

Divining the Divine: The Role of God in Levinasian Ethics

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Now hold on a minute. Now we're getting into theology! –Emmanuel Levinas¹

Across a diverse array of schools, methods, and canons, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary Continental thought is a critical stance towards the tenets of the Enlightenment, most notably: rationality, truth, freedom, and the figure of 'man.' Yet for a long time the concept of secularity, perhaps the most cherished ideal of the Enlightenment, has been left untouched. Many of the most celebrated Enlightenment thinkers thought that philosophy should expunge the divine from its descriptions and prescriptions, particularly with regard to questions of ethics and politics, and, until very recently, such a sentiment was echoed in the works of even their most ardent critics. In the last few decades, however, several philosophers from both France and elsewhere have called into question this anti-theological stance. As is suggested by the sudden presence of anthologies with titles like *Post-Secular Philosophy*, *The Postmodern God*, and *The Return of God*, there have been a number of recent attempts, made in the spirit of a critique of the Enlightenment, to return the figure of the divine to questions of contemporary social and political life. In most of these discussions, Emmanuel Levinas's notion of an asymmetrical self-Other ethical relationship figures prominently.²

¹ "Philosophy, Justice, and Love" 110

² In his study of contemporary French phenomenology, Dominique Janicaud writes that the "theological turn" begins with the publication of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* (*Le Tourmant Théologique de la Phénoménologie Française*, cited in Greisch 64–65).

Seeing itself as a sort of groundwork to a more extensive investigation of post-secular thought, this paper sets out for itself a limited task: to attempt to more precisely define the role of God in Levinasian ethics. What will be argued is that, on Levinas's account of the ethical relationship, God is the name of that which serves to prevent the subject from retroactively erasing ethical experience. In other words, I will attempt to show that the figure of the divine is what prevents ethical experience from being represented (re-presented: presented after the fact) as ontological. God is what allows ethics to remain prior to, and more fundamental than, ontology; it acts as a block to the subject's ontologizing tendencies. To substantiate these claims necessitates a reading of sections of *Totality and Infinity* in conjunction with the essays "Enigma and Phenomenon" and "The Trace of the Other."

I.

How is the subject's conception of the ethical relationship sustained by a certain conception of God? To answer this question, we must first get clear on what exactly Levinas means by ethics, at least in *Totality and Infinity*.

By producing a philosophy of ethics Levinas is not offering a prescriptive discourse about what man should or should not do, or even about what actions should or should not count as moral by the dictates of a universal law. Rather, his project is to elucidate what one might call the constitutive conditions for any possible system of prescriptions, the primal experience of the Other that is prior to any code of conduct (what Jacques Derrida, in his earliest essay on Levinas, characterizes as the "essence of the ethical relation in general . . . an Ethics of Ethics") ("Violence and Metaphysics" 111). In fact, it would not be an overstatement to argue that Levinas spent his entire career attempting to describe a modality of human interaction—the ethical interaction—out of which emerges not only prescriptive systems of ethics and morality, but intersubjective life as we know it.

Levinas's originality consists in beginning his discussion of ethics with the realization (might one say the revelation?) of the irreducible uniqueness of the other human being: the Other. Unlike an object intended solely for my use, or a concept by which I comprehend the world in which I live, the Other acts as an obstacle to my complacencies and certainties as a self. He calls into question my egoistic tendency to assume that there is nothing in the world that I could not in some sense possess. Based on this notion of the irreducibility of the Other, Levinas gives the following celebrated definition of ethics:

A calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same—is brought about by the [O]ther. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. (TI 43)

On one hand, it would be easy to read this as nothing more than an injunction: ‘Do not totalize! Let the Other call into question one’s self.’ At times, Levinas does seem to have this prescriptive component in mind. For Levinas, it is the essence of morality to put one’s intellectual and physical freedom into question before the presence of the Other, to let the Other command one. More precisely, one can heed the ethical call of the Other—a call which (temporarily) shatters the self, forcing it to call its “spontaneity” into question—or one can attempt, however ineffectively, to ignore this call, to cast off the rupture of the Other. The first attitude constitutes the essence of morality, while the latter lies at the origin of human violence.³ But although the Levinasian ethical certainly has a prescriptive component, to conceive of it as purely normative misses its scope.

Levinas is first and foremost a phenomenologist. As he describes it, the phenomenological method seeks to show “how meaning comes to be, how it emerges in our consciousness of the world” (D 14–15). And as a phenomenologist, Levinas takes himself to be providing a description of the ways in which the ethical call presents itself, rather than a prescription of how exactly one should act in order to be ethical—though of course one register inevitably slides into the other. Levinas seeks to show that reason, truth, objectivity, and, most importantly, ontology—theory about the kind of being that man is, or about how the being of man relates to some larger schema of Being—are bound to the ethical domain in which we have an encounter with the irreducible Other. Levinas goes further, arguing that the ethical domain is originary, i.e., that the ethical is not merely one phenomenological domain among many, but is the primary “irreducible structure upon which all other structures rest” (TI, 79).

Though Levinas seeks to show that the ethical relation founds reason, it would be absurd to think of him as an unambivalent rationalist. Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that while reason is built

³ The question of whether there is a moment of violence inherent in ethical experience itself is of course still open; it has occupied a central place in the contemporary French return to ethics. Rather than even begin to address this complex issue, I refer the reader to Hent de Vries’s brilliant essay on Levinas, Eric Weil, Derrida, and the question of sacrifice. See his “Violence and Testimony: Sacrificing Sacrifice,” in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, edited by Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber, Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 14–43. Perhaps the paradigmatic statement on this issue, however, remains Jacques Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics.”

upon ethical face-to-face encounters, it easily loses sight of its origins. With respect to the individual—more accurately, with respect to the Other—reason often takes the form of the dictate of an alien will that seeks to erase his specificity. By placing ethics prior to reason Levinas wants to argue that the importance of ethics is greater than the importance of knowledge production, that truth and reason should not be sought at the cost of goodness to the Other.

According to Levinas, the subject encounters the human face in a manner fundamentally different from his encounters with other objects in the world. Unlike mere things, the face of the Other cannot be completely contained within conscious intentionality, for it always to some extent exceeds and disrupts it. “The face . . . is not reabsorbed in a representation of the face” (TI, 215). This non-coincidence of the face and its representation means that there is a dimension to the face that always eludes my words and representations. In the face-to-face encounter with the Other I do not—indeed, I cannot—totalize the Other, and by concerning myself with comprehending the Other’s enigmatic message—by attempting to answer his call—I place into question the ruthless exercise of my own freedom, which feels itself limited by nothing. But this calling into question is not the whole story—it does not exhaust my responsibilities—because I always realize that my actions and thoughts do not adequately capture the experience of the Other’s face.

II.

Thus far I have left out the role that the idea of infinity plays in Levinasian ethics. A discussion of this concept leads one directly into a consideration of the vexed relationship between the theological and the philosophical in Levinas’s work.

At several points in his career, Levinas argued that Descartes’s discussion of infinity contains an essential ethical core. As is well known, in the *Meditations* Descartes establishes the *cogito*, the secure ground of subjectivity and the foundation of knowledge. But what is less often remarked upon is the analysis of infinity that follows the celebrated discussion of the *cogito*. For Descartes, the *cogito* maintains a relation with the infinite by having the idea of infinity. Unlike other ideas, the idea of the infinite in no way coincides with the infinite itself, which, were it knowable by a finite human being, would cease to be infinite. From this ‘fact,’ Descartes deduces the existence of God, for he reasons that there must exist an infinite being who put the idea of the infinite in us.

Preserving the form of the Cartesian philosophy of infinity, Levinas breaks with its content, shifting its terms from a discussion of God to a discussion of the Other man. Famously, Levinas argues that the idea of infinity has the formal structure of the self-Other ethical relation. In what way could the idea of infinity elucidate the ethical relation?

In approaching the exteriority of the absolutely Other, my attempt to appropriate the Other—i.e., my attempt to incorporate him into my pre-given modes of comprehension—always fails. My thought is always inadequate to what it thinks. But this is not simply some cognitive shortcoming on the part of the self. Rather, it is the very modality of the Other's approach. In other words, since the Other always slips away from any attempt to contain him, since any explanatory system is always inadequate to his very infinity, there exists no mode of description under which the self and the Other could be described as mere terms within a larger totality. More importantly, the self's experience of the Other is the experience of the approach of infinity. When the Other approaches, he lets me briefly glimpse his transcendence, his absolute exteriority. It is my experience of this transcendence—precisely an experience that happens too quickly and too incompletely for me to ever feel that I can comprehend or possess it—that compels me to put myself, my self-sufficiency, and my freedom into question. It is worth stressing that for the move from the idea of infinity to the ethics of the Other to hold, the Other must be in some way transcendent. Levinas certainly does think that this is the case, and statements regarding the transcendence of the Other are among the most common in his work.

Given that Levinas reorients Descartes's discussion of God to a discussion of the Other man, one could very legitimately ask, Does Levinas mean his description of ethics to be a description of man's relation to God? Or even, Is God the Other man? Levinas' ontological critique of religion throughout *Totality and Infinity* provides us with a preliminary answer to these questions.

Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas articulates a series of seemingly equivocal views on God, both denigrating religion as an organized system of faith and saving the very terminology that emerges from this system. However, such a position is, for him, not at all incoherent, for his critique of the religious conception of God is tied to his critique of ontology; Levinas views organized religions as a form of ontology. Religions conceive of God as a Being, an ultimate point of reference, and from this conception ground all subsequent discourses about lesser beings. So, by critiquing religions Levinas is ultimately arguing against the idea that God is the Being under which the absolute particularity of the human being can be subsumed. In place of this, Levinas wishes to advance an

ethical view of God (in which God is revealed through the untotalizable alterity of the Other). By using religious terms to describe the ethical relationship, Levinas is making a claim about God that is structurally similar to most of the claims made in *Totality and Infinity*: religion does not destroy the transcendence of the Other as he is revealed in ethical experience, submitting him to an impersonal God. On the contrary, the truly religious nature founds his transcendence. At some point, however, religion becomes ontology, and this ontological God does violence to the specificity of the Other.⁴ In Levinas's words:

It is in [the] ethical perspective that God must be thought, and not in the ontological perspective of our being-there or of some supreme being and creator correlative to the world, as traditional metaphysics often held. God, as the God of alterity and transcendence, can only be understood in terms of that interhuman dimension. (D, 20)

But to claim that the ethical relation opens up a transcendent space from which God can be glimpsed—to claim that God “offer[s] himself in this opening”—should not be misread as a claim that the transcendence of the Other is God (“Transcendence and Intelligibility” 156). This latter view is often erroneously attributed to Levinas, even though he is very careful to define his position against it. For example, in the quotation cited above Levinas says that God “can only be *understood* in terms of [the] interhuman dimension” (emphasis mine), leaving open the question of where (or if) God might actually exist. And in *Totality and Infinity* he writes, “The Other is not the incarnation of God, but . . . his face . . . is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed” (79). Yet although Levinas's thought maintains some distinction between the Other and God, it is important to note that he never explicitly says that God does, or must, exist. In fact, he writes, “Nobody can really say I believe . . . that God exists” (D, 18). So, it seems that in Levinas's description of the ethical domain, God simply functions as a position, perhaps empty, perhaps filled, that is opened up by my relation with the infinity of the Other. What is important is not the existence of God, but the way in which the divine arises in the ethical relation: “God commands only though the men from whom one must act” (PI, 59). Prior to any discourse on God's being, prior to any ontological discourse, there is the ethical moment in which God is glimpsed.

Yet if God can only be discussed as that which is produced in the ethical relation, if God is important only insofar as he raises the question of

⁴Later in his career, Levinas explicitly makes the link between his critique of the religious conception of God and his critique of onto-theology when he writes, in the preface to *Otherwise than Being*, of “hear[ing] God not contaminated by Being” (xlii).

justice among men, why bother with God? Can one attribute the emphasis placed on God to some pure adherence to the phenomenological method? In other words, does Levinas explain God in terms of ethics only because man's relation to the divine is an aspect of human existence, one that must therefore be treated by any phenomenology which claims to be comprehensive? It is Levinas's very insistence on continually linking and re-linking his thought to the divine that leads one to believe that something else is at stake here.

In attempting to grasp the greater implications of the figure of God in the Levinasian ethical, I want to focus in detail on the essays "Enigma and Phenomenon" and "The Trace of the Other."

III.

Although "Enigma and Phenomenon" is often thought to be about the limits of phenomenology and their relation to the ethical encounter, I think that one could also quite plausibly read it as being about the role of God in Levinas's ethical thought. Published shortly after *Totality and Infinity*, "Enigma and Phenomenon" attempts to present and solve some of the problems posed by the description of the ethical relationship offered in the former work. In this section, I will suggest that the solutions to these problems place God into the ethical relation in a way in which he was not in *Totality and Infinity*. I will suggest that, insofar as the problems of the ethical are the problems envisioned by Levinas, the figure of God functions as a sort of solution. Whether God is in fact the only possible solution to these problems is a question that will be initially left aside. In other words, in this section I am mainly concerned with authorial intent and not philosophical necessity, or rather, with the authorial fiction of philosophical necessity.

"Enigma and Phenomenon" takes up two highly interrelated questions, one that might be characterized as immanent to the movements of Levinas's thought, and one that is acutely concerned with a prescriptive question of morality and is thereby somewhat exterior to the strictly phenomenological problematic of the essay itself. The first question can be phrased as follows: If phenomenological analysis reveals that each Other always interrupts all contexts, i.e., all horizons of priorly given intelligibility into which one can place him, how do we prevent the formation of a new mode of theoretical description in which the interruption of the Other is nothing more than some sort of *quality* of otherness, and thus nothing more than a new ontological principle under which the unicity of the Other is extinguished? Levinas writes:

If the Other is presented to the same, the co-presence of the Other and the same in a phenomenon forthwith constitutes an order. The discordance that may be produced within this order proposes itself as an invitation to search for a new order in which this first discord would be resolved. (EP 68)

To rephrase the problem in a manner that, while slightly opaque, shows its full weight: If Being is the ground that lends all things intelligibility, how could the appearance of the Other outside of or beyond Being be anything but the appearance of irrationality and unintelligibility; how could that which is beyond the order of phenomenon be understandable in any way? In a more phenomenological parlance: If the Other has approached, and if this approach was intelligible, we must ask “How [did the Other] approach . . . without being forthwith petrified into a signification silhouetted against the context” (EP, 69)?

For Levinas, the way in which the Other can signify without an anonymous order of Being as intelligibility divesting him of his unicity is by indicating himself as a trace, “an indication that . . . reveal[s] the withdrawal of the indicated” (EP, 69). The concept of the trace is meant to establish that anything that can function as a sign of the Other has not the Other himself as its referent, but the movement by which the Other has withdrawn from his incorporation into the signifying system. Yet the withdrawal of the Other is not a withdrawal in any standard sense, for it was never witnessed and could never be logically derived. In fact, one cannot directly recognize the withdrawal of the Other precisely because the trace disrupts the order of synchronous time, thereby pointing to an order of temporality other than the temporality in which phenomena appear to our conscious minds in order to be apprehended, made intelligible, or witnessed. This implies that before entering in any way into a context that would divest him of his unicity, the Other has already left. What remains of the Other within our intelligible order, within the “time of everyday representation,” is nothing but his trace. This way of manifesting as trace, of entering into an intelligible order while simultaneously absconding from it, Levinas names enigma (EP, 70).

Why is it so important that the Other partially enter into intelligibility, that the Other retain his enigma without thereby becoming unintelligible? Couldn't the Other simply stand outside of all orders as ineffable, incomprehensible, absolutely Other? The answer to these queries brings us to the second problem of the ethical.

Recall that for Levinas the ethical call has always-already been felt. One can ignore this call, thereby rejecting the Other, or one actively avow it. Yet while the ethical is omnipresent, it is barely recoverable within the ontological systems of Being. Within ontology the ethical relation is “an

unheard of proposition, an insinuation, immediately reduced to nothing” (EP, 74). The quietness with which the ethical speaks within the ontological order—though, in the space outside of ontology, its loudness is deafening—means that for one to build a moral relation to the Other, one must in some sense adopt an intentional stance: “It [i.e., ethics] *remains* only for him *who would like* to take it up” (EP, 70, emphases mine). Straightforward as this statement seems, when read in light of Levinas’s overall account of the ethical the intentionality of morality points to a paradox. In order to act morally one must acknowledge the alterity of the Other, but this is precisely to attempt to bring him back within the domain of self-understanding, an attempt (that attempts) to extinguish alterity. In saying to the Other ‘I recognize that you are absolutely Other and, based on this knowledge, will do everything in my power to respect you,’ I have ceased to acknowledge his absolute alterity.⁵ So if I attempt to take up the call of the Other, i.e., if I attempt to be moral, I do not preserve the primal experience of the Other’s alterity, which lies outside any idea I can have of it, any intentional stance that I can take toward it. Morality then always misses its mark, for it can never avoid an amoral residue, an assimilation of the Other on the part of the moral subject. In other words, is it not the case that the object to which I behave in a moral manner is not truly the Other to whom I am ethically bound, but is instead an object that results from my own cognitive reduction of the Other? And since cognitive reduction, the reduction of the Other to concepts, lies at the heart of ontology, thought by Levinas to be the source of an unethical violence to the Other, one might then be tempted to construe the ethical as naming a fundamental aporia of human existence: in doing good to the Other, I thereby act violently toward him.

Contrary to certain strands of postfoundationalist thinking, the notion of the trace offered in “Enigma and Phenomenon” prevents ethics from merely naming the aporetic nature of interhuman existence. In the trace, the Other introduces a non-synchronous time that can never fully be recuperated by the order of presence, the order in which I take up the Other’s call. Yet the withdrawal of the Other is not a withdrawal in any standard sense, for it was never witnessed and could never be logically derived. It is because the Other is both inside and outside presence that the trace arises in the first place. In taking up the Other’s call, in founding morality, it is the trace of the Other than I subsume into moral precepts:

⁵Commentator Colin Davis writes, “To preserve the Other as Other, it must not become an object of knowledge . . . because knowledge is always my knowledge . . . the object is encountered only in so far as it exists for me, and immediately its alterity is diminished” (41).

the Other has always-already departed. So, although my moral actions can never fully take into account the Other's alterity, although they attempt to reduce the alterity of the Other, morality is not a violent assimilation of the Other into one's own precepts, because what one actually assimilates is the Other's trace.

As I have characterized it thus far, "Enigma and Phenomenon" could end after having introduced this notion of the trace, which solves the pressing problems of the ethical situation. However, in the five tightly condensed, maddeningly elliptical pages that conclude the essay, Levinas connects the trace to the question of God. It is to these five pages that I will now turn.

First, Levinas establishes that subjectivity is the mode of the human that can feel the weight of the Other's call—subjectivity is that which can take "on [this] sense of assignation" (EP, 74). Subjectivity engages with the trace of the Other; it is the space of the human able to hear the enigmatic call of the ethical. But how could there be subjectivity beyond Being? Is not to *be* a subject already to *be* placed within the ontology (the be-ing) of the human? Levinas's answer to this question obliquely invokes a relation to God. He writes, "In order to tear itself from . . . ontological weight . . . subjectivity [has] received some most private convocation to appear from beyond being." Levinas then explicitly likens this "private convocation" to the "subtle silence" described in 1 Kings 19:12 (EP, 74). Next, the "private convocation" is contrasted with atheism, defined as that which can be put into the light of "the relationship with being . . . immanence as a totality" (EP, 74). Here, atheism names the sum of what can be intelligible within the social order. In contrast, this passing beyond being, beyond social intelligibility, is called "divinity" (EP, 75). The subject, insofar as he is opened to the Other—insofar as he is called into question before the Other—glimpses divinity.

At this point, one could very well think that little has been changed from the way in which God was conceived in *Totality and Infinity*. Once again, the divine appears merely to refer to the ethical opening. But in "Enigma and Phenomenon" Levinas goes one step further, introducing the very perplexing neologism "Illeity" (He-ness). What in an Enigma signifies, what makes the ethical call, is now said to be not only, or not merely, the Other's trace, but something else, something absolutely outside of any order of cognition. This something else is neither hidden, given directly to cognition, nor unhidden, waiting to be grasped by the order of presence (EP, 75). Instead, Levinas writes that the way in which the Other signifies falls under the third person pronoun, the He (*Il*). The Other signifies in the trace of Illeity. Yet as soon as this concept is brought up, Levinas puts it aside. He immediately writes that the non-synchronous temporality in

which the Other presents himself can be explained by the idea of infinity. He goes on to describe the infinite and the idea of infinity in precisely the terms he used to characterize the trace and Illeity (75–76). So if Illeity merely names a whole series of concepts already worked out: desire and separation, both of which fall under the concept of infinity; diachrony, i.e., the time out of the order of presence, which falls under the concept of the trace; and the face, which falls under both concepts, what work is the idea of Illeity meant to do?

By way of explanation, Levinas repeats and extends the basic problematic of his essay. He asserts that the movement of metaphysical desire—i.e., desire that aims toward experiencing the very alterity of the Other—though it does not go toward an object in an intentional manner, can be easily taken to do precisely that. By its very proximity to the ordinary intentional sense of desire, in which my desire is for some definite thing that I wish to possess, metaphysical desire threatens to “imitate correlation” (EP, 76); it threatens to dissolve ethics into a new mode of ontological description, a description in which the alterity of the Other is brought back within the language of qualities, attributes, and Being (i.e., to be human is *to be* an Other for a self). What prevents ethics from dissolving into a self-Other ontological relation is Illeity, the third term. This conception of Illeity appears to sketch the following picture: I approach infinity by going toward a “You” (a definite Other). But this Other is signifying in the “trace of Illeity,” which means that what is truly other in the Other ‘is’ not in the same temporality. This is what allows me to face the Other, to be unable to treat him as a thing within my cognitive schema (EP, 76).

Unfortunately, this description of Illeity does not elucidate very much. Does Levinas mean to say that Illeity is some elusive content of which the trace of the Other is but the form? By writing that “the enigma comes to us from Illeity” (75) does Levinas mean to spatialize the concepts of the Other’s appearance and Illeity in order to more firmly disassociate them? Does Illeity name the region beyond being in which one can locate what is truly other in Other, so that the trace is what mediates between Illeity and the Other’s presence? Why write that such a ‘space’ is beyond being? Is not to give the term a referent to bring it back into ontology? Couldn’t one make do with the notion of the trace, leaving the question of where the Other is beyond his trace unanswered? To put this differently, can Illeity really only refer to any empty place; can it really function as a sign without a referent within the order of presence? The concept of the trace seems to avoid this problem of being caught within ontological confines, precisely because it openly acknowledges its partially ontological nature. Unlike Illeity, the trace never claims to be purely beyond ontology.

Perhaps recognizing that the concept of Illeity raises a whole series of questions and problems, Levinas then attempts to more precisely state the role it is meant to play. This time, his description is both clearer and absolutely explicit in its theological overtones, facts which do not seem unrelated. On this reiteration, what stays the same is the following: the infinity of the Other cannot be contained within the Other constituted as the 'object' of my metaphysical desire. The Other that I aim toward in the ethical might be unreachable, but this cannot prevent my desire for him from becoming one more instance of a thought apprehending its objects. Illeity is what allows me to truly face the Other. But Levinas now adds that what actually prompts the infinity of my desire "solicits across a face" but is not in the face. The face of the Other is "a You . . . inserted between the I and the absolute He" (EP, 77). Thus, the absolute He, the Il of Illeity, is beyond the Other but beckons to me through the Other. This way of explaining Illeity appears to shift the force of the face-to-face from its usual role in Levinas's thought. No longer is the very facticity of the face that which opens the ethical. Rather, it is insofar as the face of the Other obliquely shows (one might say partially presences) some transcendent realm that it opens the ethical: the face is not itself the infinite. The infinite, coming from some non-spatial 'place' called Illeity, calls to me though the face, but 'is' beyond it. Is the absolute He, the infinity who communicates through the face, a name for God? In a word, yes. Levinas writes that the absolute which solicits the ethical but moves beyond it is "but the passage of God" (EP, 77).⁶ God has never been within the order of existence but rustles within it, and by this very process of presencing and absencing calls me to an ethical relation toward man.

In order to get clearer on the role Illeity qua God is meant to play, let us now return to the beginning of "Enigma and Phenomenon." In the first section, "Rational Speech and Disturbance," Levinas writes:

All that could have attested to his [i.e., God's] holiness, that is, to his transcendence, in the light of experience would immediately belie its own witness already by its very presence and intelligibility, by its chain of significations . . . Does not the invisibility of God belong . . . to an

⁶Elsewhere, Levinas writes: "The direct encounter with God, this is a Christian concept. As Jews, we are always a threesome: I and you and the Third who is in our midst. And only as a Third does He reveal Himself" ("Ideology and Idealism" 247). Here, not only does Levinas make it explicit that 'He' refers to God, but also that this view is Judaic. Might one then conclude that the role of Illeity in the ethical relationship is meant to serve as a 'proof' of Judaism? But this is a rather audacious claim that I will not develop here.

approach which does not polarize into a subject-object correlation? (67, emphasis mine)

Here, it seems that on the ethical plane God is important precisely because of his very absence. The true transcendence of God lies in his inability to enter into “presence and intelligibility . . . [the] chain of significations.” Taking into consideration the Levinasian conception of enigma that I have discussed above, one could argue that God is the supreme enigma: he is almost entirely outside any phenomenal order in which he can be apprehended. His simultaneous existence in two registers, enigma and phenomenon, is drastically skewed toward the former, so that in placing God within the order of presence, one loses most of what is specific about him. The extremely enigmatic nature of God, this almost pure enigma, points to an approach that cannot “polarize into a subject-object correlation.” That is, since an ontological God bears little relation to the essence of God, the entering of God into presence leaves a remainder. Consequently, it does not take a supreme understanding to realize that the idea one has of God is inadequate to God himself; it is not difficult for the subject to realize that God ‘is,’ for the most part, not an object to be apprehended.

Although Levinas does not specifically say it in quite this way, it seems that, in contrast to one’s relation with God, it is much harder to keep oneself from viewing the Other human as merely a transparent, present sign, as an object for the subject. After all, the enigma of the Other speaks with a quiet voice, “remain[ing] only for him who would like to take it up” (EP, 70). Could we now not contrast the pure enigma of God with the human subject, who, as the title of Levinas’s essay reminds us, is both enigma and phenomenon? The essence of the human Other might be enigma, outside presence, but his transition into phenomenon is not at all incomprehensible. The ease with which one can construe the Other as a phenomenon is what calls for the eternal, unending vigilance that Levinas often discusses. It is what calls for the effort to continually try to preserve, however precariously, the alterity, the enigma, of the Other; the need to think and rethink one’s moral systems in light of the Other’s face. By arguing that the Other signifies in the trace of Illeity might not Levinas mean that the Other, insofar as he is not a phenomenon, lies in some proximate relationship with the pure enigma of God? More importantly, might not my realization that God is almost pure enigma keep me alive to the possibility of something outside of the order of phenomena, and thus alive to the idea that my relation with the Other is not like my relation with objects? What Levinas appears to be asserting is that after the ethical has been experienced, it is the idea of God, the absolute He (II), that prevents the subject from thinking of the ethical as a subject-object schema. On this

reading, one can say that God guarantees the intelligibility of the ethical: he serves as the extreme (pure enigma) contrasted with its opposite (pure phenomenon) that keeps open the possibility of my fellow human as a vacillation between enigma qua Other and phenomenon qua interpretable, knowable, and similar.⁷

Though this might seem to be a tenuous reading of Levinas, one can find support for it in other statements he makes in essays published after *Totality and Infinity*. For example, in “The Trace of the Other” Levinas writes:

If the signifyingness of a trace is not immediately transformed into the straightforwardness which still marks signs, which reveal the signified absent and bring it into immanence, it is because a trace signifies beyond being . . . It is the uprightness which escapes the bipolar play of immanence and transcendence proper to being, where immanence always wins against transcendence. Through the trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a ‘He’ [*profil du ‘Il’*]. The pronoun He expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility . . . The [I]lleity . . . is the condition for the irreversibility. (“The Trace of the Other” 356)⁸

The trace is what prevents the Other from becoming a mere sign, and thus entirely immanent; it is what allows the experience of the Other’s face to be a glimpse toward his transcendence. But once again, Levinas supplements the trace with Illeity. In the experience of the trace what takes the form of the order beyond presence, adumbrating the sphere in which the Other resides (having always-already departed from the order of presence), is the He (Il) of Illeity. If one accepts my argument that Illeity is a name for God, then it seems as though what lies beyond the Other’s appearance is the divine, so that the trace mediates between the Other qua human (within the phenomenal order of presence) and the Other qua located in the divine. It is important to stress again that, to my knowledge, Levinas never in his entire corpus asserts that the Other is God. In fact, in one of his more candid moments he explicitly says, “I’m not saying that the Other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God” (PJL, 110). So, what is beyond the Other’s appearance is not the Other as divine, but the Other in the divine (though, perplexingly, the divine is not exactly a place).

While it is true that I can have no knowledge of this sphere of the Other-divine, I can maintain some hazy picture of it. Levinas writes that I

⁷I thank Arnold Davidson for helping me with this formulation of the role of God in the Levinasian ethical.

⁸I will also briefly work with the original French. See “La Trace de l’Autre” 199.

can imagine the “profile of a ‘He.’” As *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it, “profile” means: “A . . . representation of the outline of anything, especially of the human face,” or, “As seen from one side, as opposed to a front view.”⁹ These senses of profile play an integral role in the conception of God and ethics put forth in “Enigma and Phenomenon” and “The Trace of the Other.” In these essays, the face of the Other surpasses all images I can have of it—what remains for me, its trace, is only the rough outline of the face (profile: “a . . . representation of the outline of anything . . . especially of the human face”). I would also argue that in “Enigma and Phenomenon,” the notion of the profile relates, albeit implicitly, to Levinas’s somewhat rare praise of religion as Biblical doctrine (as opposed to religion as a non-institutional, anarchical essence, which he praises constantly). He writes that religion “comes to use from a past which was never a pure now,” and that its “grandeur is due to this exorbitance exceeding the capacity of phenomenon, of the present and of memory” (EP, 72). For Levinas religion is the phenomenological mode of existence that points to an order outside of and beyond the phenomenal. My relation with God is what first opens my realization that something of the human Other always slips away, thus it is my first, pre-reflexive, glimpse of the ethical. Levinas elucidates this positive aspect of religion, the core of the religious that exceeds its ontological weight (God as Being), by recounting the story of Moses who “does not dare to life up his eyes” to God. To retain the leitmotif of the profile, one could say that Levinas praises Moses because he does not directly gaze onto God, but instead keeps his profile (profile: “as opposed to a front view”). The profile serves as the paradigm for viewing the ethical-divine. By averting one’s eyes from God, by ‘seeing’ God only as that which absconds from presence, one is opened to the beyond of phenomenology: the enigma of the Other. In the phenomenal sphere, i.e., the sphere in which I encounter the Other in lived experience, the profile of God serves as the condition for cognitive irreversibility; it provides the obstacle to my assimilative desires.

In establishing the importance of God in the belated zone of the already-endured ethical, the choice of the word ‘profile’ is again significant. If a profile is a “representation of the outline of anything,” it is, like all representations, a re-presentation, a presencing after the fact, a recapturing of an event that has already passed. For Levinas, it would make little sense to speak of reversing or undoing the ethical encounter, which having

⁹The French word that Levinas uses is “*profil*.” According to the *Robert and Collins French-English Dictionary*, “*profil*” has much the same meaning as the English “profile.” It can mean: “outline, profile, contour; line . . . sideways on.”

always-already happened, lies outside of any agentive actions I can take toward it.¹⁰ But the retroactive contemplation of the ethical, the desire to turn the ethical into an ontological principle, is certainly an imminent threat. By writing that Illeity is “the condition for . . . irreversibility,” and that the idea of the profile of God saves the alterity of the Other, it seems as though what Illeity/God maintains is not the actual having-happened of the ethical, but the subject’s retroactive desire to erase it. The faint outline (profile) of the ethical relation can only be retained if one keeps firmly in mind the paradigm of the profile: man’s relation to the divine.

Almost two decades later, Levinas makes what is to my mind the most succinct and elegant statement regarding the place of God in the ethical. In “Nonintentional Consciousness,” Levinas writes: “The à-Dieu [to-God] is not a process of being: in the call, I am sent back [*renvoyé*] to the other person for whom that appeal signifies, to my fellow man for whom I have to fear” (NC 132, emphasis mine).¹¹ This statement makes it absolutely explicit that God is important insofar as he sends me back to the Other—that is, after I have already ethically experienced the Other—so that I can keep this very experience alive, thereby retaining the spark of the ethical that founds all true morality. How else to read Levinas’s invocation of God but as that which continually troubles my assimilative desires, as the “challenge [which] make[s] me enter into a nonintentional thought of the un-graspable” (NC, 131)?

Yet, for all of their theological overtones, both overt and implicit, it would be a mistake to read “Enigma and Phenomenon” and “The Trace of the Other” as veiled reductions of the Other in favor of an increased emphasis on God. This mistake is often made in the secondary literature on Levinas. For instance, Phillip Blond, the commentator who has perhaps most stressed the need to examine the relation between God and Levinasian ethics, makes what is, on the one hand, the quite correct observation that in the writings published shortly after *Totality and Infinity*, “God

¹⁰The non-reversibility of the ethical becomes even more stressed in Levinas’s later work, in which the ethical encounter is thought to individuate the subject. It seems then that to undo the ethical would be to undo the subjection to the Other that guarantees one as a subject; it could only be experienced as a traumatic fracturing of self. Might this bring Levinas into dialogue with a strand of post-Freudian psychoanalytic thought represented by Jacques Lacan?

¹¹I have modified the translation. The translation by Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav reads “The toward-God is not a process of being: in the call, I am sent to the other person through whom that appeal signifies, to my fellow man for whom I have to fear.” The original French reads: “L’à-Dieu n’est pas un processus de l’être: dans l’appel, je suis renvoyé à l’autre homme par qui cet appel signifie, au prochain pour qui j’ai à craindre.” (*Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* 150). Crucial here is the verb “renvoyer”—to send back.”

is brought into the argument in order to . . . safeguard the phenomenon of the other human face.” But from this observation Blond concludes that “the [O]ther has now lost his . . . uniqueness” (Blond 209, 213). Such a reading is mistaken for at least two reasons: 1.) In these essays God still calls for, as he did in *Totality and Infinity*, ethical relations toward human subjects, a respect for the alterity of the Other. Levinas never discusses what it would mean to have an ethical relation with God.¹² More importantly, 2.) God still has no positive content; there is no reason to think that the opening in which God is glimpsed cannot vary from ethical relation to relation. Far from being extinguished, the absolutely unassimilable uniqueness of the Other is now simply relocated to the uniqueness of the sphere of divinity produced in each particular ethical encounter. But while 1 and 2 mean, at least provisionally, that the Levinasian emphasis on God preserves the alterity of the Other, they do not provide an answer to the question: Why does Levinas think that it is God who prevents the subject from turning the always-already experienced ethical encounter into nothing more than another example of a thought apprehending its object?

As I have tried to suggest, Levinas presents no compelling reason for why a divine Illeity qua God is required to sustain the ethical. The idea that I approach the Other’s trace performs the same task. The trace prevents any possibility of reducing the ethical to a purely ontological vocabulary (for the ethical always points to an order beyond presence), so that the notion of Illeity seems added on.¹³ As Levinas himself often suggests, the God that emerges from the ethical is empty, purely formal: he is that which is beyond all beyonds, calling to me across the depths of infinity. But why call this beyond ‘God?’ Does that not invoke a whole litany of discourses on God as supreme being, creator, etc. that the discussion of the trace avoids? By adopting the name of God, by allowing an evocation of an ordinary being to circulate within his discourse, might we not think that Levinas wants the reader to theologize his thought, to take his thought to extremes which, located as he is within the philosophical episteme—one

¹² Even in the example of Moses, Levinas praises the humility of Moses, the openness of Moses to something beyond, better than, himself, rather than any “glorious theophany” (EP, 72).

¹³ It might be interesting to read the relation between the trace and Illeity along the model of the Derridean conception of the supplement as that which “breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it.” As supplement, Illeity would be the derivative, secondary term that, paradoxically, is absolutely necessary to stabilize the trace’s fictions of self-sufficiency (see “Plato’s Pharmacy” 135).

that privileges a certain secularity—he does not feel that he himself can go.¹⁴

I have no definite answers to these questions. I pose them only because they must be asked if one is to begin to engage with the recent body of post-secular thought that uses Levinas to keep alive the question of the divine. Furthermore, I would suggest that these questions must be asked if recent philosophical thought on the place of God wishes to theorize an ethical relation to the Other without lapsing into a dogmatic theology.

¹⁴An adequate answer to this question would have to take into account the place of Illeity in Levinas's more overtly theological, Talmudic writings. I regret that such a project is beyond the scope of this essay.

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