

Levinas, Habermas and Modernity

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Abstract

This article examines Levinas as if he were a participant in what Habermas has called ‘the philosophical discourse of modernity’. It begins by comparing Levinas’ and Habermas’ articulations of the philosophical problems of modernity. It then turns to how certain key motifs in Levinas’ later work give philosophical expression to the needs of the times as Levinas diagnoses them. In particular it examines how Levinas interweaves a modern, post-ontological conception of ‘the religious’ or ‘the sacred’ into his account of subjectivity. Finally, the article looks at some problems that arise for Levinas once his position in the philosophical discourse on modernity is made explicit.

Key terms

Levinas, Habermas, modernity, religion, ontology, social relation, otherness.

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What does Levinas contribute to the philosophical discourse on modernity? Appearances suggest it is very little. Levinas himself rarely thematises the concept of modernity: neither of Levinas' main works --- Totality and Infinity and Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence --- deals explicitly with the problems of modernity, and the concept of modernity surfaces only occasionally in Levinas' other writings.¹ This lack of thematisation is reflected in the now extensive scholarship on Levinas, which, with a few notable exceptions, has not troubled itself with developments in the contemporary modernity debate.² For their part, the leading figures in this debate --- Habermas, Taylor, and MacIntyre, for example --- barely mention Levinas' work.³ The low profile of Levinas in recent debates amongst philosophers and social theorists about the problems of modernity, together with the lack of attention given to the modernity problematic in discussions of Levinas, give the impression that Levinas simply does not have much to say that is relevant for the discourse on modernity.

And yet if one does read Levinas with a view to reconstructing a contribution to the philosophical discourse on modernity, one soon finds oneself with plenty to think about. Might it be the case that Levinas is like the other philosophers in the discourse on modernity in having a conception of the needs of the times, and of the responsibilities of the philosopher in relation to them, that is powerful enough to motivate the distinctive themes and strategies of his philosophical project? Can sense be made of what otherwise seems baffling in Levinas' philosophy by reading it as if it were, at its core, a philosophical diagnosis of the times? And if we do read Levinas this way, how does his response to the 'malaise' and the needs of the times compare with those urged by other participants in the philosophical discourse on modernity?

It is this last question that provides my point of departure. More specifically, I want to compare Levinas' contribution to the discourse on modernity with Habermas'. Habermas' work suggests itself as a useful point of comparison for several reasons. First, we owe the very idea of a 'discourse' of modernity, in which the major figures of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European philosophy can be situated as contemporaries in a debate, to Habermas.⁴ Habermas' famous book on the subject, for all its faults, provides an exemplary account of what it is for a philosopher to be oriented by the problems of modernity, and in broad outlines I follow it here. Second, Habermas' own position in the discourse on modernity, and his critique of the other main figures in the debate, are relatively well-known. We are familiar enough with Habermas' position to be able to use it as a reference point for thinking about Levinas'. And third, it turns out that, of all the philosophers featured in Habermas' reconstruction of the discourse on modernity, the one to whom Levinas comes closest is Habermas himself. Habermas and Levinas bear comparison because, in the context of the discourse on modernity, they are very similar.

My first claim, then, is that Levinas and Habermas can profitably be read as close allies in the philosophical discourse on modernity, and my first task is to determine the nature of their shared position (section I). My second task is to locate the point at which their projects come apart. Habermas' conception of the tasks of philosophy, and his mode of philosophical practice, differs quite radically from Levinas' --- a divergence that requires explanation given their close allegiance on other issues fundamental to the discourse on modernity (section II). I then look more closely at how certain key motifs in Levinas' later work give philosophical expression to the needs of the times as Levinas diagnoses them. In particular I examine how Levinas interweaves a modern, 'post-ontological' conception of the religious or the sacred into his account of subjectivity

(section III). Finally, I consider some problems that arise for Levinas once his position in the philosophical discourse on modernity is made explicit in such terms (section IV).

I

Let me begin by stating bluntly what I take to be centrally at stake in the philosophical discourse on modernity. A philosopher's engagement with this discourse, as I understand it, arises from some apprehension of a structural normative deficit in the forms of thought and practice that are believed to characterise modernity. By a normative deficit, I simply mean some way in which a form of life falls short of a standard to which the form of life aspires or ought to aspire. Happiness and freedom are two such standards: so a philosopher may engage in the discourse on modernity because she believes that modern forms of thought and practice bring unhappiness or a lack of freedom. A structural deficit is one which is intrinsic to and firmly embedded in a form of thought and practice, rather than a merely accidental feature or one that can easily be rectified. When philosophers in the discourse on modernity speak of modernity as suffering from a pervasive 'malaise' or as being in 'crisis', they are typically, though admittedly not always, addressing such a structural normative deficit. The more or less explicit idea is that the very viability of the modern form of life is undermined by the deficit; on account of it, the very survival of this particular form of life is threatened. Furthermore, the malaise or crisis of modernity can be deemed to be so pervasive that it infects the activity and self-understanding of philosophy itself. If philosophy is viewed historically --- that is, as a reflection of its times --- then the crisis immanent to the times may be manifest as a crisis of confidence in its dominant philosophy. Partly for this reason, philosophers in the discourse on modernity often fluctuate between diagnosing the spirit of the age and diagnosing the condition of philosophy, and their critique of the normative deficits they believe characterise the modern epoch can play itself out

indirectly as a critique of the standards implicit in the paradigms of modern philosophising.

Still, it would be difficult to see the relevance of the metacritique of philosophy for a diagnosis of the times if it were not for the connection that is supposed to exist between reason and modernity. For once modernity is characterised as a rationalised form of life, and the normative deficits of the age are attributed precisely to the structure of rationalisation, then those rationalistic philosophies that support and are supported by that form of life are in trouble. It becomes plausible to suppose that the structure of the dominant philosophy of the times --- roughly, Enlightenment rationalism --- might be as riddled with contradiction, as normatively unsatisfactory in its own way, as the socio-economic and cultural structure that has come to dominate the modern age. To the extent that the two structures are in fact congruent, a critique of the normative deficits manifest in the latter --- experienced concretely as unhappiness, oppression, alienation, fragmentation and, in the view of many philosophers at least, longing for community --- can be informed and powered by critique at the former, meta-philosophical level. If philosophical reason has somehow been an accomplice in the reproduction of the pathologies of modernity, then it is incumbent on the philosopher to stand back from the inherited paradigm and to offer an alternative model for thought.

These are, broadly speaking, the terms in which Habermas stages the philosophical discourse of modernity. For Habermas, the defining normative deficit of modernity is the socially disintegrative effect of instrumental reason.⁵ Modernity falls short of its measure --- what might be called ‘intact’ or ‘undamaged’ intersubjectivity⁶ -- - because instrumental rationality usurps the social relation, a usurpation which Habermas traces back, in historical materialist fashion, to capitalist growth. According to Habermas’ staging, all the participants in the discourse of modernity see the division

between subjects, and the petrification of sociality due to instrumental reason, as the defining pathology of the times: 'Since the close of the eighteenth century, the discourse of modernity has had a single theme under ever new titles: the weakening of the forces of social bonding, privatisation, and diremption' (Habermas 1987: 139). This normative deficit finds its way into modern philosophy in the pre-eminence of what Habermas calls 'subject-centred reason'. Subject-centred reason finds its criteria of excellence in the representation and manipulation of objects, in control over what is other to it. The appropriate way of responding philosophically to the defining pathology of the times, therefore, is to question this conception of the subject and of reason, to philosophise in a manner that breaks with subject-centred reason (or as Habermas also puts it, the 'philosophy of the subject'). This, according to Habermas, is what all the key figures in the philosophical discourse of modernity, from Hegel to Derrida and Foucault, try to do.

None of them, however, quite pull it off. Habermas' version of the discourse of modernity is a story of false starts and missed opportunities (ibid.: 295). The philosophical critics of modernity inadvertently reinforce the very subject-centred reason against which they rebel. In Hegel and Marx, this happens with their alleged introduction of the notion of society as a subject writ-large, as a totality unified by an homogeneous if autonomous will. In Nietzsche and Heidegger, the structure of subject-centred reason is allegedly reproduced in the notion of something absolutely other to reason --- a vital, transfiguring, but fundamentally uncontrollable and irrational source of communal energy --- by appeal to which a 'total critique' of reason is to be carried out (ibid.:104--5). This move, Habermas thinks, gets caught up in performative contradictions and deprives reason of its critical, universal force. But there were also moments when the discourse of modernity stood at the threshold of a genuine paradigm shift, as when the young Hegel hit upon the idea of an 'intersubjectively constituted life-

context' alienation from which is experienced in common as a hostile fate (ibid.: 29). Subject-centred reason is only properly overcome when the concept of communicative reason and the idea of a communicatively mediated form of life implicit in these earlier models are fully worked out. Instrumental or subject-centred reason is then recast as a foreshortening and distortion of a more fundamental communicative reason.

So much for Habermas' position. Unlike Habermas, Levinas does not explicitly situate himself in a tradition of thinking about modernity. Nonetheless, Levinas does often reflect on the times in a way that is suggestive of an underlying philosophical diagnosis. Levinas often reminds his contemporaries of the terrible events they have lived through --- two world wars, Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism, the bomb, genocide and the holocaust --- as if this supplied the fundamental context for, perhaps even the ultimate subject-matter of, his philosophical investigations.⁷ Such passages give the impression that Levinas, like the anti-moderns and post-moderns Habermas attacks, conceives modernity as a 'lost cause' to be resisted at all costs (Habermas 1985: 12). This impression is partly reinforced by some of Levinas' few explicit reflections on the meaning of the 'modern'. According to Levinas' 1980 essay 'The Old and the New', the modern is constituted by a consciousness of freedom, and a drive towards self-knowledge, aimed at the mastery and control of what is other. This freedom 'is lived essentially in correlation with the development of science and the techniques that civilisation brings'; 'modernity and its freedom are always in correlation with the institutional existence of science, methods, and manipulations of the given' (Levinas 1987: 125). Here, Levinas portrays modernity as absolutely assured of its own knowledge, as the culmination of all past --- indeed all future --- cognitive endeavours. Modernity, brought to its concept in the philosophy of Hegel, is the 'pan-logical civilisation' (ibid.: 129). Its vocation is to know; its knowledge is definitive of its

spirituality. In this late essay, then, Levinas reproduces the familiar image of modernity as a form of life oriented and dominated by instrumental or subject-centred reason and freedom.

But modernity, or Europe --- these expressions are equivalent for Levinas --- also has a 'bad conscience' about itself (Levinas 1986: 191f). It is aware of the destruction it has caused and this makes it uneasy. Following on from the previous characterisation of modernity, Levinas designates as the object of unease 'the universality of theoretical reason' (ibid.: 192). A paradigmatic expression of this bad conscience, in Levinas' view, is cultural relativism. By relinquishing the claim to universality of its reason, modernity can expiate its guilt for having vanquished inferior non-theoretical cultures. At the same time, as well as suffering a certain guilt for its success, modernity is pervaded with a sense of loss. It is as if the universalisation of its reason has come at a price that may not have been worth paying. And this background sense of having lost something vital --- 'the malaise of European humanity' in Levinas' words; 'modernity's need for self-reassurance' in Habermas' --- impels not just a relativisation of the claims of reason but a turning against those claims. As evidence of this, Levinas points to the 'exaltation' of the so-called 'primitive' or 'savage' mind in contemporary thought. According to Levinas, the widespread 'affirmation and championing of specific cultures in all corners of the globe' (Levinas 1984: 133) is not just a matter of assuaging guilt for past crimes: it is also driven by a nostalgic longing for the 'sacred', a desire to reconnect with the source of meaning and being denied to the denizens of the disenchanted world of modernity. For Levinas, this valorisation of the pre-rational, primitive mentality is mirrored in the elevation of art amongst certain critics of modernity who maintain that only an aesthetic transformation of life can save European humanity from its fateful decline. It is possible, Levinas concedes, for art to imitate religion by neutralising the

forces of separation between subjects, and between subjects and the world, in the manner of primitive enchantment. That such a role is deemed desirable for art, and that primitive religious mentality is considered worth championing, and that the worth of different cultures is considered equal, all testify, in Levinas' view, to a profound unease. By no means answers to the problems of modernity, they are symptoms of a deep malaise.

Cultural relativism, primitivism and aestheticism each in its own way negotiates the unease over theoretical reason by stepping outside the horizon of modernity. In Levinas' view, there are much better resources for interpreting the meaning of the malaise available from within that horizon. On the one hand, there are reminders internal to the Western philosophical tradition of the limits of theoretical reason and of the one-sidedness of the human vocation defined as self-knowledge. There are also premonitions of an as yet unrealised vocation based on something other than theoretical knowledge. Levinas sees evidence of such an alternative, non-ratiocentric spirituality in Bergson's notion of lived time. But of still greater significance in this regard (for reasons I'll consider briefly later) is the Cartesian idea of the infinite. For Levinas, Descartes' idea of the infinite is a paradigm case of how philosophy can respond to and correct the distortions of subject-centred reason. In doing so, it draws implicitly on a sense of the human predicament that is just as crucial to the self-definition of modernity as the ideals of self-knowledge and self-realisation: namely, the Biblical spirituality of love for the neighbour, of the priority of the 'other human being' over the self. According to Levinas, it is only by keeping in view the confluence of Biblical spirituality, with its injunction to love the neighbour, and the Hellenic vocation for self-knowledge in the modern identity that we can understand the 'malaise of European humanity' and its need for self-reassurance. Furthermore, at crucial moments in its history, Western philosophy

intimates ways of showing up the priority of otherness over selfness and sameness.

Levinas attempts to gather these moments together and to demonstrate philosophically, in his own way, the dependence of the ideals of truth and self-knowledge on the ideals of 'peace' and 'justice'. He tries to establish that subject-centred reason presupposes a 'rationality' (Levinas 1994:146) expressed not in the correct representation or efficient manipulation of objects but in peaceful relations between subjects; that is, in the social relation. Indeed, to establish the primacy of 'the relationship of man to man...a primacy of an irreducible structure on which all other [aesthetic or ontological] structures rest', is how Levinas explicitly describes a central objective of Totality and Infinity (Levinas 1969: 79).

These brief remarks --- and of course they leave a lot more to be said --- suggest that Levinas and Habermas cut a similar profile in the discourse on modernity.⁸ Like everyone else in the discourse, they are critical of the subject-centred paradigm of reason, of reason that assimilates, organises and manipulates. They are also critical of it insofar as it reflects a defining pathology of the times, times that call for a mode of philosophising that is independent of the premises of subject-centred reason. Unlike some of the other critics of modernity, however, both understand their critique as immanent to the horizon of modernity, as drawing on the cultural resources of modernity itself (broadly, Hellenism and monotheism). They are both opposed to relativising critique, that is, critique that puts modernity on the same cognitive and moral plane as non-modern, non-western cultures. Neither Habermas nor Levinas is prepared to forego modernity's claims to universality. They are both opposed to what might be called the 'ontologisation' or 'aestheticisation' of critique; that is, critique oriented to the recovery of the meaning of being. Both Levinas and Habermas are vehemently anti-Heideggerian on this score. They are also both strongly opposed to the project of 'total' critique ---

that is, the critique of reason by appeal to something absolutely other to it --- which they condemn as irrationalist and regressive. But Levinas and Habermas are not just united in having common adversaries. They share the positive view that the standard to which subject-reason is accountable is presupposed by that reason rather than merely external to it. And they both subscribe to the thesis that this standard is given by the social relation, or in other words, by peaceful, non-coercive relations between subjects. Both Levinas and Habermas are convinced that the normativity of undamaged intersubjectivity is primordial.

II

But how is the conviction, common to Levinas and Habermas, that the social relation is the primordial source of normativity to be backed up philosophically? Indeed, what meaning can philosophy give to this relation, the supposed forgotten ground of all other relations (at least subject-object relations)? Habermas and Levinas part company on these questions, and this difference goes some way to explaining their divergent trajectories in the discourse on modernity. It will help us to understand the nature of Levinas' contribution to the discourse if we first consider Habermas' conception of the undamaged social relation and the tasks that fall to philosophy in view of it.

There are in fact several standards of undamaged intersubjectivity at work in Habermas' alternative to subject-centred reason; but they all involve the notion of a background situation --- a 'communicative life-context' (Habermas 1987: 316) --- of mutual recognition in which subjects can cooperate freely through the uncoerced exchange of validity claims.⁹ With this emphatically linguistic conception of the social relation in place, Habermas attempts to make good the counter-intuitive claim shared by Levinas that truth --- the norm governing theoretical reason --- is grounded in a prior

normativity expressed in the dialogical relation between subjects. By showing how the ‘universality of theoretical reason’, as Levinas called it, presupposes an intersubjectively constituted context of discourse --- a context, that is to say, in which the unconstrained thematisation of validity claims, and so the ‘event’ of truth, is possible --- Habermas claims to leave behind the premises of the philosophy of the subject for good. Once reason is located, as it were, between subjects, it can be seen as offering up a standard for the critique of subject-centred reason, or reason manifesting itself as power over something or someone. Philosophy can do this as a rational discourse by engaging in ‘rational reconstructions’: that is, by reconstructing or making explicit the implicitly known competencies that are presupposed in the intersubjective practice of making legitimate theoretical and practical judgements. For Habermas, accordingly, the main business of critical philosophy is justification, not the objectifying justification of subject-centred reason, but the more expansive mode of reciprocal reason-giving that characterises communicative action.

Habermas’ prime concern is thus to identify and vindicate the points of view from which we are able to make critical judgements on prevailing norms and practices, and in this sense, bring the times to account. This is a task incumbent on philosophy in part because the prevailing norms and practices of modernity have been shaped by instrumental reason. Clearly, if philosophy is to emerge as a critical force in this context it must have recourse --- indeed give expression --- to an alternative, non-instrumental conception of reason. But the critical vocation of philosophy is also shaped by other ways in which the times fall short of their measure, ways that are related to the predominance of instrumental reason but which may also manifest themselves independently of that context. In particular, modern societies fall short of their standard as democracies by excluding individuals or groups from the processes for determining

norms that affect them (and everybody else in the society). And just as the critique of subject-centred reason must prove itself in the non-objectifying manner of its critique, so the critique of exclusionary reason must be able to show how it gives expression to the norm --- namely justice --- against which the times find their measure. This is the fundamental reason why, for Habermas, so much of the burden of his critical philosophy is taken up by an account --- and practice --- of justification. For the injustice of exclusion is in part constituted by a norm's exemption from justification pressures: the excluded have no say in the procedure for establishing the norm. In the modern world, to question the justice of a norm (typically) just is to question its manner of justification. This, for Habermas, is the reason why justice is essentially linked to democracy, and a central task of critical philosophy today is to draw out the full implications of this link.

While Levinas shares Habermas' view that the social relation is the primordial ground of normativity, he has a different conception of the structure through which the 'I' and the 'other' enter into a social relation in the first instance. According to Levinas' conception, the self first genuinely encounters an other person --- that is to say, first enters into a genuine social relation --- when it finds itself no longer merely 'living from' its environment, but living 'for' another.¹⁰ The situation of non-coercively existing for another person, or of taking responsibility for the other, is in Levinas' view a purer and more fundamental expression of the social relation than the order of mutual recognition Habermas invokes. In order for the structure of discursive exchange to be intelligible at all, Levinas points out, sense must first be made of what it is for a being to give simpliciter. The delivery of the self over to the other, Levinas thinks, must have a meaning independent of the return of recognition that may be forthcoming from the other. And for Levinas, it is this prior moment of giving of oneself, the moment of uncontained (or as Levinas prefers to put it, 'infinite') responsibility of the one (the

‘me’) for the other, that defines the transition from a condition human beings share with other beings to one that is uniquely human: it marks the move from relations that are intelligible ‘ontologically’ to relations that are only intelligible ‘socially’. For Levinas the social relation is the ethical relation, where ethics involves the assumption of responsibility for the other without calculation of what the other will give in return, or indeed of what is in it for me at all. As soon as such calculation does enter the scene, or as soon as reciprocity is sought, the pure otherness of the other disappears and we exit the ethical plane. While Levinas would no doubt find Habermas’ thesis that communicative reason provides the basis of a just and democratic society congenial, in Levinas’ view even this non-instrumental, dialogical idea of reason arrives too late to provide the social source of normativity as such.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the manner in which Levinas articulates this conception of the social relation, and its primacy over ‘ontology’, departs significantly from the method of rational reconstruction. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas describes his approach as owing ‘everything to the phenomenological method’, which he defines, in standard fashion, as the attempt to recover the ‘forgotten experience’ that underlies objectifying, theoretical thought (Levinas 1969: 28). This suggests that Levinas understands himself to be offering articulations of the pre-discursive encounter with another person, the encounter which summons an ethical response prior to any thought about what justifies the response. For Levinas, just this encounter is decisive for the social relation, indeed for human subjectivity as such. But since the other of the social / ethical relation does not ‘stand for’ anything, since the other is not representative of a point of view, type or class, the other is not subsumable under a concept. Not just the objectifying thought of theory, but ordinary language and the forms of reasoning exploited in democratic deliberation, are thus not well suited to

this task of explicating the meaning of the other. Careful phenomenological description seems to be required for bringing the primordial encounter with the other to reflective, philosophical expression. For Levinas, it requires a description whose excellence lies in its fidelity to the 'exorbitant' demand the other makes on me simply qua other, rather than in the justification of a validity claim.

Taken at his word, Levinas thus promises insight into the meaning of the social relation that would go beyond, or at least supplement, what Habermas can achieve by way of rational reconstruction. As Habermas concedes, rational reconstructions are limited insofar as they only aim at making explicit the cognitive content implicit in action and judgement. They do not address the affective dimension of pre-reflective life, still less do they aspire to recover the sense of pre-reflective experience in the manner of phenomenological description. A number of authors have observed --- rightly in my view --- that such attention to the concrete lived experience of the ethical encounter provides a corrective to Habermas' more abstract, cognitivist approach.¹¹ It can inform us, more directly than rational reconstructions, of what is involved from the 'first person' point of view in listening to the other and attending to the other with care simply as an other. And Levinas certainly seems to be doing something like this in his famous account of the 'face' in Totality and Infinity and elsewhere.

A face is clearly something that we see in our pre-reflective lives. Indeed, of all the things we see, the face is perhaps the most recognisable thing: in our pre-reflective lives at least, what is more meaningful than the sight of a face? The face, then, seems perfectly chosen as a theme for the phenomenological exploration of the meaning of the other, the other we encounter in pre-reflective life. And yet the whole point of the face, as Levinas articulates it, is that it is not seen. The very idea of a phenomenology of the face is misguided, Levinas argues, because phenomenology describes only what appears

to consciousness. The face, by contrast, ‘cannot become a content, which... thought would embrace’ (Levinas 1985: 86--7). So while, at the phenomenological level, the other is present to us most concretely face to face, it is at the ethical level that this meaning is fulfilled. That is not to say that we infer, from seeing a face, a duty or responsibility towards it. We are not responsible to the other because it has specific properties. Rather, our ‘access to the face’, as a symbol of the other, is as Levinas puts it ‘straightaway ethical’ (ibid.: 85). Who or what the other is, encountered face to face, counts for nothing; nor is the other instrumental in the fulfilment of my own desires and purposes, as the things I perceive or ‘look at’ in pre-reflective life are. In this sense the ethical relation marks a ‘rupture with being’.

As we noted before, Levinas understands the aim of the phenomenological method to be the recovery of pre-objective lived experience from the distortions of objectifying reflection. While the method has some claim to universality --- it may be that all human self-reflection is vulnerable to such distortion --- nevertheless it is modern objectifying thought and practice that is the chief culprit. Phenomenology, in other words, aims at the recovery of something we moderns in particular have forgotten, where this ‘forgetfulness’ has sunk deep into the culture (and paradigmatically the sciences) of modernity. The task of phenomenological philosophy is to ‘awaken’ the subjectivity of the modern subject from its slumbers. For Levinas, we have just seen, this self-awakening must at the same time be an awakening of the ‘I’ to the ‘other’. The problem now, however, is that to be awoken to the other, in the sense of being reminded of the irreducibility of the social relation (the face-to-face), is not a matter of recovering or being reminded of an experience. Hence Levinas the phenomenologist, and the philosophical diagnostician of the times, is in a bind. For if, as Levinas writes at the beginning of Totality and Infinity, ‘[T]he true life is absent’ (Levinas 1969: 33), how

can that which is absent show itself up or be made vivid in philosophical discourse, if not as the uncovering of a phenomenon?

III

We find the germ of an answer in Levinas' conception of the sacred or 'the holy'.¹² Recall that for Levinas, a prime symptom of the malaise of modern times is its fascination with the primitive and the irrational. The lure of paganism, Levinas suggests, is that it promises to satisfy a deeply embedded human desire for communion with a larger reality, a reality that in some sense grounds the self. This communion, which is also conceived as the height of human fulfilment, is made possible through manifestations of the sacred. The absence of the true life, then, just is the absence of the sacred, traditionally or 'paganistically' conceived.¹³ And yet --- Nazism has convinced Levinas of this --- the moral, political and spiritual consequences of paganism are catastrophic. Levinas' task, then, can be reformulated as that of articulating the holy, and the 'height' of the human, independently of any pagan element whatsoever, which for Levinas means independently of any ontological framework. A key task for philosophy, in the context of its times, is thus to critique --- in a manner suited to philosophy --- the ontologisation of the sacred, and to present an alternative framework within which properly to understand the 'height' or 'holiness' of the sacred.

Levinas' critique in part follows a Kantian strategy. Any notion of the sacred that represents transcendence as a special kind of presence or manifestation has to be mistaken, according to Levinas, for the reason first identified by Kant: any manifestation of transcendence would be incompatible with the conditions of possible experience. There can be no transcendent presence for Levinas just as there can be no 'intellectual intuition' for Kant. Both are ruled out a priori. As transcendent, the sacred cannot be an object of experience, it cannot appear to consciousness. For if it were, it would be conditioned by subjectivity, and therefore not fully transcendent at all. Levinas interprets this conclusion as

blocking off all claims on the part of experience to put us in touch with the sacred. The varieties of religious experience can be no exception to the law of intentionality: qua experience, they are subject to the unifying categories of consciousness and subjectivity. However 'transcendent', 'extraordinary', or 'wholly other' it appears, religious experience 'does not break with presence and immanence' (Levinas 1989: 172). This, according to Levinas, is the salutary and irrevocable lesson of modernity.

In the disenchanted world to which our cognitive faculties are matched, there can be no presence of the transcendent, no manifestations of the sacred. Does this mean that all talk of transcendence, all 'bringing to language' of the transcendence of the sacred, is illusion? Not if it is possible to signify otherwise than by reference to an object of experience or a manifestation of being. As I hinted at before, Levinas finds such a mode of signification suggested in Descartes' notion of the infinite.¹⁴ According to Descartes, we have an idea of a transcendent reality, a reality incomparably greater than that of the subject, in the idea of God or the infinite. It is crucial for Descartes that the idea of God is given to the finite subject; the subject encounters the idea of God or the infinite passively. As a finite being empirically conscious of a world of finite beings, the subject lacks the resources to construct the idea of the infinite from an active synthesis of its own. While the subject receives ideas passively through what Kant called the faculty of sensibility, the passivity of the subject before the idea of the infinite is of a quite different order. Descartes' great insight for Levinas is that the idea of the infinite signifies as a 'trauma'. The trauma happens to the conscious subject; in no way is it a product of the subject's spontaneity or its generative powers. As if to emphasise the passivity of the subject in its relation to the transcendent still further, Levinas insists on the 'non-assumability' of the trauma through which the transcendent signifies. Never assumed, the trauma is 'inflicted by the Infinite on presence' (ibid.: 180).

Now in Levinas' view, this is just the mode in which ethics signifies. Ethics does not assert, it enjoins. Its mode of address is the order or the injunction. The ethical demand inflicts itself on the subject from the outside. To say that the ethical demand 'inflicts itself' is to say that it exercises its force independently of any assumption, decision or commitment on the part of the subject. Its force is given, not assumed in virtue of some prior act. The injunction to take responsibility for one's neighbour --- as we have seen, the primary meaning of the ethical in Levinas' view --- imposes itself on the subject. Hence Levinas can claim that the affectivity of the finite subject before the idea of the infinite 'takes shape as a subjection to the neighbour' (ibid.). My neighbour, the 'other', is intelligible ethically not as a thematised item of consciousness. Qua other, as we have seen, the neighbour escapes representation and instrumentalisation. In Levinas' account, the ethical relationship to that which is non-representable --- the face-to-face --- is the real source of the sacred, or more properly speaking, the holy. It is 'the latent birth of religion in the other, prior to emotions or voices, prior to "religious experience" which speaks of revelation in terms of the disclosure of being' (ibid.: 181).

So Levinas' answer to the question 'how does the transcendent signify if not by manifestation?' is that it signifies ethically, as an injunction. If the injunction is not to relapse into presence, it must hold externally to the being of the subject. For Levinas, the integrity of the other, and the full force of the ethical claim, depends on the other standing in a relation of utter exteriority to the subject. But this creates a tension. For, as Levinas is aware, the sacred or the holy not only enjoins, it empowers the subject to live ethically. That is to say, it enables the subject to realise its highest calling; it functions, to use Taylor's expression, as a 'moral source' (Taylor 1989: 93). Proximity to the sacred or the holy motivates ethical action, it activates the subject's potency to act, and hence empowers the realisation of the good. But how can it do this without at the same time bringing the subject to completion, that is, without

also empowering the self-realisation of the subject? How can the sacred or the holy at once enjoin and empower if the subject stands to the source of injunction in a relation of utter exteriority --- in an 'ir-relation', as Levinas puts it?

Levinas recognises this problem, which he negotiates with reflections on the notion of 'dis-interested' desire. Levinas realises that desire must feature in the relationship between the subject and the sacred. But, given Levinas' insistence on the absolute exteriority of the sacred, it cannot be a desire that is integrated into the well-being of the subject. Desire in this case must be 'of another order than the desires involved in hedonist or eudaimonist affectivity and activity, where the desirable is invested, reached, and identified as an object of need' (Levinas 1989: 177). The desire inspired by the transcendent is 'a desire without goal or need', or as Levinas puts it, a 'dis-interestedness'. It is this dis-interestedness, or desire without goal, that Levinas terms 'desire for the Good'. Desire for the Good is the 'endless desire for what is beyond being' (ibid.). In the dis-interested desire there is a desirable but not a desired. The desirable, God or the infinite, remains 'separated in the desire; as desirable it is near but different: holy' (ibid.: 178). The sacred / holy, as desirable, is proximate rather than present, and it is this structure that at once saves the sacred from immanence and makes it available to the modern, disenchanted world.

It is through the idea of proximity, then, that ethical empowerment is rendered compatible with moral injunction. In proximity to the good the subject suffers the force of the injunction to take responsibility for one's neighbour. But it also enables the subject to act in accordance with the command. Proximity to the good motivates and empowers the subject to live ethically, which, for Levinas, means living for another: 'the goodness of the good...inclines the movement it calls forth, to turn it from the good and orient it to the other, and only thus towards the good' (ibid.). The ideal of ethical life thus is far from being conceived along the model of the completion of the subject or in terms of full self-realisation.

Ethical existence, for Levinas, 'is a deficit, waste and foolishness in a being; to be good is excellence and elevation beyond being' (ibid.: 179).¹⁵ Indeed, there is really no such thing as 'ethical existence' or 'being good' in a strict sense. For ethics is not a moment of being, 'it is otherwise and better than being'. Ethical responsibility occurs in spite of my interests and in spite of myself. In the ethical relation, empowered by a desire for the good or the 'beyond being', the subject 'substitutes' for the other, is 'hostage' to him or her. This relation of substitution, the 'one-for-the other', is Levinas' paradigm of both original subjectivity and the ethical relation.

The name Levinas gives for the kind of discourse that articulates this substitution of the self for the other is 'the saying'. It is through 'the saying', rather than 'the said', that the ethical relation finds representation in philosophical discourse. The saying, in Levinas' sense, is a mode of articulation that is 'prior to all willing and thematisation'. Indeed, it is a way of signifying 'prior to all experience' (ibid.: 183). The subject of the saying exposes himself or herself to the other and represents this exposedness in the saying. And it is only through the saying, rather than in the report, documentation or narration of some religious experience or revelation, that the infinite can be brought to language.¹⁶ In the saying one 'testifies' to the infinite. I bring the infinite to language not by a thematisation, nor indeed by dialogue, but by the saying "'here I am" (me voici) said to a neighbour to whom I am given over' (ibid.: 183). Only in the ethical relationship is the infinite in relationship with the finite 'without contradicting itself by this relationship' (ibid.: 184). But it is only through such a relationship that subjectivity as finitude emerges at all. As a term in the originary mode of signification, ethical signification, subjectivity is 'wholly an obedience, obeying with an obedience that precedes understanding' (ibid.: 186).

IV

So Levinas has two principal objections to the traditional understandings of the sacred. First, he takes issue with the idea that a transcendent reality, a reality greater than that of the subject, is made manifest in the sacred. Second, he rejects the view that the sacred qua manifestation enjoins and empowers the good. Levinas does not, so far as I can tell, object to the notion that the sacred, properly (that is, non-ontically) understood, does point to a reality incomparably greater than the subject. And of course he emphatically does not want to deny that the sacred gets sense from its ethically enjoining and empowering function. His view rather seems to be that a manifestation, simply qua manifestation, must fall short of these requirements. To be made manifest is always already to be conditioned by the unifying and synthesising powers of appropriating subjectivity. Ethics, as responsibility for the other, allegedly stands in a relation of pure exteriority to these powers. Only something utterly transcendent, ‘wholly other’, offers us a reality incomparably greater than the subject. Only transcendence in the most rigorous sense can function as a source of injunction. In Levinas’ terms, it is through ‘saying’ that do we do justice to the ‘sacredness’ --- or better ‘holiness’ --- of the sacred; the content of the said is never sacred or holy enough. Moreover, the reality greater than the subject and the source of moral injunction are non-manifestable for a common reason: both take us beyond an ontology of the Same to pure alterity. Levinas’ view thus conflicts with any way of thinking about the sacred that supposes the subject to realise itself or be brought to completion through the sacred. It also runs against the idea that the source of moral injunction and empowerment can in some sense be activated or awakened in an ontological discourse, one aiming at a disclosure of being.

It is worthwhile reflecting for a moment on why Levinas thinks that we must oppose ethics and ontology; and why he insists that human subjectivity can only be fully described through the hyperbolic metaphors of subjection, like ‘substitution’ and ‘hostage’.¹⁷ Much of

the justification rests on the perceived need to articulate the call of the Other as excessive to and transcendent of the appropriative laws of intentionality. But Levinas' view will only appear compelling to the extent that we accept a background conception of being as the realm of unconstrained appropriation; as the scene of an amoral struggle for self-preservation between beings. It is clear that this is in fact the kind of ontological view Levinas himself upholds. In the short section of Otherwise than Being entitled 'Being and Interest', for instance, Levinas points to the striving for self-preservation of all beings as emblematic of the saturation of being by interest.¹⁸ As Levinas puts it, 'Being's interest takes dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all' (Levinas 1981: 4). The primordial drama of being, according to Levinas, is the war of all against all. War represents immanence in extremis. To be sure, Levinas does not identify immanence with the condition of war, for beings can escape war-like struggle between themselves without fully transcending being. This, in Levinas' view, is what contracts achieve. Humans, as rational beings, can engage in contracts of mutual interest. By use of their reason, human beings can rise above the state of war, they can secure for themselves more commodious means of existence. However, Levinas stresses that contract does not take the subject beyond the sphere of interest; it merely resituates them within it in more commodious ways. Instrumentally rational peace, peace secured through contracts of mutual interest, is a matter of 'calculation, mediation and politics'. The binding norms of commercial society, on account of which we escape the condition of war, merely involves 'reciprocal limitation and determination'. Such transcendence is 'factitious': it reinscribes interest rather than resisting it or moving beyond it (ibid.: 5). It is only by transcending the realm of interest altogether --- that is by moving beyond being as such --- that we encounter the other ethically, as pure alterity.

Levinas reiterates this philosophical anthropology during the course of an interview in which he summarises the claims of Otherwise than Being. The very title of the book, Levinas

explains, refers to the idea that ‘the ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or ‘uncondition’. To be human means to live as if one were not a ‘being among beings’ (Levinas 1985: 100). Levinas’ view is not just that human beings, in virtue of taking responsibility for others, ‘exist otherwise’ than other, non-ethical, beings. For as he repeatedly observes, ‘to be otherwise’, or ‘to exist ethically’, is still to have an essence, it is still to be driven by interest. Levinas’ position is the more radical --- and given his premises, more consistent --- one, that transcendence through ethics takes human subjectivity out of the circuit of being altogether. Why we should accept those premises in the first place, however, is less clear. Levinas’ hyperbolic conception of ethical transcendence derives what appearance of necessity it has from a correspondingly hyperbolic conception of non-ethical immanence, but it is far from obvious what philosophical justification Levinas provides for the latter. Just as Hobbes’ authoritarian politics is the flip side of an egoistic but --- most would agree --- dogmatic psychology, so Levinas’ austere ethics is the inverse of a totalised but philosophically under-determined conception of ontology. Furthermore, just as it is arguable that Hobbes illegitimately generalised an historically specific condition of social conflict into a universal structure via the artifice of a state of nature, so it is arguable that Levinas illegitimately inscribes the modern experience of war into an ahistorical anthropological structure. Not unlike Hobbes, he even builds the condition of war into the structure of being itself. Both ontologise war in a way that is intelligible, but not justifiable, as a response to their times.¹⁹

There is also something internally incoherent about Levinas’ attempt to interweave a conception of subjectivity with a modern, disenchanting conception of the religious or the ‘sacred’. We have seen that for Levinas the sacred, properly understood, has a role in activating ethical subjectivity. Articulations of the sacred, or the holy, awaken the subject to the ethical demand and they enable the subject to respond appropriately. The sacred or the

holy at once enjoins and empowers. But in order to empower, in order to function as part realiser of the ethical demand, the sacred or the holy must be integrated into the structure of self and subjectivity. And, as Ricoeur argues in his response to Levinas, this requires some measure of self-affirmation (see Ricoeur 1992). Ricoeur observes that the subject is only able to identify itself as a subject of responsibility, as summoned to the ethical injunction, to the extent that the subject 'does not detest itself to the point of being unable to hear the injunction coming from the other' (ibid.: 189). The injunction coming from the other can only count for the subject if the subject is also able to affirm itself, or in other words, if it has a sense of its own worth, a self-worth that exceeds the 'wastefulness of being'. Some such affirmation or self-esteem is required if the subject is to be able to act at all. And it is only once this power-to-act is activated that the subject can take its place in the dialectic of giving and receiving that makes up the ethical life.

This incoherence is in part due to a quite restrictive conception of the possibilities of ontological reflection. Levinas' worries notwithstanding, ontological approaches to subjectivity do not necessarily subordinate otherness to sameness. For this reason, they may be able to take on board Levinas' insights regarding the proximity of the other and the disinterestedness of the desire for the other. As we saw, proximity is so important for Levinas because it lessens the subject's distance from the sacred or holy other --- it brings the source of injunction closer and so enables it simultaneously to function as a moral source --- without appropriating it, which for Levinas is equivalent to making the other manifest. A similar movement is involved with dis-interested desire: it reaches to the transcendent without grasping and controlling it. Both proximity and dis-interested desire involve non-presence as well as presence. It follows that the structure admits just as much of ontological articulation as a saying that signifies 'otherwise than being'.

Moreover, such an ontological approach would not have to suffer from what I have argued is an instability at the heart of Levinas' conception of subjectivity: that by rendering the sacred, the holy or the religious absolutely exterior to the subject --- by placing it, as transcendent or 'wholly other', in an 'ir-relation' to the self --- it fails to make sense of the possibility that the sacred or the 'religious' can at once enjoin and empower. But this possibility is crucial to the idea of the sacred or the religious to which Levinas himself subscribes. The simultaneously enjoining and ethically empowering role of the sacred is only intelligible if we conceive the sacred or the 'Other' as integrated into the structure of selfhood itself. That is to say, we would have to think of the source of injunction as in some way ontologically constitutive of subjectivity.

Levinas comes close to making the same point himself when he distinguishes between the ego and the self (Levinas 1981:116--18). He observes that it only makes sense to ask the moral sceptic's question, 'why does the other concern me?', if it is already presumed that the ego is concerned only with itself, and with others only contingently and instrumentally. But this is not the situation the self finds itself in. The self has an immediate, non-contingent concern for the other, it hears the summons to care for the other directly and without thematisation. It does not reach its concern for the other through a calculation or inference. As far as this goes, Levinas is in agreement with our claim that it makes most sense to integrate the 'for-the-other' structure into the structure of selfhood. But Levinas then interprets this direct concern for the other as a 'religiosity of the self' that takes it beyond being --- beyond the oscillation between egoism and altruism --- as such: 'The self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles. What is at stake for the self, in its being, is not to be' (ibid.: 117). The ego is not transformed or transfigured in the transition to selfhood, it 'disappears' and 'immolates itself' (ibid.: 118). There are no degrees of selfhood; there is no space for the idea of an 'ascent' to selfhood in Levinas' account. There

is something of a performative contradiction involved here: for the power of Levinas' writings is in part due precisely to its capacity to resonate with the intuition that under certain conditions we do 'progress' or 'rise' to selfhood.

V

If Habermas is right, and the defining theme of the philosophical discourse of modernity really is 'the weakening of the forces of social bonding, privatization and diremption...which evokes the need for an equivalent to the unifying power of religion' (Habermas 1987: 139), then it should be clear by now that Levinas certainly has a contribution to make to the discourse.²⁰ I began by drawing attention to Habermas' and Levinas' shared view that normativity has its basis in the social relation. In sharing this view, both Habermas and Levinas are at odds not only with the Enlightenment paradigm of subject-centred reason, but also with the paradigm of total critique inspired by Nietzsche. I then compared the reconstructive and phenomenological approaches to the social source of normativity in Habermas and Levinas respectively. I suggested that whereas Habermas' method makes sense as a philosophical response to social pathologies arising from justification or legitimation deficits, Levinas' concern is with retrieving, in a reflective, philosophical language, the suppressed force of pre-reflective experiences of separation from and communion with the other. The continuing need for something like the unifying power of religion is palpable, Levinas thinks, in the modern fascination with the sacred and with ontological and aesthetic critiques of modern reason. In this context, we can read Levinas as setting himself the task of showing how these modern (and postmodern) avatars of the 'metaphysical desire' (Levinas 1969: 33) can be given an alternative, philosophically more satisfactory articulation, precisely as the 'dis-interested' desire for transcendence interpreted as the social or ethical relation. I then argued that 'the sacred' or 'the religious' implicitly functions as a simultaneous source of moral injunction and moral empowerment in Levinas'

account: it at once enjoins the subject to take responsibility for the other and enables the subject to act responsibly. And yet this possibility invites --- perhaps even commands --- just the kind of ontological reflection that Levinas, like Habermas, wants the philosophical discourse on modernity to leave behind.

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NOTES

¹ For Levinas' reflections on the meaning of the 'modern' see 'The Old and the New', in Levinas (1987); 'Uniqueness', in Levinas (1986); and 'Peace and Proximity', in Levinas (1984).

² The exceptions include Bauman (1990), Critchley (1997), Horowitz (2000), and particularly Hendley (2000).

³ See Habermas (1987), Taylor (1989), and MacIntyre (1985). For an indirect consideration of Levinas' contribution from a leading figure in the debate, see Honneth (1995).

⁴ See Habermas (1987). The title of Habermas' book --- The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity --- brings out the thought that modernity somehow expresses itself in the discourse. As my main concern is with modernity as a theme or subject-matter, I use the preposition 'on' rather than 'of'.

⁵ Admittedly, the expression 'instrumental reason' here is slightly misleading, as Habermas goes to some length to distinguish his own account of the objectification of social relations in modernity from Horkeheimer's. As Habermas writes: 'The problem of reification [which, for the Frankfurt School tradition in which Habermas stands, is the philosophical problem of modernity] arises less from ... an instrumental reason that has gone wild, than from the circumstance that an unleashed functionalist reason of systems maintenance disregards and overrides the claim to reason ingrained in communicative sociation and lets the rationalization of the lifeworld run idle (Habermas 1984: 398-99). For Habermas, then, instrumental reason is not intrinsically 'reifying' or disruptive of the social relation. Nevertheless, the historical circumstance of modernity is that of a form of life key areas of which are distortively moulded by instrumental reason. For the nuances of Habermas' understanding of the diagnostic value of the concept of

instrumental reason, see Habermas (1984: ch 4) and (1987a: ch 8). I am grateful to Thomas Wallgren for alerting me of the need to draw attention to this point.

⁶ See, for example, Habermas (1987: 316).

⁷ See, for example, Levinas (1984: 133, 1986: 121, 1987: 128); and especially the ‘Foreword’ to Proper Names, where, after listing again the great traumas of the twentieth century, Levinas writes: ‘at no other time has historical experience weighed so heavily upon ideas’ (Levinas 1996: 3).

⁸ A more complete analysis would of course have to deal with Levinas’ complex relation to National Socialism and Zionism, but I do not have space to go into that here. On this see Caygill (2002).

⁹ For a more detailed account of the standards of undamaged intersubjectivity Habermas draws on in his critique of subject-centred reason, see Smith (1997: chapter 6).

¹⁰ Here I draw on Levinas’ notion of ‘living from’ (see Levinas 1969: 110f), but I should add that Levinas does not himself make the contrast with ‘living for’ I make here.

¹¹ See for example Hendley (2000).

¹² Levinas’ desire to take religious thought beyond the idea of the sacred is signalled in the title of his collection of Talmudic readings, Du Sacré au saint (see Levinas 1990b). Levinas typically writes as if the very idea of the sacred were one of the chief obstacles to a proper understanding of religion. He denounces the sacred as ‘the essence of idolatry’ (Levinas 1990a: 14), as the ‘brother of sorcery’ and ‘the half light’ in which sorcery flourishes (Levinas 1990b: 141). At other times, however, Levinas speaks of the sacred more positively, suggesting a contrast between a ‘false’, idolatrous sacred, and a ‘true’ sacred, one that expresses the authentic meaning of religion (Levinas 1990a: 159, Levinas 1990b: 159). While it is true that Levinas is reluctant about using the word ‘sacred’ at all --- he prefers the expression ‘the holy’ --- it makes sense to read him as

rejecting not the concept of the sacred as such, but a particular metaphysical conception of it.

¹³ Or as Marcel Gauchet puts it (in a way I think Levinas would endorse), ‘the sacred is specifically the presence of absence...And art, in the specific sense that we moderns understand it, is the continuation of the sacred by other means’ (Gauchet 1997: 203).

¹⁴ See Descartes, ‘Meditations on First Philosophy’, Third Meditation, in Descartes (1967).

¹⁵ And as Levinas puts it elsewhere: ‘The exceptional, extraordinary, transcendent character of goodness is due to just this break with being and history. To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness’ (Levinas 1981:18)

¹⁶ In fact, articulations of the infinite that take these forms amount to ‘dissimulations’ and ‘profanations’ of the infinite. See, for example, Levinas 1981: 44.

¹⁷ For example, ‘The subjectivity of the subject is persecution and martyrdom’ (Levinas 1981: 146).

¹⁸ A similar view helps frame Totality and Infinity (see Levinas 1969: 21).

¹⁹ This is a danger inherent in all philosophical diagnoses of the times. The diagnosis must involve some anthropological commitment, and yet that commitment must prove its worth or validity in the illumination it brings to a specific historical circumstance.

²⁰ Note that the passage cited here is not meant to describe Habermas’ own conviction. Although there is some ambiguity about the matter, Habermas does not propose communicative reason as ‘an equivalent to the unifying power of religion’; rather he advocates a paradigm shift towards a theory of communicative action that would relieve us of the need to evoke such an equivalent.

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