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# **God and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: A Nietzschean Response**

Talk about God cannot remain the same across history, as though concepts were eternal carriers of the same meaning. It cannot be true to say that the word 'God' means today what it might have meant centuries ago. This seems obvious. But the important point here is to ask oneself what it would mean to apply this historical understanding to philosophical arguments. There is no doubt that, traditionally speaking, philosophy has seen itself as being immune to history. The aim of philosophy is precisely to think against history, to find those truths that float above the tempest of becoming and irreversible decay. And is not the concept of God the most ahistorical of concepts, the highest degree of non-historical thought? Thus, to think God historically is not just to think theologically in a different manner, it is to think against a whole tradition of theology itself and in turn the philosophical tradition that sustained it.

What does it mean to think about God as belonging in history, rather than outside of it? One way of expressing this idea is by saying that the conceptions which human beings have had of the divine have changed through time, and that any genealogical investigation of religion will show that they all, even monotheism, have their origins in the social relations from which they sprang. Would not this type of investigation, however, reduce critique to sociology? Would not philosophy itself, just as much as theology, become redundant? The question is whether history or sociology is the last word in which philosophy itself must find its legitimisation. The historicity of history, for example cannot

be a question of history itself, but is a philosophical question, even for the one who writes history. And yet philosophy's relation to history is stranger than merely a question of methodology. Philosophy is also an exception to history. Not because philosophy stands outside of history, for the exceptional also has a history and cannot be thought outside the relation it has with that order it disturbs or interrupts. To think philosophically about history, therefore, is not only to think about what history is as a method or discipline, in other words, what are its necessary limits. but also the limit of this limit; what can be placed neither inside nor outside.

What philosophy teaches us about our history is that time is neither incremental nor evolutionary, but discontinuous. The discontinuity of time is not a fact about history, for it is what grants our history in the first place. The discontinuity of time is marked in philosophical texts by absolute breaks in concepts that cannot be demonstrated as having their origin in the form that they supersede. Thus, for example, we can speak about the interminable conflict between rationalism and empiricism being silenced by Kant's transcendental philosophy, but this is not at all the same as saying that his response is internal to this dispute. It is not just a question of adding Leibniz to Hume so that one comes up with Kant, rather there is something entirely new in the first pages of the Critique of Pure Reason, as though one were leaving one country to enter another, and where one could never return. This is certainly not to suggest that the history of philosophy is the motor of history, rather that epochal discontinuities are more tangible in philosophical discourse that always bears the marks of its age, even if it believes it speaks from the standpoint of eternity.

What then is this discontinuity of historical time? Following Foucault's The Order of Things, we can speak of there being two great shifts in the general organisation of

human knowledge.<sup>1</sup> The first, which belongs to recent history, is the movement from the infinite to the finite, or from a transcendent God to a transcendental subject, and the second, which we are undergoing at this very time, is the dissolution of the finite, in all aspects of its existence, into an anonymity more immanent than consciousness itself. We can, therefore, speak of a double blow to the relevance of theology: first of all, in the movement from the infinite to the finite, which is a movement from God to the subject as the essential organising principle of all knowledge, and then secondly, in the disappearance of this subject and thus of any organising principle whatsoever.

The world in which increasingly the subject is declining is quite different from the one in which God was at the centre, such that it is impossible to make sense of the one world through the other, which is why from the perspective of the one, the other appears wholly alien and strange. Thus, the difference between our world and the theological one cannot be bridged by mere argumentation, but must be experienced historically. This means the gulf that separates one epoch from another is not something that can be crossed over. We cannot live in the world in which God is at the centre after it has disappeared, even if we wished to, since the conditions that made this world possible no longer exist. Nor is the transition from the one epoch to the next evolutionary, such that we could trace our steps backwards and by rejecting our own world imagine it possible to live in the other. On the contrary, their relation is discontinuous, which means there is no reason to be found in the classical representation of the world for the emergence of an anthropocentric epoch nor in this epoch the reason for its own destruction in radical immanence. This discontinuous history can be contrasted with an Hegelian conception of history where all previous moments are connected by a higher rational order that only reveals itself in the

last word. This is because the last word here is the disappearance of man as such and thus of the very idea of a 'rational order' to history.

Surely, someone might respond, the passing away of the classical view of God only makes one kind of theology impossible but not every theology? The alternative for theology would no longer be a science of an *ens supremum*, but revelation as an article of faith. But the man of faith belongs to the epoch of the subject. What happens when the idea of subjectivity no longer mobilises the world in its image? Then, there arises a greater, more difficult, and less certain alternative for theology. It would be an exposure, to the extent of enduring its own impossibility, to the advent of another epochality where the ideas of both the subject and God have passed. Perhaps this theology would bear the title of atheology and it is here that Nietzsche's response to modern theology becomes pressing.

It is not easy to place Levinas's work within these alternatives. On the one hand, he is a philosopher of ethics, and on the other, a Talmudic commentator, and this division appears to pull his work in two opposite directions. His philosophy calls into question traditional conceptions of subjectivity, and thereby appears to belong to current trends of post-Kantian thought, whereas his Talmudic commentaries belong to a conservative Jewish culture, which although touched by modernity, retains an unshakeable commitment to God and the rituals of Orthodox Judaism. Does it not seem paradoxical to share with many others the critique of the centrality of the subject, and at the same time to continue to use theological language, precisely because what both the belief in the transcendental subject and God share is the idea of an external centre, whether transcendent or transcendental, and it is this idea of a 'centre' that has been abolished in the idea of immanence?

Is it possible to return to God after the end of the epoch of the metaphysics of the subject? Is there a meaning of God that has nothing at all to do with the God of philosophy? These questions can be neatly avoided by keeping apart Levinas's confessional and philosophical writings by arguing that the latter do not at all depend on an idea of God, and the former have only a parochial interest for Jewish studies. No doubt this division can be sanctioned by some of Levinas's own statements, which seem to suggest that his philosophy remains uncontaminated by any religious commitment.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the briefest acquaintance with his philosophical work does not permit this neat separation between the religious and the philosophical writings. Thus, in Totality and Infinity, the asymmetry of the ethical relation is described as the presence of God and likewise in Otherwise than Being the problem of God and the ethical relation are said to be one and the same.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than disavowing Judaism, Levinas recognises that this very commitment to another heritage reveals to him the presuppositions of philosophy that sees itself as the only possible universal discourse. Perhaps Levinas would not argue against Foucault's and our own commitment to the discontinuous history of the West, but he would deny its universalism. We can speak of the history of the West, but we should stop confusing this with the history of the 'All'. We should stop mixing the language of history with the old language of an universalist metaphysics. The meaning of God from a different tradition, therefore, is not a philosophical problem, but a problem addressed to philosophy, since this exteriority remains as a constant thorn to philosophy's portrayal of itself as the essence of history. We can therefore complicate our first analysis of the relation between philosophy, theology and history. Not only is there the difference between history and the historicity of history, but there is also an outside to this empirical/transcendental double, more exterior

than the exception philosophy sees itself to be. This exteriority seems to me to be the basis of a 'post-secular' philosophy.

Levinas's question is why should Judaism belong to the history of the West. Obviously, there are elements that do so belong, like the rational Judaism of Maimonides or Spinoza, but there are whole aspects that do not, such as Rabbinical Judaism. In this history, Judaism has been sacrificed to an universal history of a hybrid Judeo-Christianity, where the particularity of Judaism is merely a moment in the universal history of Christianity. And there is no reason to see this changed when this Christianity itself is rejected, for again it is only the Christian philosophical conception of Judaism that is cursed in the overall condemnation of all theology.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, before we are able to come to a judgement concerning the place of God in Levinas's work, we need first of all to assess whether there is a difference between what Heidegger has called onto-theology, which includes both the idea of God and the subject, as both are conceived as the ground of the totality of beings, and this outside to history, unknown and completely forgotten by us, of the word 'God'.<sup>5</sup> The stakes for Levinas is to show that the authentically Jewish God has nothing to do with the Western, Christian, philosophic God and would therefore remain impervious to the nihilism that has infected the latter from within. Our response to this defence is whether Nietzsche's critique of religion, in a way that Levinas himself does not recognise, includes both these 'Gods'. A secular philosophy is the critique of the religious subject and not the concept of God. To believe that one has reached a post-secular philosophy by redeeming this concept is to confuse a metaphysical dispute with a political and ethical discrimination of values.



## God and Philosophy

Theology has always been a slave to philosophy, even when it believed itself, in the Middle Ages, to be its master. In its tutelage, it could either submit to reason and identify God with the rational order of the universe, such that theology became merely another form of cosmology, or it could rebel against philosophy, and assert that the revealed truth of religion was beyond any category. One choice is rational or positive theology and the other negative theology, and the history of theology has only ever been the oscillation between these two. Either God is something known, or something unknown. Beneath the apparent difference between what is unknown and known, there is an identity, for the unknown is *known* as an unknown. It is not faith that posits reason as its opposite, but reason, faith. What here puts itself forward as a true opposite or other to reason, is *reason's* opposite and other. Because the rebellion of the slave against its master, like any rebellion, still acquiesces despite its own efforts to the law of the master, the words of revolt are still the words of the master. And if the slave does not want to use the master's words, then the only alternative is silence. This has always been the form of the rebellion against reason from the Christian mystics to Wittgenstein. Because meaning is defined by reason, and its opposite is included within reason, then non-meaning, this great transcendent unknown, must have by definition no meaning whatsoever, and thus one can only *feel* it in a blissful unity or anguished disunity. Since theology accepts philosophy's definition of meaning, as soon as it steps outside this circle, like Hegel's unhappy consciousness, its alternative seems only to be the pathos of silence or an endless flow of words signifying nothing. Its 'beyond' turns out to be the beyond of philosophy itself. This is why the 'death of God' is not something that happens to theology from without. It is the inevitable conclusion of its servitude to philosophy. When reason no longer needs faith,

which in reality is when the state no longer has any use for it, faith ceases to exist except as a rather bedraggled reminder of an age that has already passed.

Levinas's question is whether the significance of the word 'God' in the monotheistic tradition is philosophical at all and thus whether the only alternatives must be either a positive or a negative theology.<sup>6</sup> Philosophy is taken to be the major discourse in which all other discourses, including theology, must be grounded. But the primacy of philosophy itself is not given. It is not something that philosophy discovers ready at hand, rather this primacy is what philosophy asserts for itself, and it can only do so if from the beginning it presupposes that it itself is the valid measure of all truth by which all other ways of speaking must be measured. Anything, therefore, that is not thought in terms of this legitimate concept of truth can be said not to be thought at all. Thus, philosophy defines, on its own terms, both what it means to think and not to think; there can be no *outside* to philosophy, for what constitutes this outside is philosophy itself.

When God is thought of as having a meaning, then this is usually in terms of philosophy's conception of meaning, as the ground of the totality of beings, and if God cannot be thought of in this manner, then the word 'God' is said to have become utterly meaningless. But the opposition between what is meaningful and meaningless in this instance is determined by the restriction of meaning to philosophy's own definition. There are two ways of viewing this problem, and this is the crux of the matter for Levinas. Either God can be seen as internal to philosophy's self-definition or God is a problem addressed to this limitation of truth. The question is not whether God exists or not, or what God's nature might be, for both questions of existence and essence belong already to philosophy, but whether there are any exceptions to the discourse of philosophy itself that has always concealed its own particularity as universalism that contains all other particularities.

What is exterior to the history of philosophy for Levinas is the experience of the other in the ethical relation. This experience is not to be understood either as something transcendent or mystical, for this is the way in which philosophy itself has characterised its outside and thus contained it within itself, but as *anterior* to philosophical discourse. Such an anteriority must still be an object of philosophy, otherwise one is left with mere enthusiasm and babbling. The difference is that the object of the investigation is not constituted in advance by philosophy, but must be encountered in its very resistance to description. For Levinas, this ethical relation to the other contains a meaning of God that is wholly different from the metaphysical, or the onto-theological concept of God that is at the heart of the distinction between reason and faith. The metaphysical concept of God is as a transcendent being that is the ultimate ground of the totality of beings. This transcendent being can either be something known or unknown, either an object of knowledge or mysticism. The ethical concept of God belongs, on the contrary, not to a world behind this world, but to the interiority of the ethical subject, which is no longer interpreted as a substance or existence, but as an infinite responsibility or obligation. The relation to God is the relation to the other who stands before me, whom I shall not kill, and not to a being who inhabits some other world as the *causa sui* of philosophy:

Thou shall not kill - isn't it there, in the face of the other, the very significance of the word of God, unheard of significance of the Transcendent that concerns and awakens me straight away. Revelation - conjuncture, or Kenosis - where the 'abstract' truth of monotheism is thought concretely without picturesque representations, the 'place' where the Infinite descends from the 'the heights of the heavens' - from its absoluteness or from the mythology of world behind this world - and where precisely 'It comes to mind'.<sup>7</sup>

## God and Ethics

Yet, is this ethical interpretation of God that strange to philosophy? How far is it different from Kant's defence of theology in terms of practical reason? Does not Kant himself preserve the legitimacy of belief by merely transposing the language of religion from the terrain of ontology to that of ethics? In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant speaks not of a negative theology, but of the negative employment of transcendental theology.<sup>8</sup> The negative employment of the transcendental theology is similar to the negative employment of the concept of the noumenon. Like the concept of the noumenon, it does not widen the limits of experience, but marks out the idea of God purified of any empirical content. Kant, however, fills this new space with the moral idea of God. Moral theology makes good the deficiencies of transcendental theology. Transcendental theology only gets us halfway by purging the concept of God of anything empirical but cannot prove its existence, since the only criterion of existence in transcendental philosophy is being posited as an object of experience. The source of faith is practical reason and not intuition.

Kant's moral theology, however, is not speculative theology by other means. It does not replace the theoretical proof of God with a better proof, as though Kant were arguing that since we cannot prove God's existence by the traditional arguments we can simply replace them by moral ones, rather speculative theology (which is the misuse of transcendental arguments) and moral theology have completely different conceptions of God. In speculative theology, God is an object, whereas in moral theology God is an idea, and thus the postulates of God's existence that Kant elaborates in the Critique of Practical Reason, do not prove God's existence as an object of theoretical reason, but as an idea of practical reason. Kant's argument is that the necessity of the idea of God's existence is for the sake of the completeness of our moral world, for the sense of ourselves as moral

subjects, but it is completely separate from our objective and scientific knowledge of the world. Science must be purged of any theological content, and theology of any scientific content.

Is there any difference, then, between this argument and Levinas's own defence of a continued language about God? The most important divergence between these two thinkers is that, for Levinas, God is not an idea to be found amongst other ideas, but exceeds every idea. In this regard, he is closer to Descartes than he is to Kant, though he rejects the rest of Descartes's metaphysics of substance. What interests Levinas in Descartes's proof of the existence of God, which from Kant's perspective would be a dialectical misuse of reason, is the idea of the infinite. All ideas, Descartes argues, apart from one, have their origin in the subject. The exception is the idea of God, because a finite being cannot produce the idea of the infinite. The necessary consequence of this premise is that the idea of God must come from outside of the subject. Even though Descartes is engaged in the most traditional argument for the existence of God, which Kant has shown to be fallacious from the perspective of theoretical reason, if one reads the text against its own intentions, then a startling paradox can appear. For Descartes is arguing that thought can think what cannot be thought. This is different from negative theology, which only asserts that God is beyond thought, whilst maintaining that God is a transcendent being. For Descartes, on the contrary, there certainly is an idea of God, and this idea is in the subject, but at the same time is outside the subject, for unlike all the other ideas I have it is not produced by the subject itself. But this outside is not outside in a transcendent sense. It is immanent to the subject, as though by an infraction from within.<sup>9</sup> For Kant, on the contrary, there can be no outside to the essence of the subject, without falling back into speculative theological reasoning. But this closure of subjectivity from

anything other than itself is what is most dogmatic in Kant's thought, and the denial of exteriority is dependent on this presupposition. Kant thinks exteriority only in terms of an object, and since God cannot be thought of as an object, it must be thought of as an idea, which is the production of the subject itself. Levinas would ask whether the only alternative is between an object of the understanding or an idea of a rational faith, or whether there can be a third possibility, which is an exteriority that is neither a phenomenon nor a noumenon, but an enigma gnawing away at the heart of interiority itself.

The danger with the rejection of Kant is that of simply falling behind him into a dogmatic metaphysics and making all kinds of claims to transcendence. Levinas's move is not to go outside the subject so as to deny the completeness of the subject's essence, but to go deeper back into the subject, such that the outside of the subject is the very interiority of the subject itself. Take for example his concept of the 'trace'. This is to show that the familiar concept of subjective time as the unity of the past and future in the present is interrupted by an absolute past that can never be present. This absolute past does not belong to another world, but to the very interiority of the subject's life, which is therefore interrupted from within. It is this very breach of the time of subjectivity with another time that is the condition of the relation to exteriority. It is only because the subject is not totally closed in upon itself that it can be opened out to that which exceeds its own essence and existence.<sup>10</sup>

It is not too difficult to move from Kant's conception of God as idea to the atheism of Feuerbach, for it is clear that this idea is the subject's own. Man is not created in the image of God, but God in the image of man. Nonetheless, it is precisely this atheism, the atheism that is the necessary consequence of the philosophical conception of God, that

Levinas would argue is irrelevant to Judaism. It, on the contrary, bears witness to God that is neither an object, nor an idea, and thus oversteps the alternatives offered by philosophy between being and non-being, reason and faith. God is, rather, experienced as the proximity of the other that demands justice from me. God is not in this relation, or behind or above it, prepositions that would merely lead to another philosophical mythology. God instead is a word that names the very excessiveness of this relation, the infinity of the infinite obligation to the other.

### **A Nietzschean Response**

Many ears have still not heard the message that the onto-theological God is dead although he died many years ago.<sup>11</sup> Kant, as we have seen, and who Nietzsche said possessed the “theological instinct” more than any other, already killed this God for the sake of the moral idea of God.<sup>12</sup> The death of the transcendent God, so the argument goes, is only for the sake of the immanent God of the man of faith. This God resides in man’s subjectivity, and is a product, perhaps the most subtle and perverse, of his reason. It is against this moral God that Nietzsche’s atheism is directed and not the God of metaphysics. Whether God exists or not is of no significance. What matters are the values embodied by a God, what kind of vision of the world the moral idea of this God portrays, and what kind of psychological type the believer is. Nietzsche’s attack upon Christianity, for instance, is not whether God in the abstract exists or not, but what kind of value the particularly Christian God exalts, and thus what kind of vision of life it celebrates. Nietzsche’s argument is that the moral idea that the Christian God expresses is the most degenerate and debased form of value, and thus expresses an extreme distortion of the reality, and its believers the lowest kind of psychological type. In metaphysical or

ontological atheism, it is God's existence that is a scandal to thought. In moral atheism, Nietzsche's atheism, God is merely the representative of certain values whose own origin belongs to real historical configurations of forces and the relations between them. It is the latter that is the primary object of a genealogical analysis and not God as some fictitious transcendent being.

Nietzsche's assault upon Kant is, therefore, not a logical or formal critique, but one concerning values. Levinas, on the contrary, distances himself from Kant, only by a negative phenomenological manoeuvre that denies God's reduction either to an object or to an idea. Yet, to what extent, from the viewpoint of a more critical and suspicious eye, is Levinas's defence of this God really different from Kant's conservation of the Christian one? It is true that Kant does dress up and conceal his Christianity in the form of universality (a disguise which Hegel improves upon greatly), but we know that beneath this counterfeit garb, Kant's ethics is nothing but Christianity, only this time made more palatable for our modern tastes. In the same way, isn't Levinas's God beyond philosophy, merely the Jewish God disguised in the language of a negative ethical theology? If this is the case, then Levinas has not at all exceeded Nietzsche's critique of values.<sup>13</sup>

The phenomenological investigations, from Levinas's perspective, justify the use of the word 'God', but this word only enters these investigations because of his commitment to Judaism. If we read the philosophical texts alone, then we might believe he arrives at the ethical relation through an immanent critique of the philosophical tradition, but after reading the Talmudic work, we realise that what is uncovered in the philosophical investigations was already integral to Judaism. The ethical subject is Judaism universalised: 'the authentically human is the being Jewish in every man.'<sup>14</sup> Why is this any different from Kant's ethics being Christianity universalised?



Perhaps Levinas would, following Rosenzweig, say there is no difference, to the extent that both are an expression of a universalism that cannot be annulled through an appeal to a higher universalism. This appears to give a special place to Christianity and Judaism that is denied to other world religions. Anyone who has read Rosenzweig's The Star of Redemption knows that the elevation of Judaism to equality with Christianity is at the expense of the devaluation of Hinduism and Islam. But why should Christianity and Judaism be elevated in this way? Is it because they express a universalism, whereas the others do not? Would it not be better to say, as Nietzsche has taught us, that they merely express a will to self-preservation that is true of any way of life, and this will is only more cunning when it declares itself to be universal?

We look at the matter the wrong way around if we start from the concept of God and then arrive at Judaism or Christianity. Or worse still that we see the difference between Judaism and Christianity as only the difference between concepts. Thus, on the one side we have the Christian God corrupted by metaphysics, and on the other, the Jewish God as the guardian of authentic monotheism. It is not because someone believes in God that they are Jewish, rather being Jewish is the condition for their belief in God. To be Jewish one must first of all adopt a subjectivity. Not a transcendental subjectivity, the empty 'I think', but the passionate subject of interiority, whose inside is hollowed out by the exorbitant demand of history and destiny, to such an extent that each individual is responsible for the whole of the history and fate of its people. Levinas only presents the ethical side of this subjectivity, and puts it forward as the model for the whole of humanity (this is the universalism of Judaism), but on rare occasions one glimpses its other side which is authoritarian and despotic; for example, when Levinas warns of the dangers of youth being diluting Judaism with their 'imprudent contacts' with the outside, or praises the most

orthodox, and thus the most reactionary groups within Judaism, for having preserved its purity throughout the ages.<sup>15</sup>

The subject of Judaism, which is the model of the ethical subject, is impossible without there first of all being the process of subjection. For there to be a subject at all, even before there is the subject of philosophy, the internalisation of a dominant reality is required, which is all the more powerful if it is said to be a sacred and divine history. God is therefore the intensification of this process. It is the highest point of the trial of subjection, subjugation and subservience whose end-product is the subject who identifies itself with a race, a people or a nation and thus closes down other possibilities, or even the most extreme of possibilities, the commitment to no identity at all. In the covenant with the Jews, God is not some transcendent object or signifier (thus the absence of any images of God in Judaism), but is the voice which subjects the individual to an ideological apparatus in which it only recognises itself as a self with a fixed character, status or identity. If in classical theology, we can say that God is represented as a Supreme Being or object, and in Kant's ethical theology as an idea, then Levinas's God is a voice that subjects the individual to an infinite demand. This is perhaps the oldest image of God before it was watered down by Greek metaphysics, where God becomes merely just one more kind of substance or concept, albeit the highest.

Every interiority, even being Jewish, is always the result of the internalisation of a dominant reality, and this process is only ever possible through the crushing of the individual itself. Don't be different; be like us. Don't let yourself be infected from outside by secret relationships. Don't break out from your own subjectivity. Don't recognise yourself in anything except the mirror that we hold up to you, which of course has already been written upon by the Law that you cannot question. This voice is always authoritarian,

always imposed, and all the more powerful since it acts from within rather than from without. We are always our greatest accusers.<sup>16</sup>

Nietzsche's atheism is a politics and we mean by this term critique of this process of identification that always lies at the root of any ethics. Whatever it is, it is not what Levinas takes it to be, which is merely a suspicion about a world behind this world; that is to say, a metaphysical critique about the status of the immanence or transcendence of God. This had already taken place with Kant and Hegel. What might such a critique of identification be? Some clue might be given to us by the description of 'becoming Jewish' given by those most Nietzschean of contemporary writers, Deleuze and Guattari, in A Thousand Plateaus.<sup>17</sup> There are two ways, they argue, of interpreting the relation between the Jew and the non-Jew: one, where it is the terms in the relation which matter, (Jew and non-Jew) and there is, therefore, a constant obsession with the multiple exclusive identification of the self as either being or not being Jewish, and the other, where it is the relation between the terms that is decisive. This second relation is interpreted as a 'becoming-Jewish' that traverses equally both the Jew and the non-Jew, precisely because it is captured in neither of their identifications. This would mean that a 'becoming Jewish' is not an imitation of being Jewish, for this would be simply to repeat the opposition once again; rather these becomings are micro-particles of Judaism that have freed themselves from the ideological apparatus of Judaism, and which, therefore, contaminate as much the Jew, in the manner in which she sees herself as being Jewish, as the non-Jew. These Jewish-becomings (there is always more than one) always come from the side of the Jew, but only to the extent in which she lets herself exist within a zone of indeterminacy in relation to the non-Jew. First of all, it is always the minority that contaminates the majority, whereas the majority only ever reduces every minority to the same, even when it wishes to

liberate them (the solution to the 'Jewish Question' was either assimilation or extermination; in either case, the majority negates the minority). There is a second moment, however, and this marks the real collapse of the process of identification that sustains the exclusivity of religious belief, when the minority itself surrenders its own subjectivity in relation to the becoming-Jewish of the non-Jew: 'A Jew becomes Jewish,' Deleuze and Guattari write, 'but in the becoming-Jewish of the non-Jew.'<sup>18</sup> For it is the power of the majority in relation to the minority, which produces the latter's obsession with its own identity, and thus the minority never escapes its own slavery by adopting the subjectivity imposed from both within and from without. Moreover, if a minority only defines itself through the language of identity, then, if it ever reaches the position of domination in relation to another minority (the Jews against the Palestinians, for example), it will only repeat the same persecution and oppression it suffered at the hands of the majority. 'Becoming-Jewish' is not to be found in either the Jew or the non-Jew, but passes between them, wrenching the non-Jew out of the majority and the Jew from the minority, by propelling both of them outside of the opposition between the non-Jew and the Jew, whilst at the same time elevating neither into some higher unity, which is always, in whatever way it might be camouflaged, the unity of the majority.

What is hidden beneath Levinas's God is the fixed subject that must bear a cultural or social identity, and this is despite Levinas's protestations that ethics is prior to politics. The model for the universalism of the ethical subject is an actual subject captured within a process or pact of subjugation whose apex is God. For this reason it is not the case, as much as Levinas himself might think, that his monotheism escapes the critique of atheism. One might accept the irrelevance of onto-theology to Judaism, but not the Nietzschean critique of values and the overcoming of the self it demands. This critique is addressed not

to the subject of philosophy, but the passionate subject of religion, since the latter, genealogically speaking, is perhaps the real condition of the former. What is here said of Levinas must be true of any theology or philosophy that claims we have now gone beyond the secular demands of critique. The battle lines are drawn. Atheism is no longer a matter of God, but the subject of interiority in which God is merely a mechanism in the intensification of the process of identification.

Levinas recognises atheism only as the death of the God of philosophy, and since he can claim that the God of Judaism is not the God of philosophy, he can equally assert that the end of theology is not the end of religion. But this is to think that all that matters in the 'death of God' is only the disappearance of the God of philosophy. For Nietzsche, at least, the death of God is as much tied a political struggle against the subject of identification as it is to the critique of a God inhabiting a mythical hinterland, which is no longer of any significance to contemporary religious belief. The ambiguity of Levinas's work is that his elaboration of the ethical relation required an increasingly sophisticated unravelling of the traditional conception of subjectivity and time, which is absent in his religious writings. Here the subject stands as one who claims a history and a tradition. There is an incompatibility between Levinas's ethical and religious subject. The question for those who read and take inspiration from Levinas is how far this ethical subject is merely the mask of the religious subject. Or, how far this subject, hollowed out by the exorbitant demand of the other, is dependent on the subject subordinated to the voice of God, which is merely the mask of social and political forces of identification. If the voice of God were to disappear, would the ethical subject remain, or would it too disappear in unheard-of becomings passing through the body and scattering it to the four corners of the earth beyond the memory of any single race, culture and tradition?

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<sup>1</sup> See Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses, (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 394ff, for a discussion of these historical periods, and especially the last that we are currently living through characterised, at least for Foucault, by the discovery of the anonymity of language in the modern literary experiments of such writers as Mallarmé, Roussel, Beckett and Blanchot.

<sup>2</sup> Mon point de départ est absolument non théologique. J'y tiens beaucoup. Ce n'est pas de la théologie que je fais, mais de la philosophie. [My point of departure is absolutely non-theological. This is very important to me. It is not theology that I do, but philosophy.] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Transcendance et hauteur,' in the Bulletin de la société française de philosophie, séance du 27 Janvier 1962, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> L'homme en tant qu'Autrui nous arrive du dehors, séparé - ou saint - visage. Son extériorité - c'est-à-dire son appel à moi, est sa vérité... Ce surplus de la vérité sur l'être et sur son idée que nous suggérons par la métaphore de "courbure de l'espace intersubjectif", signifie, l'intention divine de toute vérité. Cette "courbure de l'espace" est, peut-être, la présence même de Dieu. [Man as Other arrives to us from the outside, separated - or sacred - a face. His exteriority, that is to say his appeal to me, is his truth... This surplus of truth over being and its idea that is suggested to us in the metaphor of the "curvature of intersubjective space", signifies the divine intention of all truth. This "curvature of space" is perhaps the very presence of God.] Emmanuel Levinas, Totalité et infini, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), p. 267. Le problème de la transcendance et de Dieu et le problème de la subjectivité irréductible à l'essence - irréductible à l'immanence essentielle - vont ensemble. [The problem of transcendence and God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence -

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irreducible to an essential immanence - go together.] Emmanuel Levinas, Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence, (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the writings of Hegel and Nietzsche, which demonstrate almost a complete ignorance of rabbinical Judaism, and in which Judaism itself is interpreted as merely a precursor to Christianity. This aside, however, as we hope to show, does not prevent us from using these thinkers to think critically even of this 'extra-historical' type of Judaism.

<sup>5</sup> For the definition of the term 'onto-theology' see, Martin Heidegger, 'Die Onto-Theo-Logische Verfassung der Metaphysik', in Identität und Differenz, (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), pp. 31-67. Even Heidegger did not think that the God of philosophy was the same as the God of religion: Zu diesem Gott [the metaphysical definition of God - WL] kann der Mensch weder beten, noch kann er ihm opfern. Vor der Causa sui kann der Mensch weder aus Scheu ins Knie fallen, noch kann er vor diesem Gott musizieren und tanzen. [Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. Before the *causa sui* man can neither fall upon his knees in awe, nor can he dance or play music before this God.] Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> For Levinas's discussion of ontology and God, see, 'Dieu et la philosophie', in Emmanuel Levinas, De Dieu qui vient à l'idée, 2<sup>éd.</sup> (Paris: Vrin, 1986).pp. 93-127.

<sup>7</sup> Tu ne tueras point - n'est-ce-pas là, à travers le visage d'autrui, la signification même de la parole de Dieu, inouïe signification du Transcendent qui d'emblée me concerne et m'éveille. Révélation - conjoncture, ou "Kénose" - où se pense concrètement la vérité "abstraite" du monothéisme sans représentations imagées, le "lieu" où l'Infini descend des "hauteurs céleste" - de son absoluité ou de la mythologie de ses arrières-

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mondes - et où précisément “Il vient à l'idée”. Emmanuel Levinas, A l'heure des nations, (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup> Die transzendente Theologie bleibt demnach, aller ihrer Unzulänglichkeit ungeachtet, dennoch von wichtigen negativen Gebrauche, und ist eine beständige Zensur unserer Vernunft, wenn sie bloß mit reinen Ideen zu tun hat, die eben darum kein anderes, als transzendentes Richtmaß zulassen. [Transcendental theology remains therefore, despite all its inadequacies, of importance in its negative use and is a lasting censor of our reason, as the latter deals with pure ideas which as such allow of no other criterion than transcendental.] Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft, Werkausgabe, Bd. IV, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), A640/B668.

<sup>9</sup> For Levinas's discussion of the idea of the infinite see 'La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini' in, En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger. (Paris: Vrin, 1982), pp. 171- 172.

<sup>10</sup> For the concept of the trace, see *ibid.*, pp. 194-202.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, as Hegel suggests, that God already died on the Cross. See, G.W.F. Hegel, Die Phänomenologie des Geistes, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 572.

<sup>12</sup> For Nietzsche's comments on Kant and the 'theological -instinct', see, Friedrich Nietzsche, Der Antichrist, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, part 7, vol. 3, eds. G. Colli & M. Montinari, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1969), pp. 175-176.

<sup>13</sup> It seems to me that the confrontation between Levinas and Nietzsche goes much further, as some have argued, than whether Levinas is just another purveyor of 'slave morality' (see, for example, David Boothroyd, 'Levinas and Nietzsche', in Philosophy Today, Vol. 39., Winter 1995, pp. 345-357 and Silva Benso, 'Levinas - Another



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Ascetic Priest', in The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology, Vol. 27, No. 2, May 1996, pp. 137-156). The philosophically decisive question is the difference between phenomenology and genealogy. If we understand Nietzsche's statement 'God is dead', as Levinas does, simply as the death of the God of the philosopher, then we have not understood it all. Nietzsche was completely indifferent as to whether God existed or not. He was interested in the values which were expressed in this belief, and which for him were extra-moral in origin. For Levinas, his reaction to the death of the God of philosophers is quite different. He merely wants to save the Judaic God from the tyranny of the concept, but as he says many times, this God is entirely separate from any anthropology or ethnology of religious practice of Judaism. Nietzsche would be highly suspicious of such a dehistorisation of religious belief, but it is Levinas's continued commitment to the phenomenological method that allows him to bracket the significance of God from its social and historical manifestation. To be sceptical of such a reduction is already to leave phenomenology behind.

<sup>14</sup> L'authentiquement humaine, c'est l'être-juif dans toute homme. Emmanuel Levinas, A l'heure des nations, (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 192:

<sup>15</sup> Ce n'est donc pas le christianisme qui, désormais, menace notre existence [Jewish existence - WL], ni l'athéisme, ni la science, ni même les sciences philosophiques qui, à un certain moment, semblaient compromettre l'authenticité des textes fondamentaux. Ce sont des crises d'enfance, des maladies d'enfance, des maladies d'adolescence contractées au cours de trop frivoles et imprudents contacts. [It is therefore not Christianity that nonetheless menaces our existence, nor atheism, nor science, not even the philosophical sciences that at a certain moment seem to compromise the authenticity of fundamental texts. It the crises of youth, the sicknesses

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of youth, the adolescent illnesses contracted in the course of too frivolous and impudent contacts]. Emmanuel Levinas, Difficile Liberté, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p. 257. A travers toutes les aventures de la déjudaïsation, c'est dans ces groups [orthodox Jews WL], indifférents aux variations des époques et comme privés de tout rapport à l'Histoire, que se conservaient l'énergie de la tradition et son invisible rayonnement. [Across all the adventures of dejudaicisation, it is in these groups, indifferent to the variation of epochs and deprived of all relation to History, that the energy of the tradition is conserved and its invisible radiance]. Emmanuel Levinas, A L'Heure des Nations, (Paris: Minuit, 1988), p. 165-166.

<sup>16</sup> For the idea of God as the voice that calls upon the individual and thus constitutes it as subject and the essential ideological nature of all religion including Judaism, see, Louis Althusser. 'Ideologie et Appareils Idéologiques' in La Pensée, June, 1970, pp. 3-38.

<sup>17</sup> For their account of Judaism, see, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, Mille Plateaux, (Paris: Minuit, 1980), pp 153-170, and 356-357.

<sup>18</sup> Un juif devant juif, mais dans un devenir-juif du non-juif. Ibid., p. 357