

# Who is the Other?

## The Levinas–Ricœur Debate

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**ABSTRACT** This paper deals with the problem of what otherness consists in, and what its foundation is, within the I–Other relation. In this way, the study also explores the limits of ethics and of a quasi-religious attitude, in order to establish what is required to shape interpersonal relations in a non-violent way, when faced with the radical otherness of another human being. Such an investigation also intersects with a broader ethical discussion that aims to take account of glorious or heroic acts, focused on the issue of supererogation. The aim of the present study is to demonstrate the degree to which a neglect of reciprocity and justice in the context of such philosophical research constitutes a risky step. To this end, the main aspects of the debate between Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricœur are introduced. After examining the position of Levinas, and how Ricœur interprets the I–Other relation in Levinas, an attempt is made to assess whether the latter’s line of criticism is pertinent and helpful for attempts to arrive at the core of the disagreement between the two thinkers.

**KEYWORDS** holiness; hostage; Levinas, Emmanuel; otherness; reciprocity; responsibility; Ricœur, Paul; substitution; summoned self

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While the title of the present article indicates that it focuses on attempting to reach a precise understanding of what, in the context of the I–Other relation, otherness consists in, and what its foundation is, it should be stated straightaway that it also engages with a larger problem. This concerns the limits of ethics and of a quasi-religious attitude, and is centered on establishing the basic conditions for the possibility of “non-allergic” interpersonal relations (to use the expression of Levinas<sup>1</sup>) involving the radical otherness of another human being. The investigation pursued here also intersects with a particular approach adopted in the context of another important area of ethical discussion, relating to some difficulties generated by Kantian moral philosophy<sup>2</sup> (to which, in what follows, a few selected aspects of the ethical position of Levinas will be to some extent assimilated<sup>3</sup>): namely, the consideration of glorious or heroic acts—i.e. supererogation.<sup>4</sup> My aim is to demonstrate the degree to which a neglect of reciprocity and justice in such a philosophical inquiry amounts to a risky step.

In my paper, I would like to introduce some of the components of the debate that took place between Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricœur (OA, 335–41).<sup>5</sup> One of the main elements of that debate is the question about the Other and the I–Other relation. Let me first briefly present the main questions pertaining to the position of Levinas, before moving on to the critique offered by Ricœur, and a discussion of his claims. After examining the way in which Ricœur interprets the I–Other relation in Levinas, I will try to assess whether his criticism is pertinent and helpful for attempts to arrive at the core of the disagreement between the two thinkers.

1. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 47, 51, 305, doi:10.1007/978-94-009-9342-6. Hereafter cited in text as *TI*.

2. See Thomas E. Hill, Jr., *Human Welfare and Moral Worth: Kantian Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 215–18, 236–43, doi:10.1093/0199252637.001.0001.

3. See Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 336. Hereafter cited in text as *OA*. See also Jere Paul Surber, “Kant, Levinas, and the Thought of the ‘Other,’” in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, eds. Claire Katz and Lara Trout, vol. 2 *Levinas and the History of Philosophy* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), 296–324.

4. See Marcia Baron, “Supererogation,” in *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, eds. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, vol. 3, *P–W* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 1673–6 (and bibliography there).

5. See Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 157–61, 261–63. Hereafter cited in text as *CR*. See also Paul Ricœur, *Autrement. Lecture d’Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence d’Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1997).

It is often stated that the philosophy of Levinas is a philosophy of the Other (*autre*). This formulation means, among other things, that who I am and what I do occurs in relation to the Other, because of the Other, for the Other, and even instead of the Other. Of course, in the philosophy of Levinas the word “Other,” repeated in many contexts, creates a multi-faceted field of meaning. However, in its essential sense, it relates to the experiencing of the other human being (*autrui*), and indeed the relation with another human being defines the fundamental field of this analysis, in which social aspects of our philosophical understanding of human beings, along with ethics and metaphysics, are all inextricably linked.

What is this relation with the Other? It is one of absolute externality. A concrete model of such a relation is the relation with another human being (*autrui*). In this relation, the encounter with the face occurs. It should be noted that the Other, in this relation, is not an *alter ego*, a different I. Rather, they are that which I am not. From the very beginning, one can see the asymmetry present in this relation. Here, a collision of the subject with absolute otherness occurs: a collision with transcendence which breaches loneliness and allows for, if it may be put this way, the arising of a “second subjectivity” that does not depend on its relation to being and cognition, but is instead constituted through the experience of the Other—an experience which is fundamentally ethical. This is one of the central matters addressed by Levinas in his principal work, *Totality and Infinity*.

The discovery of such absolute exteriority is an encounter with transcendence, and this transcendence is what is infinite. This entails a transgressive transcending of the sort of ontologico-cognitive subjectivity—coagulated in itself—that, let us remind ourselves, finds its perpetuation in various fields: for example, in the spheres of politics and technology.<sup>6</sup> However, questions arise. Isn’t this transgression linked with the destruction of the subject? Isn’t it its negation? Or, quite probably, should one not rather see in it its proper founding: a discovery of the source of the true identity of being oneself, of one’s own exceptionality? With this is-

6. In the lecture entitled “Transcendance et hauteur,” Levinas explains that the assimilation of what is different into the identity of the subject of being and cognition does not consist only in a cognitive process, even though this is obviously something it does anticipate, ending in absolute knowledge. It has its own application in the field of politics and technology. As Levinas states, “The state and the industrial society whose crowning achievement is the homogenous State and from which it emerges belong in this meaning to the philosophical process.” Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendance et hauteur,” in *Liberté et commandement* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1994), 75. Hereafter cited in text as *TH*. Translations of *TH* into English are those proposed by the author.

sue a certain ambiguity emerges, to which I will return in the later part of the paper. For now, let us only note that such a structure of subjectivity is different from an ontological structure. So, the subject achieves the identity of being oneself (*ipséité*) through accepting the Other. The fundamental level of experience thus lies beyond what the subject can do on its own and in itself; it is beyond its possibilities of acting, which begin with the subject itself. In this sense, its passive character reveals itself. In other words, it is not I who am doing something, but rather it is done to me. Thus, a barrier of immanence is broken, and the most fundamental dimension of metaphysical relations is revealed.

In what way does the encounter with the Other happen? How, through this encounter, does the deepest structure of subjectivity reveal itself, its uniqueness and its exceptionality? This is connected with the experiencing of another human being (*autrui*). Who is the Other? Levinas' answer points to the relationship that exists between freedom and responsibility. What is interesting is the fact that his analysis of the relations obtaining between freedom and responsibility is by no means unequivocal. On the contrary, one can find here many different strands. On the one hand, for example, Levinas talks about the primordially of responsibility—something which is, I think, a fundamental thesis of his philosophy. The primordially of responsibility does not mainly consist here in limiting freedom, in designating its borders, in restraining the possibility of negation that always exists in it and which can appear as, for example, murder. The primordially of responsibility rather consists in the establishing and grounding of freedom itself—or in its justification. As Levinas says: “the other absolutely other—the Other—does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds it and justifies it” (TI, 197). In accordance with the above, freedom would not be subject to negation and limitation, but being led by responsibility would find its own place. On the other hand, this is only one of the aspects of this problematic, because the Other is also somebody over whom I have no power, someone who disturbs the safety of my being at home with myself, and even the one who questions my freedom. Let us add, by the way, that the radicalism of questioning freedom, of questioning a certain understanding of freedom, in which one sees an always-existing possibility of murder, is brought in the later period of the work of Levinas to the paradoxical situation, from the vantage point of the possibilities of ethics itself, where the condition of “the transcendental ethical experience” is presented together with an almost complete exclusion of freedom.<sup>7</sup>

However, let us return to the main line of analysis. As is well known, the experience of the Other, according to Levinas, has an asymmetrical character. The Other enters and ruptures all the categories connected with the Same—everything that could be imposed on them—and, simultaneously, precludes the possibility of totalization. By the same token, Levinas questions the power of the Same—including also, Levinas seems to suggest, the capacity for negation. The experience of the Other, who questions the cognitive and ontological order, the order of the Same, is an ethical experience, the experience of the face. The experience of the face is an experience of expression, of epiphany. The face says: “You shall not murder!” It distinguishes itself from all of the surroundings, from the horizon of being and knowing. Simultaneously, it opens up the dimension of what is metaphysical. “The Other,” stresses Levinas, “presents himself, thus, as the Other Human (*Autrui*), shows a face, opens the dimension of *height*—that is, goes *infinitely* beyond the measure of cognition. This means, in positive terms, that the Other calls freedom into doubt” (*TH*, 63). The other human being frees me from my egoism because they appear as somebody who has needs. Another with a face is another in misery: they are the one for whom I am responsible. The encounter with another is thus the experiencing of something completely external and other. However, the other human being, as external, also situates himself or herself above me. They instruct me with a voice from on high, the voice of the master. “The face,” notes Levinas, “in its nakedness, is the frailty of a unique being exposed to death, but at the same time is an expression of the imperative which enjoins me not to abandon him.”<sup>8</sup> These two dimensions of externality and altitude converge with each other.

In this relation, a grounding of the identity of being oneself (*ipséité*) takes place. However, this identity does not arise on the basis of ontologico-cognitive identity (*identité*). In other words, I do not validate my identity (*identité*) by absorption, appropriation, a usage of what is external to me,

7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), doi:10.1007/978-94-015-7906-3. Hereafter cited in text as *OB*. In the chapter “Subjectivity and Infinity” Levinas, speaking of the paradox which designates the field of ethics, adds: “Witnessed, and not thematized, in the sign given to the other, the Infinite signifies out of responsibility for the other, out of the-one-for-the-other, a subject supporting everything, subject to everything, that is, suffering for everyone, but charged with everything, without having had to decide for this taking charge, which is gloriously amplified in the measure that it is imposed” (*OB*, 148).

8. Emmanuel Levinas, “De l’utilité des insomnies,” in *Les imprévus de l’histoire* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 2007), 179. Hereafter cited in text as *UI*. Translations of *UI* into English are those proposed by the author.

but by opening myself up and accepting the summons of the Other. That is how my uniqueness, exceptionality, and non-substitutability, the core of my being myself (*ipséité*), are created. What is the essence of my exceptionality? Levinas answers: "I am myself (*je sui moi*) not as a master encompassing the world and ruling over it, but as the one called in the impossibility of refusing this summons."<sup>9</sup> This means that I am the responsible I, that I achieve the status of being chosen. Nobody can substitute for me in respect of my responsibility, and neither can they exempt me from it. The fact that I cannot avoid it is a sign of my subjectivity.

As is also well known, in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, Levinas radicalizes his position: "to be responsible" takes on still another meaning. This can be seen particularly clearly in the seminal fourth chapter of that work, entitled "Substitution," as well as in the next one, devoted to "Subjectivity and Infinity." What is being oneself now taken to consist in? The fundamental core of the argumentation remains preserved: to be oneself is connected, as previously, with being responsible, but starts to assume a particular, extremely radical character. We shall consult a few passages of this text to bring this more clearly into view. Levinas writes: "In the exposure to wounds and outrages, in the feeling proper to responsibility, the oneself is provoked as irreplaceable, as devoted to the others, without being able to resign, and thus as incarnated in order to offer itself, to suffer and to give" (*OB*, 105). Later, he adds: "To undergo from the Other is an absolute patience only if, by this, from-the-Other is already for-the-Other. This transfer, other than interested, 'otherwise than essence,' is subjectivity itself" (*OB*, 111). And, lastly: "the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage" (*OB*, 112). In other words, the whole discourse leads us to the figure of the hostage. The hostage pursues their responsibility all the way to the point of sacrifice for another, for others. Thus, we are not any being that is for itself: we are for the Other. It should be added that the Other is not already outside in the face: rather, Levinas places it within the sphere of subjectivity itself. To put it another way, there must be some atemporal structure in the subject itself, something that marks them out, even against their will, for being for another.

Levinas, talking about a relation with another human being, explains it as follows:

A fundamental characteristic of being (*être*) is the fact of dealing with one's own beingness, with which each particular being is concerned. Plants, animals, the totality of living beings, are attached to their own existence. For

each one it is a fight for life. . . . And here in the case of man there appears a possibility which is an ontological absurdity: care for another surpassing care for oneself. . . . Our humanity consists in the possibility of acknowledging this primacy of the other. (*UI*, 178–9)<sup>10</sup>

Certainly, some questions may be asked, and problems identified, when we are presented with such a conception. One of the influential thinkers who found themselves in dispute with the author of *Totality and Infinity* was Paul Ricœur. In the later part of this analysis, I shall attempt to present some of the elements of this dispute, in order to go beyond the perspective highlighted by this reference. What does the controversy between Ricœur and Levinas really amount to? What is Ricœur criticizing, and how does Levinas himself approach this criticism? In Ricœur's work there are many references to Levinas. A polemic launched directly against him can be found in the tenth investigation of *Oneself as Another*—though, of course, this is not the only reference to Levinas. For example, there is also *Autrement. Lecture d'Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas*, or the text "Emmanuel Levinas, penseur du témoignage,"<sup>11</sup> published in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*.

Ricœur, in his objections as presented in *Oneself as Another*,<sup>12</sup> speaks of the element of one-sidedness and exaggeration in Levinas' argumentation. In Ricœur's opinion, Levinas reserves exclusively for the Other the initiative of summoning the subject to responsibility. This means that he rejects, for example, the possibility of a conception of the otherness of the Other doing justice, on the one hand, to the priority of respect for oneself and, on the other, to the priority of summoning to responsibility through the Other. Keeping in mind Levinas' views, Ricœur focuses his attention on the fact that "[t]he Other absolves itself from relation, in the same movement by which the Infinite draws free from Totality. But how are we to think the irrelation implied by this otherness in its movement of absolution?" (*OA*, 336–7). Ricœur notes, and thus stresses, the moment

9. François Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas*, coll. *Qui êtes-vous?* (Lyon: La Manufacture, 1987), 115–6 (author's translation).

10. See Emmanuel Levinas, "Pour une philosophie de la sainteté, entretiens avec Michaël de Saint-Cheron," in Michaël de Saint-Cheron, *Entretiens avec Emmanuel Levinas 1992–1994* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 2006), 23–31. Hereafter cited in text as *PPS* and quoted in the author's translation.

11. Paul Ricœur, "Emmanuel Levinas, penseur du témoignage," in *Lectures 3. Aux frontières de la philosophie*, Points Essais 541 (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 81–103.

12. In this work there are many references to Levinas. As mentioned above, the polemic directed specifically against him appears in the tenth investigation; see *OA*, 331–41.

of the severance of relation. This effect of rupture, linked with the idea of absolute otherness, comes, in his opinion, from the use of hyperbole—i.e. the systematic employment of exaggeration in philosophical argumentation. What is interesting is that this exaggeration manifests itself both on the side of the Same and on the side of the Other. For example, in the case of a problem such as that of separation, as presented in *Infinity and Totality*, on the side of the I one can observe the functioning of a hyperbole, especially in any stressing of the inability of the I to notice the Other. By contrast, one more readily sees this on the side of the Other when pursuing the description of the figure of the master of justice who, as Levinas says, “always teaches” (see, for example, *TI*, 171)—which, as we know, is supposed to emphasize the fact that the initiative is always on the side of the Other. In short, on the side of the Same we encounter the I, separation, egoism, and a closing off of oneself in relation to others, while on the side of the Other we meet with asymmetry, radical exteriority, and possession of the initiative when it comes to dispensing advice. Moreover, there is, importantly, nothing here that could lessen the asymmetry between the Same and the Other.

Nevertheless, according to Ricœur the hyperbole reaches its extreme form only in *Otherwise than Being*, where it assumes the character of a “paroxysm” (*OA*, 338). In this case, the central theme of Levinas—namely, a summoning to responsibility—is expressed, according to Ricœur, in language of “excess never before attained” (*OA*, *ibid.*). This is the case for many statements in which it is claimed that being summoned is not contrary to acting, but a responsibility that is not justified by any prior actions. Ricœur points to the language of Levinas, which becomes “more and more excessive” (*OA*, *ibid.*), stressing visitation by the Other, persecution and substitution. The apex of this process is the statement that “the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution. A subject is a hostage” (*OA*, *ibid.*) Ricœur comments on the above statement in this way:

This expression, the most excessive of all, is thrown out here in order to prevent the insidious return of the self-affirmation of some “clandestine and hidden freedom” maintained even within the passivity of the self summoned to responsibility. The paroxysm of the hyperbole seems to me to result from the extreme—even scandalous—hypothesis that the Other is no longer the master of justice here, as is the case in *Totality and Infinity*, but the offender, who, as an offender, no less requires the gesture of pardon and expiation.

(*OA*, 338)



One should note that the role played by hyperbole in the argumentation of Levinas excludes alternative possibilities for comprehending the I–Other relation: for example, of the kind where being oneself would be defined at the same time by its openness and disclosive function. In other words, Ricœur questions Levinas about the conditions for the possibility of a relation with another human being and, at the same time, wants to point to just that sort of possibility where an answer to the summons of another simultaneously posits a capacity for accepting, distinguishing, and recognizing on the part of the Same—even though the Same is itself understood differently than by Levinas. “One has to grant,” writes Ricœur,

a capacity of reception to the self that is the result of a reflexive structure, better defined by its power of reconsidering pre-existing objectifications than by an initial separation. Even more important, must we not join to this capacity of reception a capacity of discernment and recognition, taking into account the fact that the otherness of the Other cannot be summed up in what seems to be just one of the figures of the Other, that of the master who teaches, once we have to consider as well the figure of the offender in Otherwise than Being? And what are we to say of the Other when he is the executioner? And who will be able to distinguish the master from the executioner? (OA, 339)

So, Ricœur assumes that, in the context of the relation with another human being, there is, in the ethical subject, the I, something that is dependent on the I, something that is in their power. In any case, the foundation of the I–Other relation constitutes a reciprocity which, according to Ricœur, Levinas completely failed to take into account. In the conversation with Michaël de Saint-Cheron, the former stresses this clearly, pointing at the same time to the fact that his aim was to refer to the Hegelian conception of recognition/ acknowledgement (*Anerkennung*) worked out during the latter’s Jena period. In this sense, as regards the I–Other relation, in place of the asymmetry present in the cognitive version—which can be encountered both in Husserl and in the ethical version proper to Levinas—Ricœur proposes the idea of mutual recognition/ acknowledgement (*la reconnaissance mutuelle*).<sup>13</sup>

13. See “Entretien avec Paul Ricœur,” *Bulletin du Centre protestant d’études* 43, no. 7 (1991), accessed 23 September 2018, [http://www.fondsriceur.fr/uploads/medias/articles\\_pr/entretien-paul-riceur.pdf](http://www.fondsriceur.fr/uploads/medias/articles_pr/entretien-paul-riceur.pdf).

This line of argument can be complemented by one further aspect, which refers to substitution. In Ricœur's view, the assignment to undertake responsibility which comes from the summons of the Other, and is interpreted in the categories of extreme passivity, changes itself into an act of self-sacrifice. In fact, in acts of this sort those who are themselves offer up testimony about themselves in the form of actions in which they disown themselves. "Who, in fact", asks Ricœur, "is obsessed by the Other? Who is hostage to the Other if not a Same no longer defined by separation but by its contrary, Substitution?" (*OA*, 340). In my view, a further element must also be taken into account, resulting from the different understanding of ethics of these two thinkers. To put it briefly, for Ricœur, ethics is something different from morality. What is the essence of this difference? To express it in the simplest way, ethics means striving for the Good Life with and for others in just institutions, whereas morality, by contrast, clearly has a deontological character and is linked with responsibility and adherence to norms (see *OA*, 170). If one takes into account the above distinction, then there exists, in my opinion, some basis for placing the views of Levinas more on the side of morality than on that of ethics, as what is unveiled in them is precisely their deontological character: particularly in the admonition "Do not kill!" However, one should keep in mind that the very idea of the Good, together with all of the considerations surrounding it, seems bound to somehow complicate this deontological interpretation.

Interestingly, Levinas does respond directly to the criticism of Ricœur. In one of his interviews (*PPS*, 29–31), he presents his reasons, together with Ricœur's arguments as reconstructed from his own perspective. This juxtaposition of opinions is intriguing as it allows us to grasp the profound assumptions and differences existing between the two philosophers. How does Levinas seek to answer the objections of Ricœur? First of all, he emphasizes that there is only a small difference between them as regards "good relations with another man." The essential intention of Levinas concerns a search precisely for relations that go beyond those that are merely well shared, so that they are absolutely happy just as long as they are good, and is thus a search for "a profound foundation for the final possibility of inter-human relations. The relation which is absolutely selfless" (*PPS*, 29). What does such a relation look like? We encounter it when our duty (*obligation*), attention, and attachment to another human being are not repaid with any magnanimity whatsoever. In other words, according to Levinas, the absolute selflessness of a relation to another undermines any "reciprocity of the Good that is revealed in such a relation" (*PPS*, 29).

But, we may ask, is this statement to be understood as relating to the situation in which the Good is only for the Other? Levinas thinks that for Ricœur, precisely that kind of situation constitutes a deficiency and an injustice. In turn, he believes that it is just this that is the very essence of a pure relation of generosity towards another human being—what he also calls “holiness.”

Coming from premises presented in this way—from a background painted with such a brush—how can one understand the criticism of Ricœur, and what is its essence? “The criticism of Ricœur,” Levinas will say, “presents itself in this way: why should one deprive oneself of something (*se priver*)? Why shouldn’t there exist a final satisfaction in this relation, something different from common depletion/expense (*dépense*)?” (PPS, 30). So holiness, then, would consist in selflessness, renunciation of the Good for oneself, and devotion exclusively to the Other. One might therefore wonder whether Levinas is suggesting that, at the place where thinking about the Good for ourselves would appear—the Good for oneself that obviously one should not even mention—there would already be no selflessness. At the same time, Levinas also refers to the notion of the hostage, this being a matter of controversy. And for him the word “hostage” assumes the meaning which it had taken on since the time of the Nazi oppression: namely, that which implies that in making somebody a hostage they are punished, by us, for someone else. “For me,” says Levinas, “this notion has no other meaning apart from the fact that it assumes in this context a meaning that can be honorable. The misery of the hostage is endowed with a certain glory just insofar as the one who is a hostage knows that he risks being killed for the other” (PPS, 31).

However, a problem consists in the fact that hostages have to be taken, and in only a few cases is this something involving voluntary acceptance. In other words, we become hostages through the actions of others, not by ourselves, so that one can hardly be said to be dealing here with voluntary choice. Yet even if one submits voluntarily to the fact of being a hostage—in which, according to Levinas, an act of holiness shows itself—then it still remains a controversial issue whether this really can be the foundation, the ultimate basis, for the relation with another human being, or whether one should not rather see in it just one of the possibilities, available to us but also excessive, emerging in our relation with another? In short, it is possible to relate to the other in this way. Nevertheless, it is immensely difficult to found thereby relations with other human beings, even if such a possibility is constantly open to us. Being for another is rather the pinnacle of being with others: its possibility shows itself only in particular

circumstances, and if it is transferred to the totality of these relations it only marks and distorts them.

It would seem judicious, at this stage, to take into account the problem of justice as it appears in Levinas, in order to consider whether closer examination of this could have somehow altered Ricœur's assessment of the Levinasian approach to otherness. The author of *Oneself as Another* is certainly conscious of the increasing presence of this theme of justice in Levinas, especially with regard to the elaboration of it effected as we move from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*. Its emergence is closely connected with the so-called "third party" (CR, 159–61) that is itself reachable by means of the face—which, in such circumstances, reveals the general command as individualized (OA, 336). It is precisely the third party that marks out the position of the writing philosopher—i.e. Levinas himself—and which is required, if we are concerned with an attenuation of the initial asymmetry, in order to restore some kind of reciprocity. Nevertheless, according to Ricœur, even if he to some extent appreciates, following Levinas, an equilibration of reciprocity through stressing the initial asymmetry in human relations (CR, 262–3) and correcting justice via some generous gestures of love,<sup>14</sup> this by no means establishes the priority of disinterestedness in interpersonal relationships. Otherwise, nothing would suffice to preserve human relationships from the risk of sinking into total immorality.

What might prove instructive at this juncture is a selective review of what the debate between Levinas and Ricœur actually managed to achieve—and, indeed, there exists an important body of literature devoted to just this issue. For example, one important commentator on the present controversy, Mark I. Wallace, locates its core problem in a difference of opinion concerning the so-called "summoned" or "mandated" self that engages a comprehension of the phenomenon of the commanding "voice" of conscience.<sup>15</sup> Apart from divergences separating the two French thinkers as to their understanding of the revelatory dimension of the Scripture (as basically prescriptive or multiform), Wallace also seeks to stress, as a

14. Paul Ricœur, *Amour et justice*, Points Essais 609 (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 38–42.

15. Mark I. Wallace, "The Summoned Self: Ethics and Hermeneutics in Paul Ricœur in Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," in *Paul Ricœur and Contemporary Moral Thought*, eds. John Wall, William Schweiker, and W. David Hall (London; New York: Routledge: 2002), 80–93; Mark I. Wallace, "The Irony of Selfhood in Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutic Philosophy," in *Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricœur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003), 161–71. (These two texts are almost identical).

weak point in Ricœur's approach to the last question, some crucial difficulties pertaining to the individual's exercising of the power of discernment of conscience. Would it entail a return to a Kantian perspective, not unfamiliar to Levinas, in which the hearing of a command consists in encountering the face as a "singularized" commandment? (OA, 336). Bernhard Waldenfels reproaches Ricœur for underestimating the importance of originary passivity in Levinas, in the sense of something "operating" out of reach of human agential power.<sup>16</sup> One could respond along similar lines to Carmine di Martino, who states that

without acceptance and welcoming on the part of the other, no self, no selfhood emerges. But this original asymmetry belongs to a relationship, that is, it characterizes a dialogue-structure in which two poles are always at play, and in this sense it implies and requires reciprocity.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the crucial point of the discussion between Levinas and Ricœur on otherness could be identified with the different stresses they put on the summoned self called to responsibility, which on the one hand is as large as the field of justice (Ricœur), while on the other it extends even to the boundaries of love (Levinas). What is in play in such a case is the question of whether love can become a command, or must remain just a gift.<sup>18</sup>

I will now add some further considerations to the controversies just presented, stressing in particular an act of severance which appears in Levinas' argumentation. According to what the author of *Otherwise than Being* maintains, we should understand that I am through the Other and even for the Other; the Other, when entering my field, discloses for me my own subjectivity by their call to responsibility, along with my identity in its metaphysical perspective. However, some questions arise here: one of them would have to do with the relations that exist between the subject of ontology and epistemology and the subject of responsibility thus constituted. Are these components of a single process unfolding from the inception of ontological identity and crowned in the ground-

16. Bernhard Waldenfels, "L'autre et l'étranger," in *Paul Ricœur. L'herméneutique à l'école de la phénoménologie*, ed. Jean Greisch (Paris: Beauchesne, 1995), 342–44.

17. Carmine Di Martino, "For a Genealogy of Selfhood: Starting from Paul Ricœur," in *Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paul Ricœur: Between Text and Phenomenon*, eds. Scott Davidson and Marc-Antoine Vallée, Contributions to Hermeneutics 2 (Basel: Springer, 2016), 73–74, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-33426-4\_5.

18. See John Wall, *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricœur and the Poetics of Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 124–25.

ing of responsibility in the subject? Or, should one rather detect the act of freeing oneself from ontologism and the philosophy of totality in the emerging of a subjectivity backed by the Other, and, connected with this, the co-unfolding alongside this of a disclosure of metaphysics and subjectivity themselves—as something quite beyond being, beyond the total philosophy of the epistemological subject of consciousness. If the first possibility were to come into play, then the whole process of the creation of identity would constitute only a possibility ever-inherent in man: one which would be made real, though, only through encountering the Other, through their encroachment. This, however, would no longer depend upon me; in my own subjectivity, I would be dependent on the Other. By myself, I would be able to do very little. This, then, can be interpreted as a break which does not leave any possibilities for building a connection, and cannot be interpreted as a continuity of sorts. Yet if I am myself, if thanks to the Other I achieve the identity of being myself, and if I am for the Other and even in place of the Other, would I not then also need, at least to a minimal degree, to be myself both ontologically and cognitively? Yet in the end, whatever one might be tempted to say, not everything, in respect of either being or cognition, assumes the shape of war and totalization. The ontologico-cognitive I is not only a striving for continuity and egoism, and freedom cannot be equated with an ability to negate that which is itself rooted in it. Is it not admittedly the case that, with freedom especially, I may conquer, negate, and finally kill another human being, but at the same time am able to acknowledge, let be, forgive, render justice to, and do good to another? When the line of argument being pursued moves in the direction of exaggeration, all these aspects are reduced to something accidental and secondary, and tend not to be taken into account at all.

When we survey the radicalizing movement enacted in the philosophy of Levinas, yet another disturbing question arises: are we not dealing here, incidentally, with still another kind of rupture present in his thinking? To put the matter another way, one could ask: is not the author of *Totality and Infinity*, when he radicalizes his position through the figure of a hostage understood as a sacrifice and an offering for another and breaks with the ontology of totality in favor of an ethics grounded in the wish for the Good and responsibility for another, perhaps reaching the point where one can observe, if not a break with ethics itself, then certainly at least some kind of paradox or aporia of responsibility? To be sure, when one follows the ethical road defined by responsibility, one arrives, together with Levinas, at the idea of substitution, and the following

question arises precisely at that moment: Does this, when it assumes the designation of holiness, constitute the apex of responsibility in its ethical sense, or are we rather dealing here with something that might be called a breach of ethical continuity and a transition into the dimension of religious sacrifice, which suspends what is ethical rather than constituting its crowning achievement?<sup>19</sup> In other words, one could wonder whether Levinas—under cover, figuratively speaking, of the ethical concept of responsibility—is not questioning ethicality in general when he arrives at the notions of “substitution” and “hostage.” And what, in truth, is there to say about a situation in which the ethical subject of responsibility is described as an extremely passive sacrificial lamb?

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19. The idea was present, for example, in Kierkegaard, with his question: “Is there such a thing as a teleological suspension of the ethical?” (title of Problem 1 in *Fear and Trembling*, in the translation of Walter Lowrie). Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 107. See, in particular, J. Aaron Simmons and David Wood, eds., *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008); Merold Westphal, “Commanded Love and Divine Transcendence in Levinas and Kierkegaard,” in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 200–23, doi:10.2307/j.ctt1xh5td.15.

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