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## Levinas and the Ethics of Secularism

**W**hile contemporary secularism is often understood as a primarily political concept, having to do with a state's principled neutrality towards religion, it also carries with it certain ethical attitudes such as tolerance, open-mindedness and, in its most optimistic meaning, willingness to actually engage in dialogue across differences of belief. Moreover, in philosophy, it is further associated to a certain movement away from gods and religion, a secularization of metaphysics and of philosophical thought in general. It is interesting to examine the thought of Emmanuel Levinas in relation to secularism because he addresses these three different aspects of secularism – political, ethical, and metaphysical/philosophical – in an interrelated way. What is more, when he explicitly addresses secularism in his essay “Secularism and the Thought of Israel,”<sup>1</sup> he describes it as arising out of an ethical vocation that he associates with a particular religion – Judaism – as its true meaning. Let us begin by discussing

the meaning of ethics and the relationship between ethics and religion in general in Levinas' thought, in order to return further on to this more specific claim about secularism and Judaism.

Briefly put, the term “ethics” in Levinas does not refer to a set of moral prescriptions, character traits, or final goals one should strive to follow or achieve in order to be a good person or live a good life. Rather, it points to relations of obligation towards others that are constitutive of the self in its very subjectivity. Each of us, as a self, an “I”, is made up in our most intimate core of our relations of obligation towards other human beings, though for the most part we ignore these relations, living under an illusion of independence and self-sufficiency. Moreover, these obligations are not formulated in terms of duties with clear limits which one could know in advance, but become manifest through emotions such as shame and desire, and the way these emotions open up the self to listening and responding to

<sup>1</sup> Unforeseen History, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 113 – 124. Hereafter, UH

others in terms that are dictated by others and can only come to be revealed to the self through dialogue, through actually engaging with others.<sup>2</sup>

One might ask, why focus on emotions such as shame and desire in ethics, and why describe the self as so vulnerable to the demands of others? The key lies in Levinas' conception of the self as naturally egoistic, tending to approach all otherness (including especially other human beings) as a means to achieving its own self-interested ends. The ethical relation, manifest in shame and desire before others, puts into question this self-interestedness, revealing to the self its dependence on others, and opening up the possibility of a relation to something or someone beyond its own self-enclosure, opening up in other words the possibility of a relationship of transcendence. Interestingly, Levinas also refers to the self-interested, self-enclosed self as "atheistic," and describes the ethical relation that breaks the self open as "true religion" (TI, 77 – 79). This brings us to the relationship between ethics and religion.

Repeatedly in his writings, Levinas claims that there is no true religion apart from our ethical obligations to other human beings. The core of religion is neither to be found in following dogmatic teachings, nor in listening to the voice of a religious authority. Neither can one carve a direct path towards God in the quietude of personal prayer or in striving after mystical union with the divine. Revelation, if it comes at all, comes from other human beings. It arises in my being disturbed and opened up beyond my own self-interest

– my "atheism" – by the needs of others. It arises in my response to the needs of others, be they loved ones, neighbours or strangers, and in my concern that all others be treated justly.

God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as the correlative to the justice rendered unto men.... There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from relations with men.... It is our relations with men...that give to theological concepts the sole significance they admit of.... Everything that cannot be reduced to the interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion. (TI, 79)

Essentially, any religion that does not make goodness and justice towards other human beings – be they believers or non-believers – its main priority, falls short of true religiousness.

Ethics does not only play the role of true religion in Levinas' thought; it is also first philosophy, metaphysics. Here, metaphysics does not point to a foundational principle or being, but rather to a primordial relation that is the root of all meaning and value: the ethical relation, which we can understand both as the intersubjective structure of the self, and as a more concrete relation of desire, opening and response to other human beings. Another way of putting this is to interpret the ethical relation as the birth of language in the other's call to me and my response. Meaning begins with language, and language comes to me from the other before I can speak it myself. (TI, 42 – 48)

If we take the metaphysical and religious interpretations of Levinasian ethics

<sup>2</sup> Levinas speaks of desire throughout his works. For a specific account of the role of shame, see *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 82 - 90. Hereafter, TI

together, we might be tempted to see him as an ontotheologist, that is, as a metaphysician doing metaphysics in a traditional way that places God at the foundation of all meaning and value as a supreme Being who captures the essence of all other beings and provides security and certainty to human life and thought. If this were the case, we might wonder what Levinasian ethics could possibly have to contribute to an understanding of secularism. But to interpret Levinas in this way is mistaken. He takes very seriously the death of the metaphysical God proclaimed by Nietzsche and the possibility that human life and thought stand in fact on nothingness.

One can see this most clearly when one combines four aspects of his thought: First, he describes being in general as the cold and empty “il y a” (there is), an anonymous force of existence that threatens to engulf human beings in its meaninglessness. This is a being without God, immanence without transcendence to open it up and give it meaning.<sup>3</sup> Second, though the ethical relation is supposed to be what gives us access to meaning and transcendence in an otherwise meaningless existence, this meaning is never given to us as a stable ground to stand upon. In fact, ethics is better described as losing one’s foothold, being projected into openness and uncertainty where meaning is not entirely dependent upon me but arises – if it arises at all – from my relations to others. Third,

not only does the ethical relation destabilize the self, but its meaning is uncertain; according to Levinas, one can never be sure whether the opening and responding to the other characteristic of ethics is truly a source of goodness or instead a kind of self-destructive behaviour – a “madness” – where one puts aside one’s own interests at one’s own peril.<sup>4</sup> This uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the meaning of ethics is compounded by a further ambiguity in Levinas’ thought between the emptiness and meaninglessness of the il y a, of being without God, and the God that may or may not enter into this emptiness through ethics.<sup>5</sup> We cannot distinguish with any certainty between a being invested by God and a being empty of God. At the same time, Levinas leaves a door open to God and religion through ethics, through relations of opening and response towards other human beings. If there is then to be a meaning to religion in philosophy, it has to pass through the filter of ethics, where meaning originates with the other, and cannot take the form of a dogmatic imposition of one’s own beliefs on others.

An aspect of Levinas’ thought that often bothers his readers is that his ethics seems to place the self in an extremely vulnerable position with respect to others. It could be argued that he inverts the problem of egoism – the naturally self-interested character of the atheistic self that

<sup>3</sup> See Levinas’ description of the il y a in *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 152; hereafter OB. See also “Death and Time,” in *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>5</sup> “God is . . . transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of his possible confusion with agitation of the there is”. Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 69.



reduces all other human beings to mere means for achieving its selfish ends – into a problem of total exposure of the self to others. In Levinasian ethics, not only am I opened up to others through shame and desire, but others are placed above me in the sense that their needs take precedence over my own. Some passages in Levinas even seem to suggest that I am called to be a saint despite myself, that there is no time or place for me and my own interests, but only for the needs of others. For instance:

For under accusation by everyone, the responsibility for everyone goes to the point of substitution... The uniqueness of the self is the very fact of bearing the fault of another (OB, 112)... The responsibility for another, an unlimited responsibility... in a deathlike passivity! (OB, 124) ...As such it [the self] will be shown to be the bearer of the world, bearing it, suffering it (OB, 195n12).

All persons are the Messiah. The Self as Self, taking upon itself the whole suffering of the world, is designated solely by this role. ...Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all.<sup>6</sup>

This imbalance is somewhat rectified, however, when we approach the ethical relation from within the political dimension of his thought.

The “political” in Levinas refers to the embedding of ethical relations in human society. When we look at our ethical obligations to others from a political perspective, we see that we are not only beholden

to one or a few others, but to all others within our society, and going even further, to all of humanity (TI, 212 – 214). Levinas does not offer us a community-, society- or culture-specific politics, but a universal one. This is why the stranger or foreigner plays such an important symbolic role in his thought as the quintessential other. Though I am unequal to others in ethics in the sense that the needs of others take precedence over my own, a first sense of equality is born from a political perspective when I take into account that I am equally responsible to the stranger, the neighbour, and the loved one. A second sense of equality, my own equality with others, is also granted on the political level for Levinas: this place of my own is necessary so that I can serve as a reliable source of justice for others; its justification lies in its use to fight for the rights and fair treatment of others, and only through protecting others for my own rights.<sup>7</sup>

As it would be difficult, and perhaps even impossible, for the self to work out the complicated balance of its obligations towards all others in a purely individual and case-by-case manner, politically speaking according to Levinas we all need recourse to political institutions and laws, as well as to philosophical concepts of justice that strive after universality and neutrality (OB, 153 - 161). For example, one might think here of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the role it plays in international law. At the same time, Levinas thinks we have to be very careful with these neutralizing structures and concepts, as they carry the risk of

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, “Messianic Texts,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1990), 89 – 90.

<sup>7</sup> See OB, 161 and Levinas, “The Rights of Man and the Rights of Others,” in *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 116 – 125.

depersonalizing human relations and becoming oppressive and dehumanizing if we do not keep vigilant watch over them (TI, 240 – 247). For this reason, the concrete ethical relation between myself and another, where I directly sense my obligation towards this other, continues to function as a personalizing, humanizing, “de-neutralizing”, and verifying relation beyond any concept or law. In fact, the best way to understand Levinasian ethics is as a constant interplay between ethics proper, involving personal relations to singular others, and politics as a universalization of ethical obligations embodied in laws, concepts and institutions.


If politics is to truly strive after this universal scope, then it will have to be inherently secular, neither privileging one set of religious beliefs over another, nor any form of non-belief over belief. Paradoxically, however, Levinas associates this political universalism and secularism (laïcité) itself with the ethical vocation of a particular religion: Judaism. Let us revisit then the relationship between ethics, religion and politics, as well the issue of secularism in Levinas’ thought through the lens of his vision of Judaism.

Levinas identifies Judaism as a religion of peace where “the government of God subjects men to ethics rather than sacraments” (UH, 113). “Human relations...,” writes Levinas, “constitute in a sense the supreme liturgical act, autonomous with regards to all manifestations of ritual piety” (UH, 116 – 117). As a religion of peace, the primary concern of Judaism is not to impose a dogma or set religious tradition, but to ensure peace with one’s neighbours, whether they be Jewish or not. Where there is no peace with one’s neighbours, there is no God and no religion. In fact,

Levinas goes so far as to describe Judaism as a “religion of man to man in which man takes full responsibility, as if there were no God to count on” (UH, 117; my italics). Judaism is thus the quintessential religion for a secular society, for its ethical vocation remains whether God comes into being or not, whether there is a God or not, whether one is a believer or not. Levinas calls Judaism the “moral conscience” of secularism (UH, 117), a particular religion that embodies the ethical obligations and openness towards others that ought to condition the universality and neutrality of any secular institution.

To say that Judaism privileges ethics and peace with one’s neighbours over dogma and tradition is not to say that there are no sacred texts or traditions in Judaism. There is a set of ethical rules laid down for Jews in the Torah, but the way these laws are to be interpreted and applied is the subject of much debate in the long oral and written rabbinical tradition of exegesis and teaching tied to the Torah and captured, among others, in the Talmud. The Talmud abounds with differing rabbinical interpretations, and Judaism thrives, in Levinas’ view, on dialogue and confrontation across different ways of interpreting and following its foundational laws. This pluralism inherent in the sacred texts themselves and in the ongoing dialogue across difference shown in their written and oral interpretations thus embodies another important crossover point between the spirit of Judaism and the spirit of secularism. (UH, 114 – 115)

Levinas further focuses on a particular concept in Judaism to illustrate its ethical vocation to treat all human beings justly regardless of their origins or beliefs. This is the concept of the “noachide”: “The



noachide is the moral being, regardless of his religious beliefs” (UH, 119). In Judaism, the stranger or foreigner and eventually also any gentile are understood as “noachide,” as children of Noah just like everyone else, as long as they abide by seven moral laws that apply to Jews and non-Jews alike. These laws include laws against murder, theft, idolatry, sexual licence, blasphemy, idolatry, and eating meat from a live animal, as well as a law enforcing court authority. In following these laws, the stranger should benefit from the same civil rights and protection as any native of a given human community or society. Levinas adds that the Talmud goes even further to claim moral obligation towards idolaters as well (i.e., those who do not fall under the concept of noachide) as the only way towards universal peace for Judaism. As such, the moral sphere privileged by Judaism extends to all of humanity, and the concept of noachide constitutes an important precursor to the idea of universal human rights. (UH, 119 - 120) Through this interpretation of the concept of noachide, we can also see why the stranger plays such an important symbolic role as the other par excellence in Levinasian ethics. And the stranger can stand in here not only for the other who is not from my community or society, but also for the other whose religious beliefs (including non-belief) differ from my own.

To summarize, Judaism captures the spirit of secularism in the following ways according to Levinas: (i) it strives to ensure peace through an ethical vocation and a conception of civil rights that are universally applicable across differences in religious belief and origin; (ii) it is inherently pluralistic, dialogical, and open-

minded. This does not mean that all actual forms of Judaism necessarily embody these traits, but for Levinas these traits are what one could call the heart or essence of Judaism.

Some central factors often cited in the genesis of Western secularism are the rise of modern science and the rise of the modern state, with the emphasis placed in the latter on individual rights and freedoms, including freedom of conscience and religion both in the sense of freedom to believe and freedom from belief. In the last fifty years, progressive philosophers and theologians have attempted to respond to the challenge secularism poses to religious belief by spelling out the relevance of a biblical faith within a profane world and bringing to the fore the religious roots of secularism. Many of these responses have come from a Christian standpoint. Levinas’ emphasis on the ethical vocation of religion provides a valuable addition to these responses from a Jewish perspective.

More importantly, however, by restricting the primary meaning of religious belief in general to our interactions with other human beings – regardless of whether they share our beliefs or not – he offers a meeting place, on the ethical level, for a dialogue between the different stories that can be told about ultimate meanings in a pluralistic and secular society. Levinas’ description of ethics as an openness and responsiveness to the other beyond one’s own self-interest can be seen as a call to give a new meaning to religion in secular societies through our ethical obligations toward others. Secularized religion obligates us to each other directly – “as if there were no God to count on”.