

ZLATAN FILIPOVIC

Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas: ‘After you, sir!’

Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent.

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

‘After you, sir,’ a trivial everyday phrase, we would say, worn out by frequent use, even insincere due to its perfunctory delivery, and yet a phrase that could be said to capture the entire thought of Emmanuel Levinas, a Lithuanian philosopher whose reflection on the importance of ethics and the concern for the other person is one of the most important challenges to the preoccupation with our own being that seems to characterise our time. One can see an ever increasing inclination towards self-adulation and indifference in Western society, reducing any idea of human solidarity or genuine concern for the other person to a historical discrepancy or naïve idealism. Levinas, whose thought gravitates towards humility, self-effacement and responsibility, may at first be seen against the backdrop of such idealism or, even worse, he may be seen as the moralising, incriminating conscience of our time. One could say that Levinas is at odds with the chronic disease of egotism, self-interest and voracity of ambition that have all come to constitute contemporary sensibility. The forcefulness of the Ego to concern itself with its own being—what Levinas calls the *conatus essendi* or ‘the struggle to be’ that dominates all living things—the inviolability we assign to our freedom and to the sanctity of our time, the assumed legitimacy we attribute to our projects, the naïve right, we all think we have, to recognition of our subjectivity leading to the proliferation of self-affirmative discourses online and elsewhere as a consequence, are all encouraged and sustained by the neo-liberal systems of thought and the new global economy. The commodified nature of our identities and the ability to ‘sell’ ourselves is the currency of our age; everything else is either blind to the grit of our existence or just too insincere to be taken seriously.

In this autocratic reign of the Ego, the obsessive preoccupation and care for our own being that Levinas identifies with ontology and the primacy it gives to what *ensures* and solidifies our existence rather than what *justifies* it, the concern and fear for the other person, my responsibility for their vulnerability, emerges at best as an unrealistic critique of our inadequacies and moral failures, a guilty conscience easily overcome by the harsh realities of market economy and the cynicism it seems to inspire. But far from innocent idealism or naiveté of

countless genocides too quickly become statistics in the archives of history or part of history's grand expository systems that try to give meaning to the suffering in order to make it bearable for those left behind, but the murdered leave real open holes no meaning can ever justify. The murdered may be anonymous to me, but they stand in, like empty placeholders, for my absent humanity, scattered like sand in the burning winds of madness man is capable of. Levinas demands that we consume ourselves like cinders for the sake of the other, but perhaps it is our history that demands this, the countless slaughtered victims awaiting redress.

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendence and Height' in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak et al. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), p. 18.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985), p. 89. Hereafter cited as EI.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 2000), p. 12.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), p. 303. Hereafter cited as TI.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998), p. 11. Hereafter cited as OB.

⁶ Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas: Routledge Critical Thinkers* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 58.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other' in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1986), p. 346.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2001), p. xxvii, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as EE.

⁹ Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 52.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago: Illinois UP, 2003), p. 27. Hereafter cited as HO.

¹¹ *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 169.

¹² Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 58.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Nonintentional Consciousness' in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), p. 132.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering' in *Entre Nous*, p. 101.