

In my book, *Levinas beyond the Horizons of Cartesianism*, and my paper, “Kant and the Problem of Ethical Metaphysics,” I promise to show how Kierkegaard provides a solution to ethical problems raised by the intersection of Levinas and Kant. This same solution, I hope to argue elsewhere, appears implicitly in the subtext of Plato’s *Republic* and in a few other key places in the history of Western philosophy. The unfinished paper below is a start in the direction of an answer on behalf of Kierkegaard. It is a work in progress; please do not cite.

A.B.

Ethical Differentiation in Levinas, Kierkegaard and Kant

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I

The goal of this paper is to locate the precise moment in which reason becomes endowed with an ought. In stating the goal in this way, something has already been said about Kant and his project of grounding the metaphysics of morals. But in speaking of a moment (or an instant or an event or an occasion) in which reason becomes endowed with an ought, that is, a moment in which pure reason becomes practical, we have already headed off in a direction beyond the metaphysics of morals. For by invoking the moment, we have invoked something concrete. This distinguishes the current project from the Kantian enterprise in that Kant sought the universal conditions of morality as they followed from a rationality already endowed with an ought. In so doing, he could identify that the ideas of morality and freedom were concomitantly related (along with reason itself), but he could not show that any of these ever materialized in concrete experience. Toward the end of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, he writes, “we have finally traced the determinate concept of morality back to the idea of freedom, but we could not prove freedom to be something actual in ourselves and in human nature” (*GMM* 51). On the next page, he writes:

... we are not as yet able to have any insight into why it is that we should divorce ourselves from such interest, i.e., that we should consider ourselves as free in action and yet hold ourselves as subject to certain laws so as to find solely in our own person a worth that can compensate us for the loss of everything that gives worth to our condition. *We do not see how this is possible and hence how the moral law can obligate us.* One must frankly admit that there is here a sort of circle from which, so it seems, there is no way to escape. (*GMM* 52. Emphasis is mine.)

Even though Kant can align the concepts of freedom, reason and the moral law, it would seem that the obligating force of morality has slipped beneath his grip, and he is left to analyze the *idea* of moral obligation in its place.¹

The present study seeks to return this idea of obligation to its origin. In so doing, it will attempt to overcome a common criticism that is levied against Kantian morality, namely that it entails a notion of persons that is so abstract and generalized that the moral recipient disappears behind the universalizing tendency of reason, leaving no one in particular to stand in its place. Kantian morality seems to apply only to abstract rational agents, but living individuals as such, each of whom has its own identity and a real-life situation, appear to be morally irrelevant.

In appealing to the moment in which the moral law becomes incumbent on me, in particular, and the moral recipient appears as a concrete Other, as opposed to the generalized other of universal reason, something has already been said of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, since his work has been dedicated to explicating the existential connection between confrontation with an Other outside of reason and the origin of moral obligation. His thinking focuses primarily (and one would like to say at some level exclusively) on the moment in which the moral ought is born. Here, confrontation with the Other unfolds precisely in my concrete obligation not to violate the otherness of the Other. So, Levinas' examination of the terrain of ethical metaphysics seems to provide us with an analysis of the precise moment that we need to make Kant's ethics reach to the level of concrete individuals. Furthermore, Levinas shares an affinity with Kant that may tempt us to overlook any differences between the two. In a telling passage in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, he writes, "If one had the right to retain one trait from a philosophical system and neglect all the details of its architecture ... we would think here of Kantism, which finds a meaning to the human without measuring it by ontology and outside the question What is there here ... ?" that one would like to take to be preliminary ..." (*OBBE* 129). Even the ethical injunction that Levinas finds in the approach of the Other, "thou shalt not kill," which means, for him, that we ought not violate the otherness of the Other, resonates with Kant's categorical imperative "to treat humanity whether in your own person or the person of another not merely as a means to an end, but also as an end in itself."

But Levinas aligns himself with those critics of Kant referred to above when he writes, "Philosophy itself is identified with the substitution of ideas for persons, the theme for the interlocutor, the interiority of the logical relation for the exteriority of interpellation. Existents are reduced to the neuter state of the idea, Being, the concept" (*TI* 88). Levinas' philosophy, in fact, is a reaction against this totalizing tendency of universal reason, and it proceeds precisely along the lines of showing how the Other interrupts the rational order and calls it into question. So much so, that critics of Levinas, while ac-

1. In what follows, Kant attempts to make up for the fact that the concrete moral moment falls out of his analysis by arguing that insofar as we must think of ourselves as free, we must also think of ourselves as moral. " ... now we see that when we think of ourselves as free, we transfer ourselves into the intelligible world as members and know the autonomy of the will together with its consequence, morality; whereas when we think of ourselves as obligated, we consider ourselves as belonging to the world of sense and yet at the same time to the intelligible world" (*GMM* 54). Kant's solution here is provocative, but it does not succeed in circumventing the horizons of reason to analyze the moment in which the moral law becomes incumbent on me.

knowledging his concrete analysis of the moment in which the moral law becomes incumbent upon me, fault him for not being able to generate a normative ethics that will furnish rules to clarify rights and responsibilities. Indeed, many wonder how a system of rules is possible here, given that the ethical moment includes an interruption of the rational order and that Levinas resists the temptation to take up the moral ought as a theme,² even though Llewelyn admits that the injunction, "thou shalt not kill," "sounds like the basis of a morality, even if to describe the basis as a principle or maxim would be to risk lapsing into the tradition questioned by Levinas ..." ("Jewgreek" 279).

So, while reconciling Levinas and Kant could go along way in responding to these criticisms, a central incommensurability between the two thinkers forbids any type of synthetic union. This incommensurability reaches to deeper levels as well. We cannot simply introduce Levinas' thinking into the Kantian matrix, because, according to Kant, the first principle of morality is the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (*GMM* 30). This imperative is derived from another notion, "the universality of law as such" (*GMM* 30), which supposes that all moral patients should be treated alike and ultimately gives sanction to the moral law. Furthermore, since moral patients enter the moral community by virtue of their rational agency and since the self is rational, it becomes interchangeable with the others and thereby becomes their moral equals. So, the derivation of the categorical imperative from the universality of law includes a conception of the relationship between self and Other as symmetrical. This is made more explicit in the second formulation of the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, *whether in your own person or the person of another*, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means" (*GMM* 36, emphasis added). Introducing Levinas' Other at this point -- and I would really like to say "re-introducing," but this will have to wait until later -- results in the disintegration of Kantian universality as the systematic integrity of the rational order (and hence the moral law) is undermined. In Kant, there seems to be no justifiable way to regard the Other outside of reason.

The situation would be no less problematic, were we to try the reverse strategy and introduce Kant's intuitions on pure practical reason into the Levinasian matrix. This is because Levinas derives the moral "ought" from an asymmetrical relationship between self and Other that results when the Other confronts my project of reducing pre-rational experience to reason and, thereby, calls it into question. According to Levinas, rational subjectivity is an egoism. Knowledge succeeds, he says, by a reduction of the Other to the self. It " ... does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not take the place of sociality; it is still and always a solitude" (*EI* 60). What gives the Other its ethical sanction that is, its in-itself-ness as Other, is precisely its ability to remain outside of the order of reason in spite of the egoist desire to drag it in where it doesn't belong. This ethical resistance, experienced by the self in the form of the moral command, "thou shalt not kill," or in a different paraphrase, "do not deny the otherness of the Other," provides the foundation for the rest of Levinas' thinking about ethics. Since Kant's pure practical

² This difficulty should make all talk about ethics impossible. For an interesting discussion on how Levinas gets around this apparent problem and related issues, see D. H. Brody, "Emmanuel Levinas: The Logic of Ambiguity in *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence*." *Research in Phenomenology* 25 (1995): 177-203.

reason gains its ethical sanction by leveling out the relationship between the self and Other in the "universality of law," admitting it into the Levinasian matrix means denying the ethical moment as it emerges in concrete experience. In more radical language, it means a blatant transgression of that moral law that emerges in confrontation with the Other. From the perspective of Levinas, the Kantian approach to ethics already hangs on a violation of the Other.

Levinas and Kant seem to be separated by an impossible distance, and they would perhaps remain this way were it not for the work of Kierkegaard, who, after all, had something to say about thinking the incommensurable difference between concrete individuals and universal reason. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard treats Kant's ethics in light of the totalizing character of reason. Obviously, he cannot derive this characterization of reason from Levinas. But he can derive it from Hegel. He writes, "... if there is nothing incommensurable in a human life, and if the incommensurable that is present is there only by an accident from which nothing results insofar as existence is viewed from the idea, then Hegel was right. But he was not right in speaking about faith ... " (*FT* 68). Kierkegaard's purpose in this work is to demonstrate that the self that acts outside of "the system," that is, outside of the rational order, is justified in doing so, if the action is undertaken in the correct posture of faith. There is a "teleological suspension of the ethical" that will redeem the rational order.

Kierkegaard is concerned with how the individual, who as an individual must act from outside of the universal, can be justified in doing so. Levinas' concern is with the Other, and, in particular, with the way that the Other interrupts the rational order. Levinas himself recognizes this important difference between his project and Kierkegaard's. "It is not I who resist the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the other" (*TI* 40). But what Levinas does not seem to acknowledge is that, for Kierkegaard, the self is legitimate in acting as an individual outside of the system only in confrontation with God, who for Kierkegaard, is the Other outside of the order of reason. The teleological suspension of the ethical occurs only with an absolute duty to God. So, though this is not emphasized by Levinas, the condition of legitimate individuality is for Kierkegaard, first of all, the prior encounter with the Other outside of reason and, second, the proper obediential comportment toward this Other in response. This observation is important for our purposes because it means that the extent to which Kierkegaard succeeds in "invok[ing] everything good for the system" (*FT* 8) -- that is, justifying the moral foundations of the Kantian/Hegelian enterprise -- is the extent to which we may use his work to make a transition from Levinas to Kant.

We have here then three thinkers who we may bring together to explain the birth of a system of morals beginning with an existential encounter with the Other and terminating with a justifiable entry into the rational order. This movement will have to be repeated. In what follows, we will learn from Kierkegaard how the abandonment of pure practical reason in the face of the Other gives the ultimate sanction to the categorical imperative precisely in the same instant in which it undermines it. This instant will be the moment in which a passage is opened between Levinas and Kant. We may identify it, then, as a type of difference, namely *ethical* difference, or perhaps *ethical differentiation*, since this latter locution preserves its verbal character.

Levinas himself talks of "the trace" in a similar employment on the basis of which the self is exposed to the Other, though, again, he resists letting it be taken up as a theme.

For him, "Reason is alone. And in this sense knowledge never encounters anything truly other in the world. This is the profound truth of idealism" (*TO* ??). For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, reason is redeemed, but only by faithful comportment toward God. The significance of this difference should not be underestimated, even if it does come down to a difference of faith. Levinas admits that the transition from the concrete meeting of the face to face can convert to a rational order: "Whatever be the ways that lead to the superstructure of society, in justice the dissymmetry that holds me at odds with regard to the other will find again law, autonomy, equality" (*OBBE* 127).³ In an earlier work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas says something of the when of this event. "Morality will oppose politics in history and will have gone beyond the functions of prudence or the canons of the beautiful to proclaim itself unconditional and universal *when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war*" (*TI* 22. Emphasis is mine). In other words, he still awaits a redeemer.

The viewpoint is wholeheartedly Hebraic. If we follow Derrida and identify Kant in the Greek tradition with Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, then the difference between Levinas and Kant is for us the difference between the Hebraic and the Hellenic, and so Derrida's question at the end of "Violence and Metaphysics" applies to us. "Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history" (*WD* 153). But while we are in agreement with Derrida on this point, Kierkegaard provides for us a missing voice, a third term, as it were, asking us to disagree with the necessity that Derrida identifies toward the end of this passage: "We live in and of difference, that is, in *hypocrisy*, about which Levinas so profoundly says that it is not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rendering of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets' (*TI* p. 24)" (*WD* 153).

If we are correct to find in Kierkegaard this moment of *ethical differentiation*, this moment in which the system is made good by my obediential comportment toward God, might we also have found between Hebraism and Hellenism a way of avoiding hypocrisy? Could it be that Christian faith as understood by Kierkegaard is this way of standing

³ Peperzak attests to the re-affirmation of this possibility throughout Levinas' work. He writes, "All the works of Levinas testify to this possibility, which is a necessity. By thematizing all here-and-now concrete realities, the language of reflective discourse transforms them into single cases of general possibilities. Not always, however, does the content of such a discourse -- its "Said" (*le dit*) -- adequately render what it wants to say" (*To the Other* 27). In what follows, I will show how Kant's categorical imperative is a particular moment within the Said that represents the concrete moment in which the ought becomes incumbent upon me, though only insofar as it is now stripped of its ethical exigency. Kierkegaard will provide us with a way of returning this exigency to the categorical imperative, thereby giving the ultimate sanction -- Levinas' confrontation with the Other -- to Kant's ethics. In so doing, we are paying heed to the origin of the moral ought. Again Peperzak: "Only through reflection -- and not by way of experience -- do I discover that every human being experiences the same responsibility as I do and that I, too, impose an infinite responsibility on each one of them. The discovery of our similarity in this respect -- and therewith of a fundamental equality between myself and all other people -- is the fruit of a reflective comparison; it is not simultaneous with, but comes after, the revelation of a more original *asymmetry*. This original asymmetry should not be obscured or forgotten by concentration on the secondary truth of our equality and its realm in which I myself, like all other people, am a replaceable instance of one universal "being-human" (cf. Kant's *Menschheit*)" (*To the Other* 28). Indeed, Kant's radical reflection on the idea of the "universality of law as such" is what provides the ground of the categorical imperative while showing that a system of morality is possible only on the basis of such a reflection.

between these two, not as a synthesis of two poles, nor as their dis-integration, but as their meeting face to face? This possibility will govern the remainder of this paper.

II

Before proceeding, it is necessary to understand that Kant and Levinas do not offer discourses competing for the same terrain. Kant speaks on the level of reason, whereas Levinas wishes to call our attention to a "realm" of experience that unfolds beneath reason and, ultimately, even beneath sensibility. To help clarify the significance of this difference, it would be useful to talk about "levels" of conscious life, or at least different varieties of it. On the one hand, we may talk about a rational domain within which human beings encounter objects. This is the world in which human beings *think* they live. Included in this order are all of our perceptions as well, which must be carefully distinguished from sensations. Perceptions are of things that are identifiable under one category or another. Sensations, on the other hand, present themselves to consciousness only for the duration of their appearance. They have no object permanence because there is no conceptual support for their existence outside of (or after) experience. Indeed, it would be improper to talk of "objects" of sensation, since what is experienced here are qualities like hot and cold, blue, raw textures, disembodied sounds, etc.

Levinas therefore talks of sensation, not as belonging to rational subjectivity or a disembodied ego, but under the metaphor of enjoyment, something he assigns to a self that has yet to be dualized into body and soul. Down on this level, the self bathes in elemental qualities, satisfying itself in a kind of play. Critical to our analysis is that in enjoyment, qualities appear to consciousness without being picked up by reason, thematized and, in this act of constitution, converted into things, even to the point of "ignoring the prolongation of hunger into the concern for self-preservation" (*TI* 134). When they are picked up by reason, consciousness enters a different domain.

Appropriation and representation add a new event to enjoyment. They are founded on language as a relation among men. Things have a name and an identity. Transformations occur to things which remain the same: the stone crumbles but remains the same stone; I rediscover my pen and armchair the same; it is in the selfsame palace of Louis XIV that the Treaty of Versailles was signed; the same train is the train that leaves at the same hour. The world of perception is thus a world where things have identity. (*TI* 139)

On the level of sensibility and enjoyment, each encounter is immediate and new. "The pure quality of the element does not cling to a substance that would support it" (*TI* 132). When we move to perception and reason, memory "prolongs" the encounter, converting it into an order of existents that hold fast in their being. This makes it possible for me to return tomorrow to sit in the same chair as yesterday, even though my experience of it is a different experience, and this allows Descartes to recognize and identify the same piece of wax, even after its sensual qualities have changed.

Along with the present characterization of enjoyment, Levinas describes the self on this level as saturated with itself. "In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other ..." (TI 134).⁴ It therefore shares a common characteristic with rational subjectivity, though it has yet to form an identity as such. When the Other emerges from nowhere and interrupts this project of reducing the exteriority of the element to the self in the satisfaction of enjoyment, the moral law will be handed down precisely as a limit placed on my satisfaction, a restraint placed on the egoism of enjoyment. I will return to this momentarily.

What must be emphasized at this point is that each encounter with the Other unfolds as an interruption of enjoyment and, as such, is always unique and singular. One cannot encounter the same Other twice....

Possible quotation:

That this questioning of the Same by the Other, and what we have called "wakefulness" or "life," is, outside of knowledge, a part of philosophy, is not only verified by certain articulations of Husserlian thought that we have just shown, but appears at the summits of various philosophies. It is the beyond being in Plato; the entrance through the door of the agent intellect in Aristotle; the idea of God in us, going beyond or capacity as finite beings; the exaltation of theoretical reason in practical reason in Kant; the search of recognition of the Other in Hegel himself; the renewal of duration in Bergson; the sobering up of lucid reason in Heidegger—from whom the very notion of sobering up used in this essay is borrowed. (Discovering Existence, 179)

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⁴ For a thorough analysis of enjoyment and sensation in Levinas, see Richard A. Cohen, "Emmanuel Levinas: Happiness is a Sensational Time." *Philosophy Today* 25 (1981): 196-203.

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