

# The Experience of Obligation: The Enduring Promise of Levinas for Theological Ethics

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## Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas has proven a major figure in twentieth-century phenomenology and ethics, and his work has influenced not only Jewish but also Christian ethical thought. However, Levinas has recently been the subject of trenchant critique by his fellow French philosopher, Jean-Yves Lacoste. Lacoste objects to Levinas's construal of intersubjectivity as fundamentally ethical: essentially, that we only instantiate our humanity when we take responsibility for the Other. This smacks for Lacoste of 'unworldliness', and is thus phenomenologically inadequate, since it extirpates from the domain of elementary experiences everything that does not constitute morality. This raises key questions: (1) how best to interpret Lacoste's challenge; (2) how successful that challenge is, i.e. whether anything in Levinas's project survive it; (3) and, if so, how best to understand Levinas's relevance for Christian ethics. I will address all these issues, contending that, *contra* Lacoste, Levinas's position does stand up to inspection at one key juncture. I claim, on phenomenological grounds, that it tells us something of vital importance about some special experiences of obligation, some range of moral encounters: that which arises when the subject, as moral agent, finds himself in an immediate, unbidden, dyadic encounter with the other person.

## Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Yves Lacoste, phenomenology, obligation

## Introduction

T. S. Eliot said that the poet John Donne 'picked up, like a magpie, various shining fragments of ideas as they struck his eye, and stuck them about here and there'.<sup>1</sup> In this article

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1. T. S. Eliot, 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', in F. Dickey, J. Formichelli and R. Schuchard (eds), *The Complete Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Literature, Politics, Belief, 1927–1929* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), pp. 245–60, at p. 255.

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I employ that magpie method and pick up some shining fragments of Emmanuel Levinas's ideas about moral obligation and stick them in the terrain of English-speaking theological ethics. But to make that application will require defending Levinas against a trenchant line of criticism developed most recently by another French philosopher, Jean-Yves Lacoste. Lacoste contends that Levinas's thought is, paradoxically, not of sufficient phenomenological value to give a helpful account of *any* kind of moral situation. After having in the first section sketched the key features of Levinas's project, in the second section I will explore Lacoste's powerful objections to Levinas concentrating on the former's important, essay, 'Ethique et phénoménologie' ('Ethics and Phenomenology'), unpublished in English.<sup>2</sup> In the third section, however, I demonstrate why Levinas survives Lacoste's critique at one key point, allowing me to turn in the final section to assess the resources a reconstructed Levinasian outlook might provide for thinking about the nature and place of obligation in the Christian life.

### A Sketch of Levinas—the In-breaking of the Other

In the expanding reception of Jean-Yves Lacoste's work in English-speaking phenomenology and theology, more focus has been paid to the French thinker's account of religious (non)experience—the theme of 'liturgy' in his corpus, his relation to Heidegger, and so on—than to his distinctive way of looking at morality.<sup>3</sup> Lacoste's main interlocutor in this work, and the target he constantly has in his sights, is Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising, since Levinas may rightly be considered the most influential thinker of the ethical in the phenomenological tradition. But Lacoste's central objection is that, ironically, the famous phenomenologist of ethical experience is not properly phenomenological at all.<sup>5</sup> In this article, I will review Lacoste's key objections to Levinas,

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2. Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Ethique et phénoménologie', in *Présence et parousie* (Paris: Ad Solem, 2006), pp. 231–56, hereafter *E&P*.
  3. In Joeri Schrijvers's *Introduction to Jean-Yves Lacoste*, there is no chapter on Lacoste's conception of ethics, while in *Modern Theology's* symposium on the work of Lacoste, there are no discussions of Lacoste's thinking about morality (*Modern Theology* 31.4, October 2015).
  4. Lacoste's critique of Levinas can be found in a variety of places: *Note sur le Temps: Essai sur les raisons de la mémoire et de la l'espérance* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), pp. 50, 52, 111; *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man* (1994), trans. M. Raftery-Skehan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), hereafter *EA*, pp. 71–72; 'The Appearing and the Irreducible', in B. Benson and N. Wirzba (eds.), *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 52–56; 'In War and in Peace: Heidegger, Levinas, O'Donovan', in R. Song and B. Waters (eds.), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honor of Oliver O'Donovan* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 32–51. But Lacoste's most sustained engagement with Levinas is in *E&P*.
  5. I noted above that insufficient attention has been paid to Lacoste's conception of ethics. It should also be said that the most significant book-length treatment of Lacoste in English—Jason Wardley's *Praying to a French God: The Theology of Jean-Yves Lacoste* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014)—gives only a passing to Lacoste's critique of Levinas's ethics (p. 135). I want to explore in a more sustained way the different dimensions of this critique.

focusing on a riveting essay of Lacoste's, 'Ethics and Phenomenology', about which nothing in English has yet been written. I will then assess whether Lacoste's critique of Levinas is successful and the implication of that answer for theological ethics. First, though, it is necessary to set out the central features of *Levinas's* thought: his account of 'ethics as first philosophy'.

Simon Critchley similarly describes Levinas's work as an attempt to 'think one thing under an often bewildering variety of aspects'.<sup>6</sup> What is that one thing? It has to do with the supremacy Levinas attaches to the moral, and specifically to the special site of the moral: dyadic encounter ('dyadic' in the sense of the primacy of one-to-one relation).

*In the beginning was the human relation.* Encounter for Levinas is primordial, anarchic and beyond time. Yet when this encounter is *incarnated* in the world it takes the particular form of face-to-face relation.<sup>7</sup> An ontological structure *comes to be expressed* in the event of encounter in which I meet an Other. The Other always precedes me, certainly; I am privy to awareness of her absence and constantly stumble across the traces she has left of herself. Yet when she *is* finally present she appears alone: a solitary figure. She arrives unbidden, takes me by surprise, demands my attention. She is one whom I do not call forth but by whom I find myself confronted. Her arrival fundamentally disrupts my dwelling in the world as the mode of '*maintaining [myself]*' (*se tenir*).<sup>8</sup> The Other suspends the I's 'inter-ested effort of brute being persevering in being'.<sup>9</sup> She is so radically Other and irreducibly particular she shatters the preexisting frameworks which organise for me the sum total of what appears to me. She explodes every paradigm, such as the 'virtualities inscribed in our (common) *nature*',<sup>10</sup> paradigms by which I orient myself in the world and assimilate her otherness within the totality of the same ('when I try to connect everything to everything else'),<sup>11</sup> by which I absorb the unnerving impact

6. From Simon Critchley's excellent introduction to Levinas's thought in S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 6.

7. Is Levinas referring to an actual face? In short, no. The metaphor is intended to capture the *uniqueness* of the person (the face being the site of *expression*) and her *vulnerability* (the face being the most exposed part of the body). But as Kevin Hart explains, 'realizing the danger that the metaphor may be taken literally and that the Other may be understood only as the one physically before me, Levinas replaced "face" with "proximity" in his second major work, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*' ('Introduction', in Kevin Hart and M. Signier (eds), *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas between Jews and Christians* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2010], pp. 1–16, at p. 9). Levinas himself introduces the term, 'The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face' (Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis [Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969], p. 50). Hereafter *TI*.

8. *TI*, p. 37.

9. Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Other, Utopia, and Justice', in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 198.

10. *TI*, p. 194.

11. Kevin Hart's useful paraphrase: see his introduction to Levinas's thought in *The Exorbitant*, p. 2.

of the unforeseen.<sup>12</sup> The Other arrives not to initiate an intersubjective relationship with me, but rather to make an ethical demand. There is no offer of friendship but an appeal for help. The face before me ‘summons me, calls for me, begs me’.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, despite the prominence of Levinas’s theme and the lyrical, evocative way he expounds it, readers have long wrangled over the *status* of his claims. *What exactly is he up to?* What are we being offered? Description? Prescription? The latter posing as the former? Levinas wants to offer a phenomenology of encounter. Yet we are clearly subject to a broader range of encounters in the world than the peculiar one he describes. That is, people do not uniformly appear in the way Levinas sets out. When I am subject to attack, for example. The other might appear brandishing, not concealing his knife. If so his presence would certainly be unbidden. But who is the vulnerable party? More trivially, in our quotidian existence we meet people we know as often as we meet people we don’t.

Levinas is concerned with setting out a *paradigm of responsibility*, an ‘irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest’.<sup>14</sup> He wants to flesh out this paradigm so fully we will know it when we see it. And he wants to emphasise its primacy to such an extent we will be left in no doubt that, in being called to be ethical, we are in fact being called to be human. In phenomenological terms—and this will be key to understanding the language of Lacoste’s critique of Levinas—to say, ‘This is how the (moral) other appears to us’ is the same as saying, ‘This is what moral responsibility looks like’. *Les autres* appear to us in a variety of ways; our encounters in the world are pluriform. But only when the Other appears in the way Levinas portrays are we in the realm of the ethical. Only when she makes this kind of entrance are we really talking about responsibility, and only when we are talking about responsibility are we talking about ethics, and only when we are talking about ethics are we talking about real human *being*.

*Responsibility* for Levinas is fundamentally a form of *response* to the in-breaking of the Other. It is what we do when we find ourselves in the dyadic encounter we did not initiate or anticipate. It is, Levinas writes, ‘[a] responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before devoted to myself’.<sup>15</sup> With that Levinas

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12. One interesting literary example of Levinas’s ‘originary experience’ is supplied by Edward Albee in his play of 1959, *Zoo Story*. The setting is ‘Central Park; a Sunday afternoon in summer; the present’. Two strangers, Jerry and Peter, bump into each other; their conversation accounts for the duration of the one-act play. After they’ve made each other’s acquaintance, and after Peter has tried to assimilate him to the same (‘the old pigeonhole bit’, as Jerry calls it), Jerry says this:

JERRY: Peter, do I annoy you, or confuse you?

PETER: (*Lightly*) Well, I must confess that this wasn’t the kind of afternoon I’d anticipated.

JERRY: You mean, I’m not the gentleman you were expecting.

PETER: I wasn’t expecting anybody.

JERRY: No, I don’t imagine you were. But I’m here, and I’m not leaving.

13. Levinas, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 75–87, at p. 83.

14. *TI*, p. 79.

15. Levinas, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, p. 83.

subverts the preeminence of rights-based accounts of morality.<sup>16</sup> I do not encounter a rights-bearer. For my duties towards her are not rooted in a transaction in which she accrued rights. Levinas reaches back behind any possible moment of contractual agreement, ‘before I had the freedom that might have contracted any commitments’, and contends that nonetheless ‘I am open to the accusation of which no alibi, spatial or temporal, could clear me’.<sup>17</sup> The symmetry at the heart of a whole discourse is thus upended.

It is in the subversion of the contract-model of morality that Levinas’s famous insistence upon the ‘infinity of responsibility’ comes in. If responsibility is fundamentally contractual then I can refuse the claims of people to whom I have *not* previously made commitments. And if responsibility is contractual then, concerning people to whom I *have* made commitments, it is also possible that I can discharge those commitments. It is possible for me to be done with them and with it. ‘We are responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others’. This quotation from Alyosha, the hero of Dostoyevsky’s great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, is one Levinas repeatedly invokes, and captures the hallmark of his account of duty, to which we will return: the sense I am endlessly obligated to the Other.

### **‘If Heidegger has no Ethics, Levinas has no World’—Lacoste’s Central Objections to Levinas**

Lacoste has no hesitation in conceding that Levinas’s *aims* are phenomenological. Writes Lacoste: the philosophy of Levinas ‘claims—and this is the classical ambition of phenomenology—to (re)capture the originary or, at the least, the initial’.<sup>18</sup> But Levinas does not make good on his claim because *he sets aside the world*. What does that mean and why is it a problem?

According to Lacoste’s lights, Levinas is forced to extirpate from the domain of elementary experiences everything that does not constitute experience of the ethical.

By granting to ethics the status of first philosophy and to its demands the status of immediate givens of consciousness, Levinas is condemned to pass over in silence everything that does not constitute our being-in-the-world as moral obligation.<sup>19</sup>

16. The reinstatement of heteronomy involved here also sees Levinas upending Kantian ethics too (at least in this central feature of Kant’s moral philosophy). See Jeffrey Bloechl, ‘Excess and Desire: A Commentary of Totality and Infinity’, Section I, Part D, in *The Exorbitant*, pp. 188–200, at p. 189.

17. Levinas, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy’, p. 83.

18. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, p. 71. Levinas’s claim is in line with the rallying cry which first catalyzed phenomenological inquiry in the twentieth century—‘Zu den Sachen selbst!’. See ‘Back to the things themselves!’ in Edmund Husserl, ‘Introduction’, §2, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1 (1900–1901), trans. J. N. Findlay from the 2nd German edn of *Logische Untersuchungen* (1970; London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 168. Heidegger cites his ‘master’s’ dictum in the second part of the introduction to *Being and Time*, under §7, ‘The Phenomenological Method of Investigation’ (*Being and Time* [1927], trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [Oxford: Blackwell, 1962], p. 50).

19. Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, p. 71.

All the features of our life in the world—the equipment to hand, the fundamental moods to which we are subject, the reality of coexistence (our contingent contact with and pre-moral concern for other people), the particular way the ‘newone’ appears in our midst,<sup>20</sup> the continuum between the formation of the family to the gathering of groups to the building of nations—all these have to be bracketed by Levinas. Yet when you do that, Lacoste thinks, the one reality that remains, moral obligation, is so hollowed out and its scope so limited that it is rendered meaningless.

In his most expansive critique of Levinas, the essay ‘Ethics and Phenomenology’, Lacoste writes:

To want to make ethics a ‘first philosophy’ is to demand self-evidence about morality ... [and] if self-evidence means anything at all, it is that as I relate to the other, he forces me to ignore whatever is not him.<sup>21</sup>

But by ignoring whatever is not him, the context from which and into which he acts, it becomes impossible to know how I am to respond to him. For to work out how to answer the claim of the Other usually requires reading the situation; it requires sustained attention to the place and time in which she and I find ourselves thrown together—as fellows, as neighbours, as acquaintance old or new. Which is exactly the possibility Levinas denies. For Levinas, consideration of context is only a source of potential excuse for not responding to the face. For Lacoste it is the condition of responding to the face.

Lacoste’s world is murky. Levinas’s is perspicacious. To assert, as Levinas does, that the appearance of the Other as the bearer of a foundational moral claim is, ‘at once the highest and paradigm phenomenon’, is to assume a world in which there is a ‘perfect clarity about right and wrong’.<sup>22</sup> For Levinas, our duties and values are not shrouded in obscurity. The way forward is clearly marked. The path is lit for us. All I have to do is find the will to follow (and there is always a possibility in Levinas that I won’t). Lacoste speaks of the appearance of the Other in Levinas being ‘*une eschatologie de la manifestation*’.<sup>23</sup> What is fully disclosed? Not the *identity* of the Other essential for any kind of intimacy—the revelation of who she really is, where she comes from, what motivates her, the heart of her mystery, and so on. No, what becomes wholly apparent in encounter is only what she needs and it is right for me to do for her. She appears ‘*sans reste*’, ‘without remainder’, such that ‘problems do not arise’.<sup>24</sup>

For Lacoste, moral deliberation—the formation of proximate purposes, fitting my action to the world, the preparation of an intervention—requires a weighing of goods (*deliberare*), a canvassing of alternative courses of actions, a scanning across the range of possibilities that lie before me. These determinations, in the face of the plethora of

20. The term is James Mumford’s, to designate the pre-natal human being. See his *Ethics at the Beginning of Life: A Phenomenological Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), for an exploration of the way human beings appear in the world.

21. *E&P*, p. 234.

22. *E&P*, p. 235.

23. *E&P*, p. 235.

24. *E&P*, p. 235.

difficult dilemmas and strange scenarios we face—how to negotiate the multitude of messy relationships in which we become embroiled—all this takes time and effort, distinguishing a response from a reflex. Our belief in the irreplaceable value of the person has to be unwavering, certainly. But that may not be enough. The belief in the irreplaceable value of the person is a necessary but not sufficient condition for ensuring my action gets it right. Which is why Lacoste claims that, ‘*Poser l’a priori du monde et poser un retard à l’interprétation éthique*’ (‘to insist upon the priority of the world is to postpone ethical interpretation’).<sup>25</sup> Postponing ‘ethical interpretation’, moral deliberation, is what Levinas insists we do since moral deliberation only serves to assimilate the Other to my pre-existing and totalising frameworks. But it is Lacoste’s contention that the kind of immediate, punctiliar rapid-response decision-making Levinas advocates presupposes a different world from the one we inhabit. And to this extent, Lacoste maintains, Levinas’s project is a phenomenological failure.

Levinas, then, has no world. And attention to the world is required for practical ethics. This is the nub of Lacoste’s critique of Levinas. And Lacoste’s positive proposal? Since right and wrong exist in the world in a murky ‘half-light’ (*claire-obscur*—an invention of Lacoste’s), the central contention of ‘Ethics and Phenomenology’ is that it is incumbent on us to undertake the work of moral deliberation in order to make our values and duties appear. Together (for moral deliberation is always a communal endeavour) we have to bring to light what it is we should do in our place, in our moment.

Viewed this way, Lacoste can be seen as radicalising, in a distinctly Heideggerian way, a line of criticism Levinas faced in his own lifetime: the absence of concrete norms in his corpus. One version of this complaint was powerfully expressed by Jean-François Lyotard (though Lacoste does not refer to it):

The expression *Obey!* seems then to cover several of the properties that Levinas attributes to the ethical situation. It is an absolutely ‘empty’ proposition, since it is not provided with an instruction to make it executable, not even the meta-instruction of universality conceded by the Kantian statement of the moral law.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Kant’s ‘meta-instruction of universality’ *does* generate norms, by way of the Categorical Imperative (which works as a decision-making procedure even in dyadic encounter, providing me with an answer as to how I should treat the Other), Levinas supplies us with no route from an awareness of our fundamental obligation to the Other to executable instructions, no passage from the Ur-Ethics of Responsibility to actual operable precepts.

Is this objection fair, though? The commandment around which Levinas’s corpus revolves, ‘Thou shalt no kill!’, is hardly an ‘empty proposition’. Nor did Levinas remain unaware of the concern and exasperation elicited by the underdetermined morality of *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being* (1974). In scores of interviews and occasional writings after 1974 he answered his critics head-on. For example in an

25. *E&P*, p. 235.

26. Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Levinas’s Logic’, in R. A. Cohen (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1986), pp. 117–58, at p. 152.

interview with François Poirét from 1986, collected in the important book of interviews, *Is it Righteous to Be?*, Levinas was asked, ‘Concretely, how is the responsibility for the other translated?’ Levinas takes pains to interpret the sixth commandment as expansively as possible. “‘Thou shalt not kill!’ does not signify merely the interdiction against plunging a knife into the breast of the neighbor ... So many ways of being comport a way of crushing the other’.<sup>27</sup>

Yet even with these apparently concrete prescriptions Lacoste is not satisfied. In ‘Ethics and Phenomenology’ again, Lacoste highlights contexts where the practical application of the most foundational ethical commandment is not in fact all that obvious. Even heeding that commandment requires the work of moral deliberation. For our decisions hinge on descriptions. How do we know that this thing being done here is murder? We have to know something about the world to know that. Lacoste’s instructive example is abortion. Murder constitutes the ultimate dismissal of the face, of course. But is abortion murder? That is contested, to say the least. Some see abortion as ‘the voluntary interruption of pregnancy’, thus rendering it morally licit.<sup>28</sup> Others see it as the ending of a life that has started, thus falling foul of the sixth commandment. Lacoste does not take up the question; he discusses its status. For there is no way of answering the question of whether abortion is wrong, he contends, without seeking recourse to precisely the kind of moral deliberation Levinas dismisses as ‘totalising’.

Another crucial route to ‘executable instructions’ is via *empathy*. What of those occasions when we resolve to come to a person’s aid but don’t know how to help him because he cannot tell us? Take the case of a suicidal teenager. He wants us to help him, and is convinced he knows how we can—by assisting his suicide and putting him out of his misery. In such a case that person won’t let us help him in a way that would arguably secure his good. How should we proceed? The only way, it seems, would be to get to know him well enough, to see the world from his point of view, that we could begin to offer the kind of counsel that would carry weight with him, that he could accept. What would we have to know to help him? Such a feat would require empathy, ‘feeling into another’s experiencing as felt by the other in himself or herself’.<sup>29</sup>

Yet it is exactly empathy, our only possible resort in such a circumstance, which is impossible for Levinas. That is Lacoste’s objection. Even the problem of empathy with which Husserl wrestled his whole career, cannot arise, ‘since [in Levinas] the other appears as a silent act of speech, a dumb appeal, not as another body just like mine’.<sup>30</sup>

27. Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Interview with François Poirét’ (1986), in J. Robbins (ed.), *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 23–83, at p. 53.

28. *E&P*, p. 239.

29. Ronald Bruzina’s succinct definition, from his *Edmund Husserl and Eugene Fink: Beginnings and Ends in Phenomenology 1928–1938* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 489–90.

30. *E&P*, p. 235. In the fifth *Cartesian Meditation* Husserl insists that the appearance of ‘another body just like mine’ does not necessarily reduce to projection by the I onto the Other (i.e. *from my own case I extrapolate*). This ‘inference from analogy’ view Husserl identifies with J. S. Mill and argues against. Husserl recognises that while the Other certainly possesses an



For the kind of identification required for empathy would constitute the assimilation of the Other into the same. Once again the possibility of taking the responsibility Levinas wants us to take is blocked.

For some, though, Levinas's greatest 'translation problem' lies in his relation to politics. How can the paradigm of responsibility generate concrete norms for the regulation of life in the city if the site of the ethical, the face-to-face, is *dyadic*? What is the fate of the '*le tiers*'? How can the dispensing of justice and the necessarily bureaucratic operations of the state not subject individuals to totalising rationalities? How is the Other not lost in the crowd or lost in the codes?

Levinas squared up to the barrage of objections on his front. His work after *Totality and Infinity* finds him insisting repeatedly that his conception of moral encounter in no way jettisons the political.

We live within a human multiplicity. Outside of the other, there is always a third, and a fourth, a fifth, a sixth. In my responsibility I am exclusively responsible toward one even while thinking with regard to the others, but I cannot neglect anyone.<sup>31</sup>

It is the refusal to neglect anyone which supplies an answer to the first political question of all: that of the boundary, King Lear's, 'Who's in and who's out?' The premise of the face-to-face—the stubborn individuality of the Other whom I meet in the ordinary encounter—must serve as the foundation for the political. Only a dismissal of Levinas's paradigm of responsibility could license the institutional exclusion from the sphere of concern of the destitute, the immigrant, those lacking the power to clamour for their civil rights. Yet 'who's in and who's out' is not the only question with which the city must contend. Even when the state *has* brought the Other within the boundary, how should authority operate? How should the government go about its business? This is where a tension still remains with Levinas's conception of the ethical.

Levinas recognises this too. He zeroes in on the two sites of greatest tension: the state's rendering of judgment and the task of distributive justice. In terms of the former, Levinas admits, 'now one must pass by way of logic, one must make comparisons, one must say which of the two is guilty—and this is only possible in the State. Institutions and juridical procedures are necessary.'<sup>32</sup> The face-to-face requires that I must answer

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inaccessible 'sphere of ownness', nevertheless, the fact that the Other appears as 'flesh' (*Leib*), that is, as an animate, sensitive, lived-in body and *expressive* consciousness (*even* in the cases of an impaired consciousness like that of the suicide), makes possible the phenomenon of 'pairing'—'a living mutual awakening and an overlaying of each with the objective sense of the other' (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology* [1929], trans. Dorion Cairns [Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999], V, §51, p. 113). For more on this, see James Mumford's discussion in *Ethics at the Beginning of Life*, pp. 125–32, as well as Edith Stein's famous development of her master, Husserl's thinking, in *The Problem of Empathy* (1916); trans. Waltraut Stein, in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, Vol. 3., 3rd edn (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1989).

31. Levinas, 'Interview with François Poirét', p. 67.

32. Levinas, 'Interview with François Poirét', p. 67.

the Other's appeal for help without asking questions, ensuring that the thought of desert is not one I should entertain. In the realm of the state, however, it has to be different: an authority must arbitrate according to a *system*, but systems assimilate the Other to the same. Secondly, in the political realm, of necessity, Levinas writes elegantly, 'a measure superimposes itself on the extravagant generosity of the "for the Other", on its infinity'.<sup>33</sup> In terms of resource allocation, for the state to give excessively to one would be, given the conditions of scarcity, to deprive another, but the state, unlike the moral agent in ethical encounter, is dealing with multiplicity of persons.

How does Levinas answer his own questions? His strategy is simply to repeat his insistence on the stubborn individuality of the Other. In his essay, 'Uniqueness', the Jewish philosopher's experience of the twentieth-century issues ushers forth a full-blown ideology critique. As long as the 'imperative motivation' for the state remains 'inscribed in the very right of the other man, unique and incomparable', then the citizen will not be subsumed into totalitarian logic and practice.<sup>34</sup> But while the conception of the Other which emerges from the face-to-face might rule out the most egregious misuses of power, will Levinas's paradigm of responsibility do all the work he thinks it can do?<sup>35</sup>

Lacoste thinks it cannot. In another text, 'In War and in Peace', Lacoste recalls the quest Levinas sets out on, as he tells us in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*—whether peace is possible in the shadow of the Shoah; whether two persons could meet in any way other than as enemies on a battlefield. However, Lacoste argues, because Levinas knows of no other ethical phenomenon than 'the silent supplication of the other man', because 'what [Levinas] proposes against war is ... a demand rooted in an experience, private to two people', the peace he pines for will always elude him.<sup>36</sup> Because the Other does not communicate, there is no possibility of dialogue between myself and the other man.<sup>37</sup>

33. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Uniqueness', in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 162–68, at p. 168.

34. Levinas, 'Uniqueness', p. 168.

35. It is important to note that another vociferous line of criticism about Levinas's thinking about politics, from the left, has a different emphasis from that discussed above. Levinas's obsession with the fraternity element of the secular trinity of French republicanism causes him to overlook the domination of a people (*plural*), leading to a characterisation of Levinas as 'an apologist for a conservative republicanism' (Simon Critchley, 'Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them', *Political Theory* 32.2 [April 2004], pp. 172–85, at p. 177). This neglect of the realities of domination goes deeper than the mere neglect of the Other in the boundary question (which Levinas has the resources, I have argued, to address). Levinas, according to his critics on the left, may recognise that a certain constituency or people have a place within a polity; but the power imbalances *between included groups* Levinas does not and could not face up to. See Howard Caygill, *Levinas and The Political* (London: Routledge, 2002) for an exploration of this critique, with particular relation to what is viewed as the most troubling example of Levinas's blind-spots: his interventions later in his life concerning the comportment of the State of Israel.

36. Lacoste, 'In War and in Peace', p. 39.

37. While Levinas's account of language is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that Levinas does at points describe the challenging address of the Other as a 'word'. Yet it is clear that this word does not say much, or say *enough* for the possibility of dialogue upon

But peace hinges on dialogue. Recall that, in phenomenological terms, to say, ‘This is how the (moral) other appears to us’, is the same as saying, ‘This is what moral responsibility looks like’. Seen this way, the charge that Levinas’s other only appears in silence is to say that moral responsibility is restricted to the realm of the private or, at most, the realm *within* the state. And therefore Lacoste can object that politics could be moral only if I could discharge moral duties in a broader array of circumstances than Levinas will admit. The cessation of violence could occur only if the face-to-face relation did not exhaust the moral—the possibility Levinas will not admit. There is no prospect of engaging citizens of the country my state has just concluded a peace treaty with. Lacoste concludes by noting the irony, ‘Levinas thinks under the threat of war, but proposes no negotiated solution to the problem of war’.<sup>38</sup>

### ‘I have never been in a Levinasian situation’—where Levinas Survives Lacoste’s Critique

Levinas does not survive many of Lacoste’s most powerful critiques: that much can be gleaned from my discussion of how Lacoste radicalises the widespread concerns about the derivation of moral precepts from Levinas’s account of responsibility. And Lacoste, I have shown, deftly dispatches with Levinas’s own attempts to shore up his positions to such an extent that the ethicist of first philosophy is left looking like he protests too much.

The point of this article, however, is to show the key point where Levinas *does* survive Lacoste’s critique. My aim is to show where Lacoste’s dismissal should not be total and to emphasise the enduring value of Levinas’s representation of morality. Contrary to Lacoste, Levinas does remain phenomenological at a critical juncture; that is, he gives an account of the lived-experience of one aspect of our experience of obligation.

The entry point here is to identify a conflation in two of Lacoste’s global objections to Lacoste. Traced across Lacoste’s writings it is possible to pick out two different claims, a weaker and a stronger:

*Weaker claim:* The other doesn’t *always* appear in face-to-face relation.

*Stronger claim:* The other *never* appears in face-to-face relation.

Put in different terms:

*Weaker claim:* The moral field cannot be *shrunk* to face-to-face relation.

*Stronger claim:* The moral field *does not include* face-to-face relation.

Lacoste conflates these two objections. Levinas might be *wrong* to insist on the uniformity of the way in which the Other presents himself to us (in the immediacy of the ‘face-to-face’), whilst being *right* that sometimes the Other does appear to us in

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which the achievement of peace depends. Therefore Lacoste’s observation in ‘In War and in Peace’ is not misplaced.

38. Lacoste, ‘In War and in Peace’, p. 39.

exactly this way. Our dealing with someone cannot be reduced to, nor wholly derived from, the account of responsibility Levinas proffers. We have seen why that is so. Nevertheless, the situation with which Levinas was preoccupied may still have a place within the moral field. It picks out a relation to the Other which is a key possibility for human beings to realise in their moral life. The face-to-face may not be the ‘highest and paradigm’ phenomenon of encounter in the world. That doesn’t mean it is no phenomenon at all. Therefore there is an irony here. Lacoste says Levinas shrinks the moral field. But in not making room for a Levinasian situation Lacoste shrinks the moral field.<sup>39</sup>

So why, then, is it a mistake to exclude Levinas’s account of responsibility from the moral domain? Why should we be reluctant to dismiss the possibility of the face-to-face along with Levinas’s insistence on its ubiquity? Let me elaborate on my earlier sketch and pick out three distinct features of Levinas’s originary encounter. These will serve, I hope, to fill out a richer, more variegated picture of what it means to receive the call to realise the good in context of being-in-the-world. The three features of one experience of obligation to which Levinas does justice are: (a) immediacy, (b) selflessness and (c) lack of closure.

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39. It is important to mention a critique similar to Lacoste’s: that of Anglican theologian Oliver O’Donovan. In his recent, *Finding and Seeking*, he writes, and it is worth quoting at length:

‘Delight in human virtue forearms us against too narrow an understanding of our own responsibilities, a preoccupation with decision-making that shrinks the moral field to a sequence of raw “situations”, moral vacuums that suck our action into them by the claims they lay upon us. To see how a human life may take shape as a totality under the grace of God puts the decisions in perspective, the bad ones as well as the good ones. It allows us, moreover, to envisage ourselves as part of a moral community, [delivering] us from the Levinasian nightmare of a moral “Other” who does nothing but lay claims upon and take us hostage by those claims’ (Oliver O’Donovan, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology 2* [Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2014], p. 89).

O’Donovan shares many of the same concerns we saw in Lacoste: the ‘Levinasian nightmare’ dispenses with moral deliberation; it is hazardously monadic; and it prevents us from seeing ourselves as the ‘moral community’ necessary in the end to make our values and duties appear. But O’Donovan adds another important, distinctly theological worry that goes beyond Lacoste. The rapid-response, decidedly punctiform conception of moral agency (the ‘preoccupation with decision-making’, as O’Donovan eloquently puts it, ‘that shrinks the moral field to a sequence of raw “situations”’) renders impossible the development over time of *projects* undertaken by the persevering moral agent—the realisation of a good I am committed to over the long haul. Nevertheless, despite O’Donovan’s penetrating critique, it is also possible to view him as running together two objections in the same problematic way Lacoste does. For on the one hand we find the claim that Levinas’s scheme issues in ‘too narrow an understanding of our own responsibilities’. The moral field, O’Donovan insists, cannot be shrunk to a sequence of raw situations. This suggests that there may be *some* room left for the face-to-face, but not the dominant role allotted to it by Levinas. But then O’Donovan employs the strongest terms possible to call the Levinasian picture a ‘nightmare’. Which would suggest that there is no room *at all* for the face-to-face.

## The Value of Levinas for Christian Ethics

### Immediacy

In his essay, 'Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion', Jeffrey Bloechl eloquently paraphrases the first feature of Levinasian obligation I want to highlight: immediacy.

What seems to define this exceptional experience is the manner in which a call for help strikes the passerby *before* he can invoke the matrix which frames the response one elects to make. *Passivity has gone ahead of activity*, and cannot be reduced to it. The question of responsibility ... is mobilized by the face of another human being ... and the appeal for help is not yet qualified by the dispositions of those who hear it ...<sup>40</sup>

We noted above Lacoste's observation that Levinas cannot accommodate the deliberation the moral agent so often needs in order to navigate the choppy waters of the moral life. But 'so often' is not 'always'. Dyadic encounter has an essential element of contingency about it. 'Now *by chance* a priest was going down that road'.<sup>41</sup> In Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan all encountered the Other *en route*. None of them went out in search of a man hemorrhaging blood on the Jericho road. They came across him. The man had not gone missing. They were not responding to an alarm. And a road is not a destination. So while the immediacy of confrontation does not always preclude deliberation, may there not also be occasions when, in the traumatic interruption of the Levinasian appeal, passivity goes ahead of activity? Sometimes there is not time to 'blink', in Malcolm Gladwell's felicitous term. Sometimes standing back may be passing by.

Now, it is not as if theological ethics can give no account of the Good Samaritan! What is it, then, about the immediacy of dyadic encounter that Levinas brings into view? Levinas brings into view the element of *excess*.

Moral philosophers committed to the category of supererogation tend to interpret at least some aspects of what the Good Samaritan did as beyond the call of duty.<sup>42</sup> While the primary attention paid to the wounded man may constitute a positive duty, since Christ depicts the Levite as blameworthy for *not* stopping,<sup>43</sup> we might think the *way in*

40. Jeffrey Bloechl, 'Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion', in J. Bloechl (ed.), *The Face of the Other & The Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), pp. 130–51, at p. 130; my emphasis.

41. Lk. 10:21; my italics.

42. This may be because they have spent too much time in the Vulgate since the only appearance of '*supererogare*' in the scriptures comes in Lk. 10:35. The Samaritan gives the innkeeper two denarii and then says: 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend (*et quodcumque supererogaveris*), I will repay you when I come back.'

43. The renewal of interest in supererogation in the twentieth century can be dated to J. O. Urmson's classic article of 1958, 'Saints and Heroes', in A. I. Melden (ed.), *Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), pp. 198–216. Urmson designates as going beyond the call of duty if, post factum, it could not objectively be thought that everyone should act in the way that the agent did. In the first book-length treatment of the subject,

which the Samaritan responded was supererogatory. He gives no thought to expense, pouring oil and wine on the man's wounds. He sets the injured man on 'his own animal'. He pays no heed to his own time, expending his whole day on the task at hand. He doesn't just patch up the man, send him on his way or pass him on to authorities or others. He personally takes him to an inn, seeing to his safekeeping and presumably risking a second attack by the same or different robbers. Then, finally, he gives the innkeeper carte blanche to look after the man. No expenses are to be spared. Surely, in doing all he possibly could, the Good Samaritan went beyond anything anyone could expect or require? For Levinas, though, it is exactly this excess that is the hallmark of obligation in contingent dyadic relation. The extra mile is simply another mile; it is whatever is the distance to the destination.

Early in Shakespeare's play, King Lear waves away the poverty he encounters. 'Reason not the need!' he cries; 'our basest beggars are in the poorest things *superfluous!*'<sup>44</sup> By the end of the play his perspective has changed. During the hurricane on the heath, he imagines the 'poor naked wretches that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm':

Oh, I have ta'en

Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp.

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,

That thou mayst shake the *superflux* to them

And show the heavens more just.<sup>45</sup>

Repeating the word, 'superflux', or excess, it is clear its meaning has transformed in Lear's moral imagination. Given the destitution of the Other, given the emergency, excessive generosity has become the call of duty.

### Selflessness

Levinas's relation to Kant is fascinating for the reason it is uneven. Kant's famous recommendation for ethical decision-making, the Categorical Imperative, grounded as it is in universalisability, is, as I indicated above, the epitome of the kind of procedural ethics that is so totalising for Levinas. Yet when it comes to the mainstay of Levinas's thought—'un *dés-intér-essement éthique*' (selfless ethics)—Levinas is decidedly Kantian.<sup>46</sup> Responsibility

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David Heyd formalises a definition: 'An act is supererogatory if and only if "it is neither obligatory nor forbidden" and its omission is not wrong, and does not deserve sanction or criticism'. David Heyd, *Supererogation: Its Status in Ethical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 115.

44. King Lear, Act II, scene iv; my italics.

45. *King Lear*, Act III, scene iv; my italics.

46. Emmanuel Levinas, 'L'Autre, utopie et justice', in *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'Autre* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1991), pp. 253–64, at p. 261.

for the Other, he avers, is ‘amour sans concupiscence’, ‘love without desire’.<sup>47</sup> It is a sacrificial love purged of all desire; a love that, unlike Martin Buber’s I-Thou relation, is strictly non-reciprocal; a love which has disavowed—in fact would be completely discredited by—any prospect of fulfilment in the Other.

Falling foul of the naturalistic fallacy, Levinas is able to derive the ‘ought’ of selflessness here by describing the ‘is’ of what he terms ‘separation’. Separation is one of the central themes of *Totality and Infinity*. At first glance it might be surprising, that the famous thinker of intersubjectivity insists that the natural state of the ego is narcissistic. But Levinas does not conceive of this as a fall or a privation. The ego going about his business, the I before the I, has become a question to itself: this is merely the human being in the world as found. *For if it were otherwise*, if his natural state was characterised by need for the Other, then the in-breaking of the Other would somehow be anticipated and the freedom of his revelation curtailed. As Levinas explains, ‘the idea of Infinity requires separation [so that] truth is expressed and illuminates us *before we sought it*’.<sup>48</sup> Or as Bloechl puts it:

If the subject does not tend towards radical closure with itself, it remains open to Others with whom it might then appear to have something in common. Under such conditions, one could hardly speak of the revelation of an otherness which is absolute.<sup>49</sup>

The dismissal of natural sociality here attests to the ludicrous lengths Levinas’s scheme must be stretched to be internally coherent. We see Levinas radicalising even Kant; not simply must duty be construed in the most unattractively ascetic way but, on top of that every relation, is then ethicised. It follows there can be no friendship at all.

The question is: having conceded Lacoste’s weaker claim, that the face-to-face cannot exhaust the moral field, on a reconstructed Levinasian picture does the radical selflessness of these punctiliar moments of obligation have any phenomenological adequacy? To answer that, it is necessary to reflect on what we might mean by ‘fulfilment’. For we might say that acting to save a friend because we love them, or desire them, or desire to save our life together, is necessarily erotic love, and such love is difficult to excise from the Christian moral imagination, given the place of friendship within it. But some kinds of sacrifice, reaching as far as laying down your life for your enemy, or perhaps just sacrificing something for those whose flourishing you will not see in your lifetime, may constitute a different kind of category for the reason that the fulfilment of the self in them seems hard to identify. Moreover, even when ‘fulfilment’ might be a possibility, we would question someone who, in the immediate experience of obligation, turned round and told us they are motivated by the hope of finding fulfilment in the Other. Therefore,

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47. Levinas, ‘L’Autre, utopie et justice’, p. 259.

48. *TI*, p. 103; italics mine. There is a formal similarity here between Levinas’s argument and the neo-Thomist dismissal of the natural desire for the supernatural. For if, so that argument goes, we were the kind of beings who anticipated or needed in some way the revelation, in all brightness and glory, of the self-revealing God, then that revelation could no longer be said be characterised by pure gratuity.

49. Bloechl, ‘Ethics as First Philosophy and Religion’, p. 133.

Levinas restores for theological ethics a phenomenology that prevents us eliding different kinds of sacrifice.

### *Lack of Closure*

Supererogation remains a problematic category for theological ethics because the latter is a tradition in which moral demands have been famously radicalised. Actions which moral philosophers tend to accord heroic or saintly status—forgiveness, for example, or loving your enemy<sup>50</sup>—are not presented in the Sermon of the Mount as *consilia evangelica* ('counsels of perfection') but as new commandments upon which a flourishing life is to be constructed.

The common perception of the unworldly idealism of such an ethic can be broken down into two kinds of skepticism: first, that the ideals are simply impossible, the high-jump preposterously positioned; secondly, that, given the range of positive duties prescribed by the new law, the moral agent could never have 'closure' on anything. Exhaustion would be her interminable fate such that any other endeavour would be impossible.

Christ's regular promise of rest would be orthogonal to such a picture were it not the case that duties, even positive ones, can indeed be discharged. If closure always escapes our grasp, if tasks could never be completed, His burden could not be light,<sup>51</sup> and our attitude to time and to sleep would have to be very different. It would be strange in the Lord's Prayer if, when resources are time-limited—'Give us *today* our daily bread'—moral To Do lists were always infinite.

We have already cited Levinas's favorite quotation, Dostoyevsky's: 'We are responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others'. For a start, this first seems to contradict the contingency and immediacy with which Levinas imbues the face-to-face. And we know how easily so universal a sentiment dissipates into an abdication of responsibility for anyone. Nevertheless, while the face-to-face, we have argued with Lacoste, does not *exhaust* the moral field—and therefore duties can be discharged and we can rest—I want to conclude by arguing that even in this most extreme stipulation Levinas still captures a crucial dimension of our worldly experience of obligation.

Let me conclude by working through an example—the final scene of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film *Schindler's List*. Based on a true story, Schindler is a member of the Nazi party and a shameless war profiteer in German-occupied Kraków. Since remuneration for Jews is forbidden, by taking on hundreds of Jews in his armaments factory, he can ensure a low cost of production and high profits. The film traces the transformation of Schindler's character as he comes to know the Jews who work for him and see firsthand their persecution. He comes face to face with the Other. In the climax of the story when, towards the end of the war, Schindler is instructed to send the Jews who work in his factory to neighboring Auschwitz-Birkenau, Schindler pays a bribe to his SS-*Untersturmführer* Amon Göth for each of the 1,100 men, women and children who work in his factory. The names are recorded on a list, Schindler's list.

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50. See Heyd's list in *Supererogation*, p. 2.

51. Matt. 11:30.



In the highly charged final scene, we learn that the advancing Red Army will soon arrive to liberate the Jews and Schindler must go into hiding. He and his wife Emilie come to say farewell to the men, women and children whose lives he has rescued. How does Schindler react? There is no congratulation, sense of pride or rejoicing on his part. The experience is an agonising one. Why? Because any sense of achievement Schindler might feel at saving 1,100 lives is cancelled out by the awareness of those he did not save. By this point, as well as saving the lives of those working in his factory—Schindler has added other names, other Jews he has met. Still, he knows he could have done more. He points to his car and says ‘ten more lives’. He takes out his tiepin: ‘One more life’.

By this point in the film, having done what Schindler has done, we can hardly fault him for what he did *not* (that is, *after* coming to realise the evil of Nazism and the Shoah).<sup>52</sup> When his Jewish accountant and friend Itzhak Stern discovers Schindler has had to pay a bribe for each life, Stern says, ‘you’re buying them? You’re paying [Amon Göth] for each of these names?’ Schindler retorts: ‘If you were still working for me, I’d expect you to talk me out of it. It’s costing me a fortune’. But Schindler does not feel his bankruptcy was sufficient. He experiences in Dostoyevskian and Levinasian terms ‘responsibility for everyone else’. Driving away from the factory—a scene Spielberg does not give us in the film—it is difficult to imagine Schindler talking with his wife and resolving at what point he had or would have done enough. That intuition eludes him and always will. We get the sense that *he* will probably be haunted his whole life not just by his earlier complicity with the Nazi regime but by what more he could have done.<sup>53</sup>

The unique value of Levinas’s account is to show us that sometimes the intuition that a duty has been discharged may not be forthcoming. We might want to resolve this problem by saying that, while *in medias res* the knowledge of having done enough will elude the agent, *post factum* that realisation will slowly emerge. But Levinas highlights that sometimes the experience of a certain kind of obligation will only be genuine if the agent remains forever *unable* to stand back, unable to assume the third person perspective on her action, unable to assess whether she did enough. On an Aristotelian account of virtue, in which *phronesis* (‘wisdom’ or, in one’s action, ‘getting it right’) is central, one might conclude that, if Schindler does not know he has done enough, it follows he does not understand what he has done. Accordingly he would lack *phronesis* and, therefore, virtue. But Levinas, in showing what it is like to be deprived of knowledge of the sufficiency of our action, overturning as he does the niceties and strictures of theory, Levinas offers us an account of *what it is like* to experience obligation which is unsurpassed.

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The radicalisation of obligation, the intensification of the moral demands upon the self, the paradoxical imperative to be generous, the call to excess, the necessity of selflessness and the impossibility of closure—these are the features of the experience of the moral

52. Schindler’s complicity with Nazism before his epiphany, and his complacency in his view of the Jews, are of course condemnable. This is revealed at the turning point in the film where, as on horseback above the ghetto, he watches it being gutted, as Jews are rounded off to the nearby concentration camp.

53. This, to clarify, relates to *Schindler’s* assessment of his own acts, not mine.

life which Levinas lights up for us. For it is the contention of this article that Levinas helps Christian moral theology to see why supererogation does not belong in the repertoire of moral concepts we can derive from the New Testament. For believers in Christ to act like the Good Samaritan is not to go *beyond* the call of duty but to experience the amplification of it.

Yet a problem remains: it is difficult not to find the counsel of Levinas a counsel of *despair*. We have seen how Schindler is haunted by not knowing whether he has done enough. And the reader of Levinas, Jewish, Christian or secular, may well be left with a sense of exhaustion, paralysed (paradoxically) rather than compelled by the presentation, in the face of the Other, of the infinite duty that does not know completion. How can this be consonant with the promise that entering into rest is not only God's *eschatological* promise to us, but a promise for our time now?

One suggestion, and perhaps a point of departure for further reflection, is that the only real Levinasian 'I', the only one who can possibly be, in Alyosha's phrase, 'responsible for everyone else'; the only one who can love without desire and give without ceasing is Christ. For through his incarnation he becomes the Good Samaritan; he is the answer to his own question—'Who is my neighbour?', the neighbour who has gone out ahead of us. His contingent dyadic encounters with Zacchaeus, or the man born blind or the Samaritan woman constitute the form in history taken by the one who is primordially *relational* given the reality of the Trinity. Therefore, the two 'conditions' in view—our ethics having the character of excess on the one hand and the possibility of rest on the Other—can only be met in the Incarnation. For we may fail constantly to respond to the call of the Other but, ultimately, we can participate in what Christ has already done.<sup>54</sup>

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