Humanism and Levinasian Metaphysics

I. Question and Thesis

My thesis in this paper is that Levinasian metaphysics offer a fruitful and timely suggestion for the problem of philosophy in the 21st century. Levinas has famously suggested that ethics is first philosophy. This suggestion does not point to the supercession of philosophy by ethical concerns. Rather, in claiming that ethics is first philosophy, Levinas offers an original direction for philosophy and metaphysics qua philosophy and qua metaphysics. Post-structuralist humanism in the Levinasian sense offers an original direction for metaphysical, philosophical inquiry.

A. Metaphysics

Let me begin with some definitions and a sketch of the classification system which we might consider. Just what do we mean by metaphysics, after all? It seems plausible to consider metaphysics as the queen of the sciences in the classical epoch, from Plato forward, until say Descartes. For these eras, and the thinkers we typically privilege in the history of them, metaphysics precedes specific inquiry. In this context, when we say "metaphysics," we usually mean ontology, the study of being. So first philosophy is the study of being qua being, as Aristotle defines it in his *Metaphysics*. Descartes disrupts this classical presumption, and shifts first philosophy from ontology to epistemology.

But let me raise another question, specifically at the juncture which Descartes represents. Jesuit curriculum often examines a question of the "metaphysics of knowledge," here following Thomas, as opposed to epistemology. The difference between the two would be roughly the question of whether we can begin with the

question of epistemology itself, or whether it is required that we understand being qua being, and then, in Thomistic order of progression, understand the being of certain specific kinds of beings, here most relevantly, of objects, and of subjects. This involves, then, further, a propaedeutic study of metaphysics, prior to the possibility of articulating an ethical theory. And as a part of that prior metaphysics, it would be necessary to specify the meaning of human nature, for human knowledge is always the knowledge of human beings, human subjects.

Now this privileged position of metaphysics in the Aristotelian sense, has been challenged from Descartes forward, with Kant also being one of its chief critics. And yet the Metaphysical Society of America persists. So one question would be, how this anachronism manages to continue into the present day. Levinas observes aptly, "In fact, in our times, metaphysics keeps on ending and the end of metaphysics is our metaphysics…."[1] But, honestly, we haven't even begun to raise this question with sufficient desperation as yet. Post-Kantian developments push us even farther from the glory days of metaphysics.

B. Humanism

Where metaphysics perhaps was cut off by the Kantian argument, humanism persists through the enlightenment in an unquestioned manner. There are different conceptions of humanism, notably secular and religious, particularly Christian. The American Humanist Association defines humanism in pointedly secularist terms: "Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism and other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good of humanity" (AmericanHumanist.org). If Aristotle defines human nature in terms of having a specific end, this definition here and the Thomistic conception of humanism would be similar this far, though the Thomistic conception of human nature would include necessarily defining that end in terms of our relation to God.

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[1] Emmanuel Levinas, "Humanism and An-Archy," p. 47.

Sartre claims, in "Existentialism is a Humanism," that there are two major kinds of existentialism: the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard and Marcel, and the atheistic existentialism of himself and others, Camus, etc. For Sartre, this difference is decisive. Sartre's own definition of existentialism there suggests a unique place for human beings, different from other beings: human beings are the only beings for whom existence precedes essence. A tree cannot choose its own mode of existence; it has no freedom. A human being has a will, and a free will. A human being can choose what being human means. Human beings are not bound by an essence. So for Sartrean existentialism, it is incorrect or irrelevant to begin with ontology as genus and proceed to the specification of that in specifically human being, since human being does not conform to being qua being. Human existence differs from any other type of being.

On this conception of existentialism, we see two things: First, it is clear why the difference between Christian existentialists and atheist existentialists is paramount for Sartre. For his conception of atheistic existentialism suggests that we are not only free from essence, we are free from any external definition and hence from any source of our own existence who or which might have determined that essence and given it to us. For Sartre, as for Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things." Secondly, because of this, we might expect Sartre to argue that ***only*** existentialism could possibly be a humanism, and furthermore that only an ***atheistic*** existentialism could be a legitimate humanism. Any theism and particularly one which, as Christianity and Judaism both do, claims that God creates the world and human beings, would render human existence relative to the existence of a divine being. While Sartre doesn't say so in this essay, it seems he must ultimately conclude that Christian existentialism is a contradiction in terms.

C. Structuralism and Marxism

Many might presume that humanism survives the destruction of metaphysics, and that humanism makes sense after, say, religion and metaphysics together have been debunked. Here Hobbes, Nietzsche, Sartre, or even Kant, though he remained religious, might be mentioned. Now if metaphysics is tinged with an air of naivete after Kant, humanism,

secular and otherwise, might seem just as naïve today. The Enlightenment presumption that humanism might be a meaningful category despite the loss of religion and metaphysics can no longer be taken as axiomatic.

Two strands of thought come to mind here, Marxism and Structuralism. Marx himself would be definitively post-religious humanist, yet his analysis of ideology begins the process of challenging the significance of humanity as a unique being among the world of beings. The early Marx argues that Capitalism has destroyed the meaning of human being, that for capital the worker is only capital, a certain quantity of material production. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, it is specifically because human beings are beings which have some sort of worth (not defined by Marx as such), that Capitalism has committed an evil in destroying human being and human society. Like Sartre, Marx finds religion to be at odds with a properly humanist conception of human being, and like Sartre, he defines this human being in terms of freedom.[2] But Marx' also defines intellectual production as derivative of material production in *The Communist Manifesto*. This claim has often been taken to mean that human beings are determined by material structures; they are not really free to determine the meaning of their own being. Both Marx and Sartre dance on a tightrope between the necessity of certain material and social factors which determine our choices (If I choose to marry, I choose it for my whole society),[3] and their own suggested emphasis on the freedom of human nature.

Subsequently, structuralism and the social sciences more broadly point to certain social institutions and entities which shape the field of choices which an individual encounters. On some accounts, the being of human beings would be subject to determining factors and laws, just like any other type of scientifically observable phenomena. Structuralism and the social sciences raise the question whether human

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[2] Here I am referring to the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts for humanism, and to the Dissertation for the definition of humanism in terms of freedom. From the Dissertation I am specifically thinking of the famous lengthy footnote which emphasizes the choice Themistocles makes.

[3] Sartre, Existentialism is a Humanism, claims that if I choose marriage, I choose it for my whole society. As in the Marxian footnote, we human beings have the freedom to shape our society. At the same time, we shape a society which then presents certain choices to us as human, social beings.

beings and even and specifically human reason, are really so separated from material conditions (Hobbesian desires, Freudian drives, Marxian economic laws) or other social factors as we might like to think. There is a strand of thought which runs through Marxism, in the description of material and economic laws of history, and structuralism, the social sciences, and psychology, which challenges either the romantic or the Hegelian notion of the self, which gives itself its own existence, as well as the Thomistic-Aristotelian notion of a uniquely rational nature.

D. Question and Thesis

This brings us to the question of whether it is possible to sketch a post-post-structuralist conception of humanism. Of course none of the above structuralism/ post-structuralism/ post-post-structuralism refers to a "turn" which we are compelled to accept. Still, both structuralism and post-structuralism are a significant part of the present-day philosophical landscape, and I would submit that, whatever portions of these schemas we do or do not accept, it is worthwhile to be in philosophical dialogue with them.

Levinas is a unique figure in the post-structuralist world. One significant reason is that he is a religious thinker, and remains a religious observer in a traditional sense. Levinas is Jewish, as are Sartre, Camus, and Derrida, but unlike these other thinkers Levinas ran a Hebrew school, said daily prayers, and lectured on the Torah regularly. He did not distance himself from his own religious tradition or suggest a naivete or silliness to a belief in God.[4] He does, indeed, criticize certain overly simplistic conceptions of the deity and suggest deeper, more authentic ways of understanding God, and he does at times refer to "atheism" as part of that authentic conception of God, but Levinas begins and ends and remains throughout an unapologetic, unembarrassed, religious thinker.

If Sartre suggests that Christian existentialism produces an entirely different type of existentialism than does atheist existentialism, we might ask the same question about humanism, and ultimately about metaphysics. If Levinas is a uniquely religious post-structuralist thinker, would his conception of humanism differ from other post-

[4] In this characterization I follow the biography by ***

structuralist accounts. I think it does, and I think it does specifically for this reason. That is, Levinas conception of humanism and metaphysics is different from that of Derrida or of other post-structuralists specifically because his religious observance is different from those other thinkers. It does not follow from this contention, however, that his metaphysics or his humanism is or requires a fideism. Whether it is possible to sketch a post-structuralist humanism from a non-religious perspective is a question we cannot address from a Levinasian perspective. Whether it is possible to offer a secular version of a Levinasian humanism is another question which we will leave to one side for the purposes of this paper. Levinas' own conception is rooted in Levinas' religiosity, and I would argue that his version of humanism is inextricably linked to that. Hence the sketch of his humanism will proceed from that ground, and will not raise the question of compatible secular accounts.

My thesis in this paper will be that Levinas claim that "ethics is first philosophy" is rightly to be understood not as the supersession of philosophy by "ethical" concerns, but rather as a philosophical and specifically metaphysical claim. So rather than intending that metaphysics be supplanted by ethics, in the way that we might say that modernity replaces ontology with epistemology, Levinas suggests that ethics is metaphysics, that ethics is the ground and the source of philosophy. Ethics is first philosophy. That is, Levinas agrees with Plato in arguing that "the Good" is the primordial transcendental, rather than "Being" or "the True," or the Thomistic God. But unlike Plato, whose "Good" is a universal good, precedent to and independent from human participation in it or our reaction to it or assessment of it, Levinas' conception of the good, or Levinasian ethics, cannot be understood outside of human being.

II. Levinasian Metaphysics

A. Ethics is first philosophy

Levinas' claim that ethics is first philosophy is his philosophical contribution. This claim, in the context of Levinas' writing ***is*** philosophy, and it ***is*** metaphysics. This is not

always apparent in the reading of Levinas. First of all, the suggestion might sound as if it were an abdication of philosophical rigor and philosophical themes in favor of edification. Human beings and their suffering, as in some versions of liberation theology, are more important than doctrine or metaphysics. While one might clearly draw an edifying application from Levinas' body of work, to interpret Levinas' analysis of my responsibility before the "face of the Other" in this fashion is to miss the entire philosophical effort for which he has spent his life. His purpose in articulating an ethics as first philosophy is primarily philosophical, not edification.

A second pitfall could lead us to fail to appreciate the philosophical rigor of the Levinasian enterprise: his language and his style of writing. In that Levinas offers a thorough critique of the western tradition of philosophy as thinking of totality, to which he contrasts his own suggested language of infinity and the eschatology of messianic peace, his text resists typical conceptual procedures and definitions. This leads many to reject his writings rather quickly, almost a priori, as non-philosophical or anti-philosophical. This rejection, while perhaps understandable, is unfortunate and erroneous. However, serious readers of Levinas also conclude that Levinas' text fails to offer the type of rigor and conclusive argument which philosophical discourse typically requires.

To cite one example, Michele Saracino has suggested the Levinas "neither has a well-defined method nor a structured anthropology…. Levinas' weakness, in terms of his ambiguous notions of freedom, agency, and justice and his lack of method, are indicative of his descriptive rather than explanatory anthropology."[5] Sinan Kadir Celik approves this diagnosis and extends it, claiming that "Levinas seems to leave the enigmatic concepts like "infinity," "insomnia," and "transcendence," etc. without clearly defining them…. Accordingly, his concepts can really be treated as completely bizarre or highly abstract."[6]

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[5] Michele Saracino, On Being Human: A Conversation with Lonergan and Levinas (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003), p. 207, quoted in Celik, below, p. 278.

[6] Sinan Kadir Celik, "Traces left by Levinas: Is 'Humanism of the other' possible?" [in A-T Tymieniecka, ed., Analecta Husserliana XCIII, (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2007): 269-282], p. 278.

This is incorrect. There is a decisive and explicit method to Levinas' argument, and the terms noted above do have specific meanings and definitions which are articulated in the text. Certainly his prose can be enigmatic, his language is descriptive, and the meaning of the terms is often polyvalent, imbued with tension, and highly complex. But it is simply incorrect to claim that he does not define them or that he has no well-defined method. These mistakes lead to the oft-believed misperception that Levinas is a religious thinker or a preacher of an edifying challenge, rather than a philosopher. So Celik concludes: "there is no way for Levinas [to argue], except from praying for us to share his pathos and believe in his 'humanism of the other'."[7] However we might assess the value of Levinas' philosophical argument, I must flatly disagree with this conclusion.

We are familiar with the Levinasian dictum which insists that subjectivity always occurs in relation to an other, and is founded upon this relation to an other truly other without losing its own subjectivity in the relation. Levinas presents subjectivity as key to ethics as first philosophy and subjectivity is presented "as welcoming the Other, as hospitality." Whatever difficulties might persist with this language, it is my point of emphasis here to note that the language points toward a thorough re-structuring of our most basic philosophical assumptions, specifically as philosophy and as metaphysics. Ethics and ethical relations are the basis of humanism, the basis of metaphysical transcendence, and the basis of human subjectivity. Ethics is the key to a proper understanding of metaphysical transcendence: Quoting Levinas, "The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road." (p. 29).

That is, ethics ***IS*** first philosophy. Levinasian ethics as alterity is not bleeding-heart liberalism, nor is it edification. Hospitality does not point us toward the welfare state or the welfare state ideology. Rather, the explication of hospitality and of our responsibility for the other is an articulation ***of first philosophy***. ***Philosophy itself*** finds truth only outside of, beyond, the totality which would be made up of schematic definitions and of pieces within the whole. Alterity is not structuralism; Alterity is not

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[7] Celik, "Traces," p. 281.

intersubjectivity. Alterity is the ultimate ground of the being which would be specifically human being. The being of the being for whom being is a concern is not to be found in her care for herself or in her facing her own death, it is, rather, to be found in her being always already in a relation to another.

B. Levinasian Humanism.

Levinas is not typically considered a humanist thinker. In that he is typically classified as a postmodernist, and in that he accepts too much of what we might call "modern anti-humanism," he aligns poorly with humanism, whether Christian or secular. The tradition of post-Kantian critique, first of metaphysics and then of humanism itself, running though perhaps Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and Heidegger,[8] is not one which Levinas dismisses or repudiates, but rather is a decisive tradition shaping his philosophical thought. However, it is likewise problematic to align Levinas with that critique or with that list of critics.[9]

In an essay entitled "Humanism and An-Archy," Levinas refuses to espouse or to reject "modern anti-humanism;" he clearly offers both agreement and criticism. He writes:

> Modern anti-humanism is undoubtedly right in not finding in man taken as individual of a genus or an ontological reason… a privilege that makes him the aim of reality….

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[8] This characterization and list comes from Peter Atterton's essay, "Levinas's skeptical Critique of Metaphysics and Anti-Humanism, Philosophy Today, 41:4 (Winter 1997): 495.

[9] Atterton, "Levinas's skeptical critique," offers the thesis that Levinas' stance with respect to this tradition of the end of metaphysics and humanism is ambigious, and cannot be articulated as a simple agreement or disagreement. I agree with this conclusion, and the quotations I offer here from Levinas' essay will illustrate the same conclusion.

> Modern anti-humanism may be wrong in not finding for man, lost in history and in order, the trace of this pre-historic an-archic saying.[10]

Levinas rejects the anthropocentrism found in a traditional conception of Christian (Levinas calls this "Greek") metaphysics, such as the Thomistic description of man as the highest of the earthly, created beings, while simultaneously rejecting the reduction of humanity to mere nature or to structures given a priori. Levinas' conception of subjectivity is one which follows neither the Aristotelian-Thomistic conception of man as an end in itself, nor the reduction of human being to nature or to prototypical categories, whether Hegelian or structuralist. Quoting again from "Humanism and An-Archy,"

> Subjectivity, the setting up of intelligible structures, would have no internal finality. We would witness the ruin of the myth of man as end in himself, giving way to the appearance of an order that is neither human nor inhuman, ordained of course through man and the civilizations he produces, but ordaining itself, in the last analysis, by the appropriately rational force of the dialectic or logico-formal system. A non-human order, suited to the name that is anonymity itself: matter.[11]

The critique of anthropocentrism, which dislodges "man" from the center of the universe, cannot be rescinded. Still, Levinas likewises refuses to follow this out to a destruction of the humanity of human beings, the reduction of human existence to mere anonymity or to materiality. Both I and my Other are far too important to Levinas to allow this type of reduction. "Humanism and An-Archy" refers to the primordiality of my speech and my responsibility for the Other: primordiality in the sense of the Greek arche. I precede the arche, I am the arche, I dwell in a world that has no arche, and the arche only arises when both I and an Other are able to speak to each other. Though on different grounds, Levinas' text may be even more anthropocentri than the classical anthropocentric axiom

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[10] Emmanuel Levinas, "Humanism and An-Archy," in *Humanism of the Other*, trans., Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003; French, 1972), pp. 56, 57, respectively.
[11] Levinas, "Humanism," p. 48.

it replaces. Levinas concludes this essay with strong language pointing to the unique position of man in the universe:

> From a responsibility even more ancient than the *conatus* of substance, more ancient than the beginning and the principle, from the anarchic, the ego returned to self, responsible for Others, hostage of everyone, that is, substituted for everyone by its very non-interchangeability, hostage of all the others who, precisely *others*, do not belong to the same genus as the ego because I am responsible for them without concerning myself about their responsibility for me because I am, in the last analysis and from the start, even responsible for that, the ego, I; I am man holding up the universe "full of all things."[12]

C. Levinasian Metaphysics

To raise the question of the *arche* is to become as metaphysical as one can possibly be. Levinas' writings are always thoroughly metaphysical in nature, from the early text, *Existence and Existents*, to the mature magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity*, and the later reworking of his philosophy in *Otherwise than Being*, the character of being itself and the being of human beings is the primary topic of Levinas' powerful and probing exposition. But while Levinas is concerned with the being of being, he is not to be understood in classical metaphysical conceptions, which he opposes directly and unflinchingly. *Totality and Infinity* is "An Essay on Exteriority," which opposes itself to the history of philosophy as the thinking of totality.

Levinasian subjectivity would be founded upon the idea of infinity, which is the ultimate event of being. There must be, for Levinas, an outburst of exteriority. To be a subject is only possible where there is the possibility of the surd. A subject in a totality, Hegelian or structuralist, is merely a piece of the puzzle, a cog in the wheel, an individual who follows certain pre-scribed roles or rituals. The purpose and the question of Totality

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[12] Levinas, "Humanism," p. 57.

and Infinity, Levinas' most coherent statement of his critique of the western philosophical tradition, is to reject the notion of totality which, Levinas claims, is prevalent in western philosophy from Parmenides and Plato through Hegel and Husserl.

> Do the particular beings yield their truth in a Whole in which their exteriority vanishes? Or, on the contrary, is the ultimate event of being enacted in the outburst of this exteriority? Our initial question now assumes this form.
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> This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity (p. 26).

This is sweeping language and a radical, fundamental critique. Levinas wants to replace the notion of totality with a thinking of infinity, the ontology of war with an eschatology of messianic peace, the interiority and mimesis of rationalism with exteriority, and the egoist exploration of the cogito (Cartesian, Hegelian, Husserlian) with hospitality and responsibility for the other. I have insisted above and maintain that the project is fundamentally philosophical and metaphysical, but there can be no doubt, at the same time, that it opposes most of the language and framework within which philosophy and metaphysics have been considered heretofore.

This task, then, is rather ambitious and will doubtless exceed my reach in this paper. But perhaps a couple of indications which might be productive can be offered. I have claimed that there are definitions of the key terms in the Levinasian text, so perhaps we should examine a couple of those here. The idea of infinity is the key idea which he opposes to the history of totality, so I will explicate that idea first, and his conception of metaphysics, in opposition to ontology, second.

Infinity

The central argument of *Totality and Infinity* is that the history of philosophy has been predominantly (there are exceptions) a history of the dominance of the idea of totality. "The meaning of individuals is derived from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning." (TI, 22). While Levinas' own philosophy is shaped against the totality of the Husserlian ego, the descriptions of the sweep of history and its lack of regard for the individual bring Hegel directly to mind. Levinas suggests an "eschatology of messianic peace," which would contrast with the thinking of totality. Eschatology does not, in his description, refer to a point in time after the completion of time, rather "eschatology institutes a relation with being beyond the totality or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present" (TI, 22). Eschatology points beyond totality to something not contained in the totality, a surplus, an excess, exteriority. It points to the notion of infinity:

> It is a relationship with a surplus always exterior to the totality, as though the objective totality did not fill out the true measure of being, as though another concept, the concept of infinity, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality, non-encompassable within a totality and as primordial as totality (TI, p. 23).

Levinas speaks of "the idea of infinity," which is not a concept, but rather "a revelation… a positing of its idea in me" (TI, 26). "Infinity" in the Levinasian sense is neither the incessant mathematical progression which Hegel discounts nor the Hegelian "notion forged by a subjectivity to reflect the case of an entity encountering on the outside nothing that limits it" (TI, 26). Rather, Levinas claims that "[t]he idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity." (TI, 26). What is that, exactly? It is exteriority, it is the actuality, rather difficult to justify on grounds of a logic of consistency, but nonetheless determinative and ubiquitous in human experience, of my own experience of an other being which remains my experience. Hegelian history would

make of my experience a universal progression about which I may or may not care about, with which I may not agree, and of which I may not even be aware. But Levinasian experience is uniquely mine, and as such experiences an other as truly other, not merely as an object of my comprehension or a moment of my act of awareness. In the experience of an other who remains other, I experience what I cannot contain, and remain through that experience separated from that which I experience. I am I and the Other is the Other. Hence, subjectivity consummates the idea of infinity in my own self not as knowledge or as self-consciousness, but rather as hospitality, as welcoming the Other (TI, 27). Infinity is the impossible situation, inexplicable on Hegelian or on Husserlian schemata, that I experience an Other who remains other while remaining myself separated. The infinition of infinity "is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity" (TI, pp. 26-27).

Metaphysics

Infinity is a separation, the pluralistic non-ontology which allows me to be who I am outside of the universality of history or being, and which, correspondingly allows me to recognize an Other as likewise other. This separation is metaphysics. Metaphysics is contrasted with ontology, the ontology of war, the ontology of the same.

> Metaphysics, the relation with exteriority, that is, with superiority, indicates, on the contrary, that the relation between the finite and the infinite does not consist in the finite being absorbed in what faces him, but in remaining in his own being, maintaining himself there, acting here below (TI, 292).

Metaphysics finds its origin in a desire for something which exceeds my own self. Desire propels me outward, toward the exterior, toward an other, and ultimately toward the transcendent and toward infinity. "The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other." (TI, 33). Ultimately, desire leads, not in the

Hegelian sense to something which is an object for me and for my consumption, but to the breach of totality, toward transcendence.

Whereas Hegelian metaphysics, as well as Platonic metaphysics for that matter, involve the completion of a circle of totality, Levinas defines metaphysics as the impossibility of this type of complete grasp. "Ontology" is the term Levinas gives to "theory as comprehension of beings," (TI, 42) and with this definition he opposes himself to Heidegger and to the tradition of metaphysics simultaneously. "Metaphysics," for Levinas, "precedes ontology" (TI, 42). Ontology would be the language of totality, of freedom, of mastery and of war: my mastery not only of nature, in Bacon's sense, but also of history after Hegel, and even my domination of an other race in the sense of national socialism, which always hovers over Levinas' critique of Heidegger. "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (TI, 43).

Levinasian metaphysics is the opposite of "ontology." Rather than my mastery of the totality, metaphysics is the realization that there is real alterity, that the other is not contained in my idea of him, that I am not alone in the world. Metaphysics is not the freedom of a solitary consciousness (be that the entirety of history or a universal spirit) who can have his say without opposition; metaphysics, contrariwise, is the realization that my freedom encounters an Other who is truly other. That my spontaneity is called into question by on Other whom I cannot possess. "Beyond theory and ontology" (TI, 43), beyond Socratic mimesis wherein I already contain the whole world of ideas in my soul, beyond any completed system of rationality as a complete disjunct of ideas, ***metaphysics is ethics***. It is the recognition that "being is inherently plural," that exceeds my rationalist grasp. "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge" (TI, 43).

III. Conclusion

What does it mean, then, to suggest that ethics is first philosophy, if, as I have claimed, this does not mean that we sacrifice philosophical reason for ethical application. If we follow the Platonic suggestion from the middle books of the *Republic* that knowledge of the Good is the ultimate goal of inquiry, and further that it is this knowledge which illuminates other knowledge, then for Plato metaphysics would not be first and preeminently the study of being qua being; metaphysics would be first and ultimately the study of the Good.

Now Levinas is not a Platonic essentialist, he is a twentieth-century phenomenologist in the tradition of Husserl and Heidegger. And in a more Heideggerean than Husserlian vein, he understands phenomenological inquiry to require investigation into the precisely human kind of being which human experience evinces. So Levinasian metaphysics would proceed from human being in the world, not from being itself or from objectivity in a scientific or modern sense. But Levinas' conception of human being is not defined in scientific or structuralist terminology either. So he is neither a classical metaphysician in the pre-Cartesian sense, nor an Enlightenment humanist in the modern sense. He is a definitively and deliberately post-Heideggerean, post-structuralist philosopher, who offers a conception of metaphysics as humanism as ethics. And the Levinasian suggestion for post-structuralist metaphysics and post-structuralist philosophizing begins with human experience and with human experience as ethics and as receptivity to an other human being. As such, the suggestion that ethics is first philosophy represents, I would submit, not the end of metaphysics as the locus of philosophical rigor and supra-factical reasoning, but rather an avenue for considering anew the meaning of metaphysics and of philosophical reason in a post-metaphysical age.

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