintains a relation, “precisely the *idea of the Infinite*, that is, the Infinite in me. Or, more exactly, it is as though . . . the *in* of the Infinite signified at once the *non-* and the *within.*”³⁸

I wonder if it is possible to say that I feel you as someone toward whom I am always coming closer, opening myself to you, offering myself to you, though never reaching you – that I cannot absorb you. Yet you are near to me, such that your proximity expresses an irresistible desire toward you – and although I cannot grasp you, I can make myself available to you. I am a self-in-relation-to-you as a self-summoned-by-you. The very structure of “contrarities,” of transcendence in immanence, relation and non-relation. In all your otherness, you are nevertheless nearby.

You prayer –, you blasphemy –, you
 prayer-sharp knives
 of my
 silence.

You may words being crippled
 together with me, you
 my hale ones.

And you:
 you, you, you

³⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 53.

³⁸ Levinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, 63.

my later of roses
daily worn true and
more true . . .

(Paul Celan)³⁹

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³⁹ Paul Celan, "... Plashes the Fountain . . ." in *Selected Poems*, 187.