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THE ETHICAL IMPORTANCE OF BEING HUMAN

GOD AND HUMANISM IN LEVINAS'S PHILOSOPHY

Pat J. Gehrke

The positioning of ethics as first philosophy, prior to ontology or epistemology, can appear to contradict Levinas's insistence that the other be another person, i.e., human. After all, if the ethical relation is one that precedes being or knowing, then on what basis might one claim that such a relation can exist only among or in a particular instantiation of beings, namely human beings? Scholars interested in environmental ethics and human-animal relations have grappled with this issue in Levinas's philosophy, but usually as a critical move that would contradict or correct Levinas (e.g., Benso, Clark, Diehm). This is of little surprise given that Levinas's moral universe is both resolutely and exclusively human, leaving little space for ethical relation to the nonhuman as more than merely derivative of interhuman relations.

This is not to say that one cannot attempt to recuperate an environmental ethic or an ethic that might extend to relations with nonhuman others from Levinas. Indeed, Levinas himself will claim implications for relations with nonhumans from his philosophy of ethics, but such implications are, for him, always secondary reflections of the more primary relation between humans.

The focus of this essay is neither whether Levinas's philosophy is right or wrong about its obsession with what is uniquely human, nor whether the philosophy ought more properly to take into account a primary ethical relationship with nonhuman others. This is neither an environmentalist nor vegetarian ethical treatise. Instead, I am concerned with one simple question: How does Levinas justify or substantiate the unique ethical status of the human without returning to ontology?

My hypothesis regarding this question is that Levinas's distinct notion of God and his insistence upon the unique status of the human are the glue that holds together his ethical philosophy. The culmination of Levinas's thought, from this vantage point, is not merely his statements on ethics and justice, but also

his unique refiguring of humanism. In order to explore these issues, this essay begins with a brief clarification of Levinas's statements about relations to nonhumans then works through this distinction to clarify the concept of the face and God in Levinas's thought. Finally, I conclude with an exegesis of Levinas's unique position vis-à-vis humanism.

Non-Human Others

Silvia Benso, David Clark, and Christian Diehm have each taken significant notice of Levinas's insistence on a fundamentally different ethical category for the human and the nonhuman. Levinas himself has made this point on a number of occasions, though not entirely without equivocation. Part of the controversy comes from his short description of the experience of a stray dog wandering into the prisoner of war camp where Levinas was held (*Difficult Freedom* 152–53) and his subsequent discussions of the status of the face of a dog and a snake (“Paradox of Morality” 169–73). While Levinas does admit that “the ethical extends to all living being” and that “one cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal,” he is always quick to follow up these statements with amendments that the “priority” or the “prototype” for any ethical consideration of the nonhuman must always first be human ethics (“Paradox” 169, 172). When asked directly about the matter, Levinas put it thus: “The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal” (“Paradox” 172). It was for this reason that Levinas criticized the philosophy of Martin Buber “not because he seems to be animistic in his relation to nature; it is rather that he seems too much the *artiste* in his relation to people” (*Proper* 33). The issue is not whether we bear some ethical responsibility for the nonhuman; Levinas easily concludes that we do. The issue is whether such responsibility is itself a direct ethical relation or merely derivative of a more unique ethical relation of the interhuman. For

Levinas, the latter description appears more fitting.

Part of the controversy also resides in the lack of clarity to be found in either Levinas or his commentators about why the human occupies this unique status. While Levinas claims to be uncertain as to whether a snake has a face (“Paradox” 172) and vacillates ambiguously about the face of a dog and his ethical relation to the dog in the prisoner of war camp, he is not at all ambiguous about the uniqueness of the status of the human or the importance of that uniqueness to his thought. In the same interview in which he questions the ethical status of a dog or a snake, Levinas states, “With the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life and that is the life of the other” (“Paradox” 172).

Diehm is particularly perturbed by the combined ambiguity about the ethical status of nonhuman others and the unequivocal claims to the unique ethical status of the human. The problem is that Diehm can find little reason to exclude a dog or a snake from the status of the other in Levinas’s phenomenology. Diehm notes that both are bodies subject to violence, open to betrayal, vulnerable, weak, and exposed to violation. Thus, the nonhuman appears to fit the same kinds of phenomenal descriptors that Levinas assigns to the experience of a human other, leading Diehm to conclude that “it becomes increasingly difficult to hold any radical distinction between the alterity of the human and that of the other-than-human” (56).

Clark is similarly dissatisfied with the distinction and the reasons given for it. In the end, he finds the distinction not only obviously anthropocentric but he accuses Levinas’s *Dasein* of failing to be “neutrally indifferent to the biological” and “even sentimental in its hierarchization of living creatures” (182). Such a conclusion is a cutting indictment of Levinas’s work, since one of the primary themes of ethics as first philosophy is that the ethical relationship “is a relation of kinship outside of all biology” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 87).

Rather than attempt to correct or critique Levinas for a failure or incongruity, if we take Levinas at his word on these matters we may gain a rather unique insight to the surprising

coherence of his statements on alterity, humanism, and God. To do so, let us quickly dispose of a few possible but inaccurate explanations for Levinas’s insistence on human uniqueness.

Perhaps one of the oldest and most common distinctions made between the human and the animal is the capacity for reason or its connection to rational order. This distinction is common in Western philosophy from Aristotle through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Clark notes a certain surprising similarity between Levinas’s comments about the dog that wandered into the prisoner of war camp and Immanuel Kant’s own arguments for the ethical inadequacy of animals due to their failure to grasp *logos* (188–89). Even Levinas seems to bolster such an analysis when he writes that the human face “differs from an animal’s head in which a being, in its brutish dumbness, is not yet in touch with itself” (*Collected* 55). However, to emphasize reasoning, intelligence, or rationality as qualities that distinguish the human from the animal would, for Levinas, be to mistake anthropological manifestations with phenomenal reasons. The distinction between animal and human is, and must be, for Levinas first and foremost an ethical distinction. If we were to locate the origin of the distinction in the faculties of reasoning or even language, it would require that we make these the *esse* of the human, the nature and meaning of being human. In short, it would be to once again place certain qualities of being as the nature and meaning of being, putting ontology back at the beginning again. If we are to take Levinas seriously in his detailed and repeated arguments for ethics as first philosophy, then we should take him at his word that “intelligibility and rationality do not belong by first right to being” (*God* 157). We must seek another explanation for both the distinction and these comments about the “brutish dumbness” of the animal.

The explanation may be that the difference is not one of rational intelligence, but ethical awareness. Levinas claims that the being of animals is “a struggle for life without ethics” (“Paradox” 172) and perhaps this is the status of the animal as ethically less significant. Diehm clarifies the matter by noting that the animal world is quite precisely not the ethical world of being for the other because animals

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are primarily concerned with their own being. They are “beings for whom the fundamental question surrounds their persistence of being” (51). While this may indeed get at the difference in the ethical status of the human and the animal in an abstract sense and it may even have some impact on whether an animal can experience an ethical relation with an other, it is not entirely clear that any of this is relevant to the question of whether an animal is an other and whether I bear a direct responsibility for the nonhuman other. This problem is compounded both by Levinas’s ambivalence about the matter and the asymmetrical nature of ethics as first philosophy. In his account of the dog that wandered into the prisoner of war camp, Levinas describes an experience that for at least a brief moment interrupted the inhumanity of the camp, reminding him that he was human. When the dog greeted him and his fellow prisoners, he writes that “there was no doubt that we were men” (*Difficult* 153). Levinas’s own insistence on the brutish dumbness of the dog and his explanation that the experience was anthropomorphic seem posterior rationalizations for excluding the dog from the status of an ethical other, even if the experience of the dog appeared contrary. The asymmetrical nature of the ethical relationship makes it even harder to exclude the dog from the status of the other for whom I would be responsible. The other’s responsibility, even the other’s capacity for responsibility, is just not important to the question of my own responsibility. In Levinasian terms, it does not concern me. Reciprocation is, as Diehm succinctly noted, “simply put, moot” (52). So, even if ethical awareness is lacking in animals, even if I can never be the other to a dog, this does not seem, *de facto*, to preclude a direct ethical responsibility for the nonhuman other.

However, there is still one matter to be considered in the possible distinction of the human and the nonhuman other: the capacity for resistance to appropriation. This, I think, is the beginning of the explanation, but not in itself wholly sufficient. Recalling Levinas’s argument for the priority of the other in the ethical relationship, we can begin with the infinity of the alterity of the other that refuses to be appropriated or comprehended. The important distinction that may not yet be clear is that this resistance to appropriation is not, in Levinas, a

failure of the knowing subject’s ability to fully grasp the things that it might observe. Contrary to a simple epistemological skepticism, which might argue that all observation of objects is always by nature incomplete, Levinas notes a specific type of resistance to appropriation found uniquely in the human other:

An object, we know, is integrated into the identity of the same; the I makes of it its theme, and then its property, its booty, its prey or its victim. The exteriority of the infinite being is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. (*Collected* 55)

The reference to “the infinite being” might harken us back to the infinite alterity of the other in the ethical relation or it may push our thinking forward toward an idea of God. The ambiguity about the reference is itself a clarification, pointing us toward Levinas’s connection of the human other and the Infinite Other that he will often signify by the term God. This helps to move us to understand the unique ethical relation of the interhuman, connecting what is most uniquely human with this exteriority of infinite being that might oppose all my powers of integration and thematization. While this clarifies the distinction, I think it only begins to move our thinking toward answering our first question: How does Levinas justify or substantiate the unique ethical status of the human?

The Face

Since Levinas so often uses *the face* as the entry point to ethical relations and the experience of ethics, it is reasonable that we might seek some insight by clarifying what is meant by the term. Both Diehm and Michael Hyde have had some success at using Levinas’s concept of the face as an opening for explication and examination of the broader ethical philosophy. Diehm makes an excellent case, referencing specific and direct passages from Levinas, that “face” does not refer to the specific front of the head where the eyes, nose, and mouth are located. Instead, Diehm argues, the face can manifest throughout the human body, in a hand, the shoulder, the whole of the sensible human being, or any sensible part thereof (54–56). Starting from Diehm’s analysis we

can find that Levinas may go even farther in making the face more metaphor than physicality. In fact, while there is something of the experience of the approach of the face of the other, the face itself may not be a phenomenon at all. We may have phenomenal experiences of the approach of the face, but the face does not appear, it has no appearance of its own, and it would refuse to ever be made present (“Paradox” 171). Levinas makes clear that we do not see the face and the face is not an object of knowledge, the way any physical object or element of the body might be seen or taken into our consciousness (“Paradox” 176).

In addition, the face does not refer to a social phenomena, personality, or other non-physical particularity of a person’s individual character. Hyde clearly articulates the sharp difference between the idea of “face” as a sociological or anthropological concept, in which it might be equivalent to a notion such as a role or a mask, and the face for Levinas, which must come “before it subscribes to socially circumscribed rituals of self-preservation” (82). What Levinas refers to as the face is not adorned by convention, clothed in sociality, or even capable of being connected or contained in a social order. It is, as Hyde would call it, naked, or in Levinas’s terms, “extreme immediate exposure, total nudity” (*God* 138).

Starting from these negative definitions is not merely a strategy to avoid common misinterpretations that later cause problems for commentators on Levinas, but it also hints at one of the most significant problems of reading and studying Levinas: what we are after when we try to describe the face, ethics, or even God, on the basis of Levinas’s writings, are not phenomena that can be contained with words or even thought. When we say that the face is this or is that, we say not so much what the qualities are that make up the face—we cannot speak of what the face looks like or the substance of its being—but rather, in Levinasian terms, we end up speaking of how the face moves, the effects it might have, and the experience of being confronted or called by it. In short, the face “is” only if “is” can be stripped of all its ontological meaning as a being that can be made present. This does not mean that the face “is not.” The face is neither simply negated nor absent, it is not caught in

either being or not-being. In the same breath, Levinas can say that “there is no evidence with regards to the face” and yet say that there is “an order, in the sense that the face is a commanded value” (“Paradox” 176–77). Whenever Levinas describes what the face “is” it is always described in terms of what the face communicates, the way the face opens one up, calls one out of oneself. The face, thus, is not an object of knowledge, it is not a thing that is seen or felt or can be erased, but it is an authority, a value, a calling, a nudity, a weakness, and a commanding that is outside of being and not-being and cannot be contained in either language or thought.

If the face is commanded value and authority, then what is that value or command? While at times Levinas can be understandably coy about the answer, at least once he was quite direct: “It is believing that love without reward is valuable” (“Paradox” 177). Love, as in the being-for-the-other that is the basis of the ethics, without reward, as in without even a hope or desire for reciprocation or result. It is a belief that love is valuable, regardless of whether that love can have any effect, produce any result, or even be returned. This truly unconditional love for the other is the command and authority that includes the simple “Thou shall not kill” but also commands an affirmative obligation of owing everything to the other. However, as command and authority Levinas is quite careful to distinguish the face from force or power. The face is all weakness and nudity in its supreme authority, an authority without force, that can require nothing even while it calls out for everything that I have to be owed to the other (“Paradox” 169; *Alterity* 105).

With all this said, we may have only a gleaming, an inclination, or a trace of what we might want to refer to when we say “the face.” Ultimately, the face must escape our cognition and understanding, as it exceeds the simplicity of the “is” that would seek to make of it a theme or a visage or a simple metaphor. The face shares this status with the infinite and with alterity as ultimately unthinkable and unknowable, even if it commands me with all the ethical authority possible to owe everything I am to the other, to be *for* the other. This is not an accidental similarity but points toward the fundamental importance of the infinite and the Infinite Other, the Infinitely Alterior, that circu-

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lates throughout every last page of Levinas's writings, be they philosophical argument or Talmudic inquiry: God.

I choose to introduce God into this study at this point because the face is a common entry point for God in Levinas's philosophical works. Levinas was never hesitant to note certain similarities between his notion of God and his notion of the face, noting the similarity between "the face of the other, the trace of Infinity, or the Word of God" as being something other than being, representation, theme, or object of any field of knowledge (*Alterity* 169). Hyde notes this tendency when he writes that the face "is how God, at least indirectly, show's God's face: by way of the face of the other" (94). This is not a mere similarity in description or a simple commonality in thought or even just different ways to reach a similar point. Instead, for Levinas, the face of the other, the Infinite, and the Word of God are the same commanding authority, the same weakness and nudity that can call of me to give everything I have, to offer my very being to be for the other. As Levinas put it, "there is, in the face, the supreme authority that commands, and I always say it is the word of God. The face is the locus of the word of God" (*Alterity* 104).

God

While perhaps clarifying the ethical relationship between humans, the question of the face has not, however, given us a direct insight to Levinas's insistence on an ethical distinction between the human and the non-human, nor has it yet provided a complete reason for the prioritization of the human that is outside of biology, genus, or *logos*. If the ethical relation is primarily only in the interhuman and the locus of the supreme authority that commands, i.e., the word of God, is in the face, then there must be something uniquely human about Levinas's notion of the face or there must be something about the face that limits its appearance to being first found in the human. Such explanation would be salient to answering our question here, especially if it could help to explain the apparently different degrees of ambivalence about the status of the dog and the snake. Perhaps, though, this entry through the face that leads us to the word of God can better

explain the status of the human in Levinas if we can ask what God is to Levinas.

There is some contestation over the role that God and religious thought more generally play in Levinas's philosophical writing. While commentators generally distinguish between his Talmudic commentary and his philosophic works, it is impossible to read both and not notice the significant similarities in the propositions and conclusions. Levinas himself claims that there is "a very radical distinction" between the two bodies of work, but at the very same time also acknowledges that "there is certainly a relationship between them" ("Paradox" 173–74). The radical distinction, however, is not in his statements about the nature or status of ethics. Indeed, he is relatively consistent, even in his ambivalences, between the two bodies of work. The primary difference is in the types of evidence used to support his analyses. Levinas himself isolated this as a critical difference: "I would never, for example, introduce a Talmudic or biblical verse into one of my philosophical texts to try to prove or justify a phenomenological argument" ("Ethics" 54). The difference to be found is one of articulation and evidence, but not of actual argument or philosophy. On his own terms, Levinas recognizes that his "ethical reading of the interhuman" has been influenced by his Biblical thought, even if the Western tradition "has largely determined its philosophical expressions in language" ("Ethics" 57). Regardless of whether one reads his Talmudic readings and Biblical commentaries or one read his philosophical analyses and arguments, one gets essentially the same position vis-à-vis ethics, alterity, the human, and God. The Infinite will appear in both sets of texts and will make that appearance in much the same way whether it was teased from a criticism of Buber or a passage of the Talmud.

The relation between ethics and religion is thus difficult to determine in some of Levinas's work. While he sometimes prioritizes the ethical, saying that "belief presupposes ethics as that disruption of our being-in-the-world which opens us to the other," he also contends that the ethical call of conscience "remains an essentially religious vocation" ("Ethics" 59, 61). It is too simplistic to take these statements as contradictions. Instead, what Levinas begins to show us is that religion is ethics and eth-

ics is religion. This does not mean that religious doctrine, dogma, or even religious documents and exegesis must guide our ethics. Such a position both would mistake our understanding and knowledge of religion for the word of God and would also make ethics derivative from a divine that could have the will or substance to give ethics a resultant form. The invocation of God and religion is neither a diminution of nor a caveat to the principle of ethics as first philosophy. But this can become clear only if we give significant attention to Levinas's understanding of God.

The study of Levinas's notion of God is not a detour that detracts from our focus on the unique status of the human but, like the face, is an entry point to another level of analysis and understanding of Levinas's philosophy. Even if we restrict ourselves to his more predominantly philosophical texts, we find God plays a central role in not only the articulation of the face and ethics, but also Levinas's own understanding of the exigency that drives his work. Traditional Judeo-Christian religions have often conceptualized God through an ontology, making God into a particular being with will and consciousness. As Levinas writes, "onto-theo-logy consists in thinking God as a being and in thinking being on the basis of this superior or Supreme being" (*God* 160). Levinas desires to put ethics, and God, prior to ontology and thus must find a way to articulate a God that is not ontotheological but ethical, a God that is not already embroiled in the status of being and not-being or in questions of the nature of being. Time and again in his philosophical works Levinas insists on the importance of thinking about God "without the help of ontology" and "not in the ontological perspective of being-there or Supreme Being and Creator" (*God* 153, "Ethics" 56). From this perspective, God is as much a phenomenological question for Levinas as a theological one. God is not "the unconditional foundation of the world and cosmology" that might give to being order and meaning or that might explain to me the cause and purpose of the other (*Alterity* 96). God is not an object of knowledge nor is God an interlocutor in a dialogue, but is outside of presence, absence, being, appearance, and thematization (*God* 224). God "is" or, perhaps today we have to write, God is "other than Being" ("Ethics" 61).

Again, we find that we are given a definition largely through the negative, as with the face, and the reason is much the same, for God and the face are not disconnected. God is not the model for the face of the other, for the face is without model, but God is the ultimate Other, the Infinitely Other "with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other person, prior to the ethical compulsion to the neighbor" (*God* 224). God is the Infinite, which is always already distanced "in the guise of the third person," appearing in every moment of the approach of the face of the human other, appearing in every calling of the neighbor, but always prior and third (*God* 207). God, then, is the obligation and fraternity of otherness that calls for my first obligation, before even my obligation to this face before me now, even if it is only the human face that testifies to the alterity of God (*Difficult* 295).

Here is the emergence of the substantive explanation for why the distinctness of the human from the animal is not ontological but ethical: God is the absolutely Other, the infinitely Other-to-all-others, which refuses every attempt at appropriation and thematization with a resistance that is absolute and undeniable. The absolute otherness of God is the undeniable rupture that would rip consciousness out of the for-itself and command it to be for the other, in the most absolute authority and yet with no force or power. The interhuman is privileged because it is only the intelligible experience of the face of the other person that can "cut through and perforates the totality of presence and points towards the absolutely Other" ("Ethics" 57). It is not that the human has some innate or even inchoate capacity or quality that makes the ethical uniquely interhuman, but because God can come only to the human and only in the other human can a trace of Infinite Otherness shatter being-for-itself. As Levinas put it, "The idea of God comes only to man" (*Outside* 118).

This will not, I know, be a wholly satisfactory answer to many philosophers who will still ask *why* the idea of God comes only to man, *why* animals are excluded from being able to invoke the trace of the face of the Infinite Other. Rightly we have not yet even gone far enough to satisfy our original question of *how* Levinas justifies or substantiates the unique ethical status of the human, though we

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have now found and assembled two important pieces of the puzzle. What we must finally do is to deal directly with Levinas's own statements about the human and his complicated relationship with humanism.

The Human

The relationship between Levinas and humanism is easily and most often viewed as one of direct opposition. Many contemporary scholars of ethics who have turned toward Levinas find him attractive precisely because he seems to repudiate so much of humanism. Peter Atterton notes that Levinas's denunciation of humanism is especially powerful because it is not merely a claim that humanism gets it wrong in ascribing an essential ontology to the human, but because humanism is denounced as an ethical failing (496). Atterton is astute, however, is noting that Levinas "does not repudiate humanism wholesale" (495).

What, then, is the relationship between Levinas and humanism? If the idea of God comes only to man, then is that not something that is uniquely human and substantively important to ethics and being? Levinas's insistence on the ethical priority of the human and the uniqueness of the human in relation to God may be why some contemporary scholars prefer to say that Levinas seeks to create a radically different foundation for humanism that finds its grounds outside of traditional metaphysics of being (Simmons 104).

There is no doubt that Levinas takes sharp aim at humanism on more than one occasion. In *Difficult Freedom* he characterizes humanism in a way quite similar to Martin Heidegger's now-classic definition and also quite antithetical to Levinas's articulation of ethics: "In a wide sense, humanism signified the recognition of an invariable essence named 'Man,' the affirmation of his central place in the economy of the Real and of his value which engendered all values" (277). In particular, the insistence on "an invariable essence named 'Man'" seems quite at odds with Levinas's claim that ethics precedes all genus or species (e.g., *Totality* 39).

However, the characterization of Levinas as an antithesis or even a wholesale repudiation of all humanism is too simplistic. There is, for Levinas, a notion of the human that precedes

genus, species, and ontology. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas notes that "fraternity precedes the commonness of a genus" (159). Here, he lays the foundation for thinking the human as fraternity, separated and bound in a fraternity of alterity before there is any organizing principle, idea, or shared quality that would create the species or the genus. There is, then, a very peculiar type of humanism at work here in which the human as a distinctly different type of fraternity, by virtue of its unique relation to God, is cut through with responsibility before even the idea of being enters the picture.

Thus, Levinas can in one breath condemn humanism for conceiving of man as "a genus or a being situated in an ontological region, persevering in being like all other substances" and also chastise anti-humanism for "not finding in man, lost in history and the order of things, the trace of this responsibility which makes subjectivity and, in the other person, the trace of this value" ("Contemporary Criticism" 186–87). This, Levinas notes, is the failure of anti-humanism to find "the trace of this pre-historic an-archic saying" for man (*Humanism* 57). Thus, it is across the whole of his philosophy and not merely in Levinas's Talmudic readings that he can at once work contrary to the notions of what he calls "the humanism of the Renaissance man" and at the same time strive to recover a humanity "whose spirit is inspiration and prophecy" (Levinas, *New Talmudic* 76–77). This is a humanism of the Other, a humanism that finds its basis all in ethics as first philosophy and God (interchangeable concepts in much of Levinas's work) and why Jacques Derrida had clung to Levinas's own classification of the thought as a "Jewish humanism" (Derrida, "The Mystical" 22).

In a way, Levinas's ethical and religious philosophy is the strongest possible manifestation of humanism: it is a faith in humanism that relies on no other higher principle or essence that would be the reason for human value. Prior to ontology is responsibility, but not an abstract idea of responsibility or a noumenal principle of responsibility. Ethics is not a metaphysical substance that imposes itself prior to all things in the fashion of a Genesis. Instead, ethics as first philosophy is the placement of human fraternity before all ontology,

commonality, sharing, or knowing. Human fraternity is itself, for Levinas, responsibility for the other (Otherwise 116). This is what being human means, it means being responsible without any ontology or essence that would ground this responsibility. Thus, one need know nothing, learn nothing, and remember nothing in order to be human. "We are human," Levinas writes, "before being learned and remain so after having forgotten much" (*Outside* 3).

Thus, for Levinas, the only *esse* of the human is responsibility, and this essence precedes all ontological characteristics. Responsibility is prior even to consciousness or being, but is the hallmark of the human being. By locating the origin and meaning of human as pre-ontological, Levinas establishes a radical humanism, more human than all the ontological notions of human essence. His faith in the human can be so absolute because it is at once also his face in God, his hanging on to what he calls "the goodness of everyday life" that remains after every failure to organize the human in thought, theory, principle, science, or philosophy (*Alterity* 107). Goodness, God, responsibility, in distinctively Levinasian pre-ontological registers, are what define the human, separate the human from all those things that are merely persistent substance in the world, things that truly are first being before they are involved in ethics and which become involved in ethics only by virtue first of the human as the prototype of the ethical relation. No matter how many horrors, atrocities, abominations, and evils man lets loose upon the world, Levinas insists that "poor kindness holds on. It is a 'mad goodness,' the most human thing there is in man. It defines man" (*Alterity* 109).

This is what Levinas will call a humanism of the Other. It binds human to human pre-on-

tologically, before there is any notion or idea or thought that would make the idea of human intelligible or capable of articulation. This is a humanism that is more human, more grounded in the notion of an intrinsic, unshakable goodness and responsibility in the human, than all those notions of humanism that would locate in the species some essence that would then be the intermediary to valuation and ethics. In many ways, this refiguring of humanism is the very core of Levinas's philosophy and the end of his articulation. Attention to the Other, at once and the same time this human standing before me now and God, has consistently across his work been "the very bond of human subjectivity, even to the point of being raised to a supreme ethical principle" ("Useless Suffering" 159). What could be more humanist than this?

Levinas can break with the tradition of humanism for all those failings that most anti-humanists have so rightly pointed out and at the same moment lay claim to a humanism far more human in its absolute faith and valuation of the human because he will remove the operation of a mediating substantive essence such as logic or language that imbues the human with value. Instead, his humanism of the Other places value itself, responsibility, ethics, God, goodness, however one wishes to term it, as innately and uniquely human, before all ontological structures or essences that will (always failingly) try to organize or account for that mad goodness. Thus, Levinas is more than consistent to be skeptical about the face of the dog or the snake and to claim that all ethical responsibilities for the non-human other emerge only as resultant of the uniquely human ethics that is before all being.

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