

Editor's Introduction

Richard A. Cohen and Jolanta Saldukaitytė

For more than a decade, *Levinas Studies* has served admirably as the only English-language journal dedicated exclusively to the academic study of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. It is an honor to coedit an issue of *Levinas Studies* — not only to contribute articles but also to organize an entire volume. Volume 11 of *Levinas Studies* gathers together essays from scholars who have (with the exception of James Mensch) participated in one or more of the annual Levinas Philosophy Summer Seminar (LPSS), held from 2013 to 2016, directed by Richard A. Cohen, with the assistance of James McLachlan, and organized jointly by Cohen and Jolanta Saldukaitytė, coeditors of the present volume.

The LPSS has met in different countries at different venues around the world, each time with ten invited international participants (and some additional auditors). Each summer these dedicated scholars join up for one very intense week of reading and conversation, finding a deeper understanding of an important topic in Levinas's philosophy. As a one-week Seminar for College and University Teachers, 16 American scholars gathered at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), Buffalo, to discuss "Emmanuel Levinas: On Morality, Justice and the Political." As the ancient Greek philosophers along with the biblical prophets understood, ethics and politics are inseparable.

Participants usually attend only one LPSS, but some have returned for more, and two scholars have attended four. This and Levinas's philosophy, and a few e-mail updates to former participants, have created a modicum of continuity and group spirit, or so we hope. The contents of the present volume of *Levinas Studies* contributes to that collegiality and continuing discussion, enabling a much wider audience of Levinas scholars to look over our shoulders, as it were, and join the conversation. Most of the topics and concerns of the present issue of *Levinas Studies*—embodiment, Eros, aesthetics, Kant, and difficult freedom—reflect those of past LPSS gatherings.

Volume 11 starts with Irina Poleshchuk's essay, "Transcendence and Sensibility: Affection, Sensation, and Nonintentional Consciousness." Underscoring the importance of sensibility in Levinas's philosophy, she shows that subjectivity is not only a vulnerable and affected selfhood but also that, in and through, its sensible subjectivity is endowed with transcendence. Affected by the other, the vulnerability and sensibility of selfhood are "nonintentional" and radically passive. By introducing the phenomenon of a sensibility with two distinct dimensions—one on the level of enjoyment and the other on the suffering of the face-to-face encounter—she shows the double character of affection, both constituting and constituted. Sensibility is both source and shocked in the face-to-face relation. Elaborating sensibility as enjoyment and sensibility as nonintentional consciousness and passivity, Poleshchuk deepens our understanding of the core Levinasian structures of one-for-the-other and hospitality. In contrast to the idealistic leanings of philosophy's ontological tradition, Poleshchuk shows that transcendence in Levinas's ethical philosophy becomes flesh in sensibility.

Sensibility also features centrally in Brigitta Keintzel's essay, "'Like a Virgin': Levinas's Anti-Platonic Understanding of Love and Desire." This essay questions how sensual love and ethical desire relate to Levinas's description of the relations linking "intimate" and "real" society. On the one hand, she shows that Levinasian ethical desire coincides with the Platonic notion of love as desire, and hence not as an existing or already accomplished knowledge. On the other hand, Keintzel

underlines that Platonic love does not coincide with what Levinas calls “Desire,” since the latter is directed not toward an idea but toward the face of the Other. Love for Levinas begins as a subject addressed in his/her direct, vulnerable, traumatized passivity. Eros lies in love’s ability to orient itself to the future. Virginity, then, has to be understood beyond biological attributes, in relation to the intersubjective transcendence that defines the human as such. “Like a virgin” is not biological innocence, or eternal youth, or an exclusively female matter, but being “not-yet,” the open orientation of one to the Other. Finally, the figure of the Third—care for others, for justice—deepens the difference between ethical desire and sensual love. The Third overcomes Platonic dualism by requiring an ethical position and an overturning of any triumphalism of the “I.” In relation to the Third, in concern for a just society, sensual claims and ethical demands do not impede but enrich one another.

The meaning and status of embodiment in Levinas philosophy is located in a different perspective in James Mensch’s essay, “Europe and Embodiment: A Levinasian Perspective.” Here the issue is not the subjectivity of a person or persons, but the subjectivity and subjectivities, as it were, of nations. Mensch questions the commonly understood European account of identity within the universality of rational thought by recalling another term for another universality, *katholikos*, which while referring to universality does so by signifying “according to the whole.” “What is the whole according to which we can think the identity of Europe?” is Mensch’s question. Applying Levinasian conceptions to European nations would mean a transforming of current self-understanding, leading to a new definition of the nation or state not in terms of force relations but rather as responses and responsibilities, the nation thought in relation to alterity. The unicity of European nations would then have to be rethought not in relation to powers, and struggle for dominance, but by their responsibilities to one another. Raising the question of radical uniqueness, of national self-identity, Mensch turns to Levinas’s notion of the body and embodiment. Body not only binds us to the world but also sets up a nonrepresentability

and nonsubstitutability independence. As Poleschuk's essay elaborates, such a perspective—the body as vulnerable—immediately introduces ethics into the equation. Mensch draws the parallel with nations, social relations, as “embodied,” going beyond current political theories of self-interest to factor in the ethical responsibilities and obligations to which Levinas draws attention. As with Keintzel's introduction of the Third, for Mensch ethical responsibility would thus extend beyond the face-to-face to issues of national identity, and to issues of international and transnational relations.

Continuing this line of thought, social and political aspects of Levinas's philosophy are discussed in the following essay, “On (Im)Patient Messianism: Marx, Levinas, and Derrida” by Chung-Hsiung Lai. Lai notes that in contemporary philosophy there has been an ongoing dialogue about “messianism.” Messianism must be considered beyond the tradition of Judaism. A postmodern “messianic turn” in continental philosophy, according to Lai, unfolds in two directions: a trajectory of the Jewish religion, which includes Levinas, and a trajectory of secular philosophy, which includes such figures as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, and Slavoj Žižek. Lai defines an “(im)patient messianism” as the dynamic of a three-dimensional humanism, each of its three strands associated with one of the three figures—Marx, Derrida, and Levinas. Levinas, then, contributes the notion of an ethical messianism, specified as the absolute patience to pursue justice for the Other. Lai claims emphatically that Levinas's ethics, from his early to his late writings, must be understood to be essentially political in nature. And this includes the I-Other relation, identity, responsibility, and not just such evident political themes as justice, war, and, of course, the Third. The Third is a well-recognized intersection of the ethical and political in Levinasian messianism. Lai argues that by criticizing and displacing traditional notions of politics, the Levinasian messianic politics is of the utmost importance in addressing crises of contemporary politics. Lai, too, recognizes the importance of sensibility in Levinas's ethics and politics. Through sensations, through pain and vulnerability, the calling of the Other is encountered. Messianic hope, then, is associated

jointly and irreducibly with responsibility and humanity, with the inextricable link that binds the two in a responsible humanity. Like Mensch, Lai underlines the importance of Levinasian ethics not only in interhuman relationships but also in the larger world of international relationships as well.

Jolanta Saldukaitytė's essay, "The Strangeness of Alterity," distinguishes and clarifies the difference between relative and radical/absolute strangeness, uncovering and clearing up these two quite different senses of difference in order to avoid the unfortunate intellectual confusions that occur when they are not distinguished, especially when Levinas's notion of the face is misunderstood in terms of relative strangeness. The essay begins by elaborating upon a general notion of strangeness, concentrating primarily on strangeness understood as that which is peculiar, weird, or unusual, and, naturally, the notion of the foreigner. Saldukaitytė considers the studies of Bernard Waldenfels, who takes the main feature of strangeness to derive from the other's place, whether the other is from here, one of us, or from elsewhere, not our place. In the second part of the essay, Saldukaitytė turns to the problem of strangeness in the context of Levinas's philosophy. Here the strange is absolutely other, not by comparison, but as such, through a dynamic Levinas calls "deformalization," or "nudity," or "ab-solution." It is of course the ethical relation, the for-the-other, that defies the containment of propositional logic and representational thought. Examining the sense of personal otherness, Saldukaitytė brings together the notions of strangeness as weirdness, and strangeness as absolute alterity. By confronting the relative strangeness of the weird and peculiar with the absolute difference of Levinasian alterity, she probes the question of if and of how alterity is strange.

Kevin Houser's essay, "Facing the Space of Reasons," enters into a comparative analysis of Kantian and Levinasian ethics. Holding to Levinas's notion of absolute alterity, the alterity of the other in the for-the-other of ethics, he questions the priority and necessity of reason in responsibility, wondering about the role of the prereflective. In the alterity of the face, Houser sees an alterity to reason. But insofar

as other sorts of alterity also resist comprehension, he does not limit the alterity of the face to this resistance to reason. Thus, he focuses on the uniqueness of the alterity of the face to see how this singular alterity informs a specific form of reason-resistance, discussing how alterity and reason-resistance are related to moral responsibility. In many respects, Kantian and Levinasian ethics are similar. However, Levinas, unlike Kant, takes seriously radical alterity, embodiment, and sensibility, as positive components of his ethics. Houser makes the point that vulnerability constitutes alterity, and in this vulnerability as solicitation, alterity elicits the relationship of responsibility. Hauser invokes the figure of Cain, delving further into the relation between suffering and normativity, as understood each in his own way by Kant and Levinas. He writes of the difference between Greek wisdom and Jewish ethics to show that the most revolutionary or Copernican aspect of Levinas's philosophy lies in its derivation of reason from ethics and not the reverse. Ethical anteriority or priority, however, is not understood historically or developmentally but normatively: ethics is the unconditional ground of order, including the order of reason.

Richard A. Cohen, in "Levinas on Art and Aestheticism: Getting 'Reality and Its Shadow' Right," presents a close reading of Levinas's most important publication on art and exposes widespread but erroneous readings of Levinas that criticize him for allegedly misunderstanding and disdaining art. Taking up two book-length instances of the latter, Cohen challenges the criticisms of Robert Eaglestone in *Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas* (1997) and Jill Robbins in *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (1999). Regarding the former, in Cohen's close reading of Levinas's "Reality and Its Shadow" it is shown that Levinas opposes not *art* but *aestheticism*, that is, the taking of art—creativity, imagination, *poiesis*—as, or as the model of, reality. In modern philosophy, aestheticism has molded ontology and epistemology across a distinguished lineage of thinkers from Schelling and Shiller to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Bataille, and Deleuze. For his part, avoiding aestheticism, Levinas provides a phenomenological and nuanced account of art as image, but image caught in temporal stasis. In addition, and importantly, Levinas sees in art two essentially critical

moments: first, “art criticism,” which integrates artists, art movements, and artworks within the history of art; and second, “philosophical criticism,” which integrates artists, art movements, and artworks into the larger social-historical-political-ethical world. An example of both types of criticism is Arthur Danto’s 1964 article “On the End of Art” about an exhibit of Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes. Levinas’s own article on art is another instance. Indeed, that Levinas has a positive relation to art, in contrast to aestheticism, appears in all his writings, in “Reality and Its Shadow,” certainly, but in the many literary references, allusions, and exegeses, as well as in his own carefully wrought literary style, without flinching from, indeed entirely in accord with his basic claim regarding the primacy of the ethical.

In Rossitsa Varadinova Borkowski’s essay, “On the Way to Ethical Culture: The Meaning of Art as Oscillating between the Other, *il y a*, and the Third,” also raises the question of ethics in relation to the meaning of art. She asks, “How can the existence of art be justified?” She suggests that Levinas’s vision of art takes it to be instrumental, and as such is subjected to the ethical. At the same time, she sees Levinas as remaining uncertain about the relation between the artistic (senses) and philosophy (reason), and the ability of the artistic to climb its path to the ethical alone. Raising the more general question about the meaning of art as a distinctive dimension of the human condition, she locates art within the optics of Levinas’s metaphysical ethics. To accomplish this, she explicates the relation of the artistic with *il y a* (“there is”), the Other, and the Third. She makes the point that artistic existence rises out of the *il y a* as does the human existent, and hence must be regarded within the latter perspective. The key difference, however, is that the human existent seeks to *escape* from *il y a* while the artistic existent maintains itself *exposed* to *il y a*. Borkowski’s thesis, then, is that Levinas’s understanding of art is one that sees it as essentially connected to *il y a*. By further describing the artistic as an intersection of three movements: directly transforming the nonsense of *il y a* into sense, acknowledging such sense as involving relationship with the Other, and placing the artistic also as response to the Third, Borkowski claims that a Levinasian approach justifies artistic existence

not as knowledge, truth, pure form, or expression but as an ethical response to and for the Other.

James McLachlan, in the final essay, “*The Il y a and the Ungrund: Levinas and the Russian Existentialists Berdyaev and Shestov*,” also takes up Levinas’s notion of the *il y a*. McLachlan draws parallels between Levinasian *il y a*, hypostasis, and Schellingian conceptions of the *Ungrund*, the emergence of the personal from the impersonal ground. In Levinas’s understanding of the *il y a* McLachlan discovers that similar philosophical views can be found also in Levinas’s contemporary émigrés: Lev Shestov, Nicolas Berdyaev, and Alexandre Koyré. For example, McLachlan indicates that Shestov shares some similarities with the Levinasian theme of escape, even though for Shestov escape is glossed with a different goal and takes on a deeply religious sense. McLachlan also discovers that Berdyaev’s characterization of the *Ungrund* has similarities with Levinas’s *il y a* inasmuch as both refer to the pre-existential abyss, to an impersonal anonymity. *Ungrund*, like *il y a*, is an impersonal absolute, and by itself would signify the dissolution of the distinct or independent person. McLachlan also finds similarities between Berdyaev’s description of the face and that of Levinas, despite Berdyaev’s use of mythical language, and his characterization of *Ungrund* as preexistential creativity and freedom. From the viewpoint of the history of ideas, McLachlan suggests that it would be interesting to find out more about the crossing paths of Levinas and Berdyaev and Jean Wahl. For instance, both Levinas and Berdyaev attended and participated in a discussion following a lecture by Wahl given in 1937.

The coeditors of the present volume of *Levinas Studies* are honored that it concludes with something by Emmanuel Levinas himself. It is a very short book review, published in 1937, of Lev Shestov’s book, *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy*, published in the same year. In this review, Levinas not only draws attention to some intellectual relations joining Kierkegaard and Shestov but also gives some short but insightful characterizations of the latter’s philosophy and position in general.