


2008

Emmanuel Levinas and the Judaism of the Good Samaritan

Lawrence A. Vogel

Connecticut College, larry.vogel@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/philfacpub>

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vogel, Larry. "Emmanuel Levinas and the Judaism of the Good Samaritan." *Levinas Studies*, 3, 2008: 193-208.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

Emmanuel Levinas and the Judaism of the Good Samaritan

**Lawrence Vogel
Connecticut College**

A question crops up every time I discuss Levinas with thoughtful students and colleagues: namely, what is implied by, and can we live with, his notion that the Other is "higher" than the self - that the Other is "one for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all"?ⁱ Without fail, newcomers to Levinas's ideas raise two issues. The first centers on the question: What is my responsibility to strangers? If I "owe all" to a stranger in need to the point where his welfare and life come before mine, how can I possibly address the interests of my loved ones, friends, colleagues and fellow citizens, not to mention my own needs? Is Levinas suggesting that we have a moral duty to be saints?

The second issue revolves around the question: What is the responsibility of a victim towards her persecutor? Is Levinas implying that a Jew being herded off to Auschwitz "owes everything" to his Nazi captor? What can it mean for a victim to encounter the face of a rapist and to "substitute" herself for him? And should she?

I shall approach these persistent issues by first explaining how Levinas grounds his claim that the face-to-face-relationship is asymmetrical and that "I am responsible for the Other, without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it."ⁱⁱ

Levinas accuses the entire history of Western ontology “from Parmenides on” of being driven by the urge to bring Being under the command of the thinking self, so that the "Other" (or "Infinite") can be corralled within the horizon of the ego’s own cares and possibilities.ⁱⁱⁱ This sweeping indictment permits Levinas to draw a stark contrast between two roads in Western thought: 1) an avenue originating in Athens - the egoism of ontology, with its penchant for a "totalizing" grasp of Being - and 2) a path, emanating from Jerusalem, that is less travelled by philosophers and that Levinas calls “metaphysics.”^{iv}

The heart’s desire of the Jerusalemite, the metaphysician, is not to master Being but to be ethically responsible for the Other, whose very face is received as the locus of God’s commandment, “Thou shalt not murder.” The face is a vessel of the *Torah’s* prophetic call to give to “the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor.” The quality of our lives is measured, in Levinas’s Judaic tradition, not by our knowledge or authenticity, but by the attention we pay to these “Others”: the needy who are unneeded, whose cries are inconvenient, and whose lives may seem useless to those intent on mastering Being.

But what has Levinas’s move from Being to “the Other” to do with philosophy? Doesn’t pitting Jerusalem against Athens, metaphysics against ontology, also mean pitting faith against philosophy, revelation against reason? Levinas answers with a resounding "No!," contending that Judaism's message does not require submission to the texts or laws of the Jewish tradition in particular, but is immediately available to every human being in what the human face-to-face encounter reveals on its own terms. And this encounter can be articulated philosophically.

Worldly things derive their meaning from the roles they play within a context organized around the cognitive powers and practical needs of the ego. Knowing, using and enjoying things in one's environment involve "assimilating" what is alien to "the Same." The Other, however, has absolute meaning "all by himself," prior to how he fits into the ego's grasp of Being. When the face is encountered for what it is, the inexhaustibility of what it signifies - the Other - is welcomed as a Good-in-itself for whom I am responsible.

This transcendent Good is acknowledged in its "Infinity," as coming from "beyond Being," neither in a Platonic intellectual intuition nor in a Heideggerian mood of anxiety, but in the feeling of shame that attests to the awakening of one's conscience before the Other. Levinas writes:

Conscience... is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls into question the naive right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent... The Other is not initially a fact, is not an obstacle, does not threaten me with death; he is desired in my shame.^v

Levinas's key idea is that the Other is not just an alter ego, for if he were, then our relationship would be symmetrical: I would be another You, and You another I. Levinas goes beyond Martin Buber's account of the I/Thou relationship by insisting that I am more responsible for you than you are for yourself, and that my responsibility for you is not contingent upon your mutuality.^{vi} You approach me from a height. You face me

immediately, before I face myself. I only face myself - to the extent that I ever do - when I step back in reflection, but by that time I have already been claimed by the commandment to serve your good. Here's how Levinas puts it:

The Other is higher than I am because the first word of the face is "Thou shalt not murder." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. I, whoever I may be, as the "first person," I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call. The mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth... are presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not, then we would not even say, before an open door, "After you, Sir!" It is an original "After you, Sir!" that I have tried to describe. ^{vii}

Ethics can only get a foothold in our lives, Levinas insists, if we can overcome our natural temptation to "look out for old number one." He notes:

There is a Jewish proverb which states that 'the other's material needs are my spiritual needs': it is this disproportion, or assymetry, that characterizes the ethical refusal of the first truth of ontology - the struggle to be. Ethics is, therefore, against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first. ^{viii}

Each organism orders its world around its own survival and prosperity and is, at bottom, states Levinas, “hateful” of others.^{ix} Life on its own terms is a war of all against all. Even that sublime accomplishment of the *cogito* - ontology - is, by Levinas’s rendering, just a sophisticated means by which we humans express our *conatus essendi* - our animal will-to-live - by mastering what is around us. Within nature, there are subjective goods, but no objective Good-in-itself, and so no basis for ethical responsibility.

Consequently, the very possibility of ethics demands reference to a supernatural Good: a meaning that reveals itself from “beyond Being” because it requires one to be able to sacrifice one's interests - and even one’s life - for the sake of the Other. Regardless of whether one identifies the Other’s face as the trace of God, one is responding to a supernatural summons when one suppresses nature in order to welcome one’s neighbor. Our bodies sets the stage for our being able to transcend our nature and condemn “the survival of the fittest” in the name of “Shalom!” And paradoxically, we reveal our spirituality most fundamentally by tending to the material needs of others: the needs of life itself.

Levinas agrees that the ethical message he discerns within the I/You encounter is perhaps best exemplified by Jesus’s selfless lovingkindness. But he interprets the Gospels as conveying the same basic lesson that was already present in the Prophets' injunction to give to “the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor.” Still, Levinas’s emphasis on *agape* - one’s exclusive, self-sacrificing exposure to the particular Other one happens to face - seems to conflict with the Prophets’ ideal of justice: a moral principle that requires that all Others, and even oneself, as “the Other of Others,” be respected equally.

Levinas concedes that love needs justice because the “third parties” who stand outside the immediacy of the I/You encounter are also one’s neighbors. Justice demands

that incomparables be compared: that the unique Other to whom one is absolutely devoted be placed within the wider human community and be acknowledged as "only one among others." Justice requires that the conscientious self step back from the immediacy of the one-for-another and adopt a posture of neutrality: treating everyone as having equal rights. Levinas acknowledges that justice is recommended by the *Torah* itself, but argues that ethical priority lies in mercy (*rahamim*): simple acts of caring. Long before the recently celebrated debate between Lawrence Kohlberg and Carol Gilligan over the relative importance of justice and care, the Judaic tradition has known that a concern with justice's "abstract order of rules" too easily degenerates into an "ideological rationalism" that is forgetful of the unique Other who needs a helping hand.^x

It should come as no surprise to us now that Levinas reads the encounter with God - one's submission before the majesty of the Other who commands from "on high" - into the phenomenology of the interhuman relationship itself. In presenting itself as coming from beyond the world organized around one's own, and even society's, needs, the face of the Other person is the "trace" of the divine. Metaphysics, in Levinas's sense, is ethics because the Good-in-itself is revealed in the experience of one-for-another. And ethics, in turn, is already religion: because proximity to God can arise only through devotion to the other person. The transcendent is an immanent moment of the ethical relation itself. The personal presence of God resides in the I/You encounter, and love of God resides in love of neighbor.

But isn't faith something above and beyond morality? Levinas relates an anecdote told by Hannah Arendt shortly before her death. "When she was a child in her native Konigsberg, one day she said to the rabbi who was teaching her religion: "You know, I have lost my faith." And the rabbi responded: "Who's asking for it?"" Levinas remarks:

[T]he response was typical. What matters is not ‘faith,’ but ‘doing.’ ... [A]re believing and doing different things? What does believing mean? What is faith made of? Words, ideas? Convictions? What do we believe with? With the whole body! With all my bones. (Psalm 35:10) What the rabbi meant was: “Doing good is the act of belief itself.” That is my conclusion. ^{xi}

Levinas concedes that the Christian idea of God’s kenosis - the humility of God’s willingness “to live and die for all men” by appearing on earth as the suffering servant of the vulnerable - is “close to the Jewish sensibility.” ^{xii} But he rejects the theological concepts of transubstantiation and the Eucharist that come to surround the personality of Jesus. The obsession with theology attaches too much importance to faith and forgets the Judaic message that belief lies in *mitzvot*: the performance of good works. Indeed, "theology" - with its “Greek” root in the desire to comprehend God’s nature, the nature of perfect substance - is a kind of idolatry: the exercise of “the spiritually refined” who, in the telling words of Isaiah 58, want to see the face of God and enjoy His proximity before they have freed their slaves and fed their hungry.

Levinas’s account of how God presents Himself, as forever absent, through the face of the other person - captures three crucial features of the Judaic idea of God. First, God is infinitely Other. It would be idolatry to believe that one can grasp Him in a finite image. Divine incarnation is foreign to Judaic spirituality. Yahweh - He whose face no human can look upon and survive - has abdicated us out of trust in our ability to hear Him from afar. Second, in His infinite separation from us, God nonetheless remains present, for His law is revealed through the face of the Other. To compensate for His separation

from us, God has put *Torah* into his childrens' hands, and, writes Levinas, "one is justified in loving *Torah* even more than God." It is the glory of Judaism, according to Levinas, to welcome a God who does not want to possess us but who wants us to be responsible so that our work has real importance. "To veil His face in order to demand everything from man": this, remarks Levinas, is "an austere humanism bound to a difficult adoration."^{xiii} Finally, Levinas's is a personal God who singles each of us out for responsibility. We stand alone not, as Heidegger would have it, before our own death, but in the irreplaceable burden we bear for those whose lives embody a Good-in-itself that absolutely transcends our own life and death.

Levinas brings all humans into the orbit of Judaic experience because the I/You encounter, constitutive of being a human agent, bears pre-philosophical and even pre-textual testimony to the Judaic understanding of the relationship between humanity and God. "Thou shalt not murder" is, as Levinas puts it, "a Saying that is prior to any Said": an imperative addressed to the singular individual, through the face of the Other, that precedes all products of tradition or reflection, including ontological accounts of the meaning of Being.^{xiv} Though commandment takes possession of the ego before one has time to evaluate it reflectively and autonomously, our reason can articulate the meaning of this experience by a phenomenological description of the revelation implicit in the face-to-face encounter. In this regard, then, faith is not alien to philosophy, revelation not immune to reason.

Against Heidegger in particular, who represents the apotheosis of the egoism of ontology, Levinas uses phenomenology to establish that no anxious assertion of freedom can excuse a shameful failure of ethical responsibility, no appeal to authenticity can

override the commandment not to murder, and that any philosophy, like Heidegger's, that cannot set this fundamental limit is complicit in the Nazis' crime against the Absolute.

II

At last I return to the questions that my thoughtful students and colleagues inevitably pose when they become acquainted with Levinas's ideas: in particular, his claim that I "owe everything" not to my parents, spouse, children or community - but to strangers, and even persecutors. Everyone agrees that Levinas's philosophy is sublime. But is it true? Does it describe our human reality, or rather express a fantasy, perhaps fuelled by resentment that, given human nature, we cannot be as noble as Levinas would have us be?

What immediately makes Levinas's view seem incredible is his assertion that the entire history of Western ontology falls under the sway of egoism and so cannot ground the apparently minimal imperative, "Thou shalt not murder." If Levinas were correct, then the tradition of reason stemming from Athens could not even account for what makes the Holocaust a moral abomination. But surely much of the inspiration for the best of Western philosophy derives from the attempt to justify the priority of justice over injustice. One need think only of Socrates's reply to Thrasymachus or Kant's rejoinder to Hobbes to conclude that the fight against an egoistic conception of human nature - and rational support for the virtue of respecting, and even promoting, the interests of other human beings - lies at the heart of Western ontology.

Levinas seems to argue that anything short of "Jerusalem's" insistence on the asymmetry of the I/You relationship and the priority of Other over self must end up

giving priority to self over Other. If so, he seems to overlook a major strand of the ethical tradition springing from Athens: humanism, born of a regard for the dignity and moral equality of all human beings, rooted in our shared capacity for reason. When my students and colleagues object to Levinas, they usually articulate a humanistic perspective of a roughly Kantian variety that forbids us from using one another solely as means, and so condemns murder. Because this perspective comprises so much of contemporary moral commonsense, it is worth spelling it out in order to identify what Levinas has against it. Why does Levinas consider rationalistic humanism, in spite of its insistence on the moral equality of all persons, to be a species of egoism incapable of providing us with ethical protection against our murderous impulses?

On the Kantian view our primary responsibilities to others are negative: do not harm or inflict evil upon anyone. Our positive responsibilities to help others in need are more qualified: do good - or prevent or repair evil - sometimes. Our resources to help are limited. Because 'ought' implies 'can,' there is no obligation to help everyone. One has a positive duty to help strangers only in special cases and when the cost to one's own welfare is "within reason." Ordinary morality amounts to limiting norms, mostly negative, which we may not violate, but within which we may live such a life as we deem good for ourselves. A saint who dedicates his entire life to helping strangers may be an object of our admiration, but he is not emulated from the perspective of ordinary morality, for a saintly life requires the sacrifice of too many of the goods that make most peoples' lives worth living.^{xv}

Within the framework of ordinary morality, Bernard Williams has defined the conditions of "the moral principle of rescue" as follows:

- IF 1) V ("Victim") is in peril, and
- 2) H ("Helper") is "saliently related" to V's peril, and
- 3) H can hope to offer effective aid to V, and
- 4) the cost to H is not unreasonably high,
- THEN H ought to help V. ^{xvi}

When the rescuer goes above and beyond the call of duty and risks his life to save a stranger, the stranger does not have a right to be helped and the rescuer has acted in a "supererogatory" manner. Other bystanders cannot be faulted as if they behaved unconscienably by refusing to expose themselves to similar dangers.

Williams points out that the expectation of rescue is further diminished when the victim is in peril because of the hostility of a third party, P ("Persecutor"). In "the hostility case," the cost to H of helping poor V is probably too high. At best, it is only reasonable to expect a group to come to the victim's aid. But even here there are problems: 1) the coordination problem - who will assume the greatest risk by daring to take the lead? - and 2) the authorization problem: is H entitled to confront the persecutor, even if he is able to do so? Perhaps this is a job for the police. Of course when the persecutor is himself a representative of the police, the risk to would-be rescuers becomes unbearable.

Though ordinary morality precludes one's becoming a murderer, it rarifies the conditions under which one has a duty to become a rescuer. And Kant is notorious for going further than this. Should the persecutor inquire as to the whereabouts of his would-be victim, a moral agent, according to Kant, should not lie in order to protect the victim, but should only make sure that he himself does not become a murderer. Most advocates of ordinary "Kantian" morality would not go as far as Kant on this score because the vast

majority of us take the duty to tell the truth to be less stringent than the duty to protect the innocent. But when one must lie to the police in order to save the innocent, the would-be liar is likely to perceive this act as being as dangerous as positively rescuing the victim, and so it may seem unreasonable to expect of him that he ought to protect the innocent by lying. The line between moral principle and collaboration has become fine indeed.

III

This reflection on the place of rescue within ordinary "Kantian" morality gets us to the heart of Levinas's suspicion that a kind of "egoism" lurks within the tradition of rationalistic humanism. For what does this tradition come to if it cannot meet the apparently straightforward demand that ethics inoculate us against the moral collapse that accompanies genocide? If it is not ethically incumbent upon a person to rescue strangers in need because it would be unreasonable for him to significantly risk his interests, then the imperative to prevent genocide in fact exceeds the capacity of what conscience requires of us, even while conscience purports to be sustained by the principle, "Thou shalt not murder."

Levinas calls attention to the gulf between 1) a theory of justice that can ground the impartial judgment that murder is wrong because each of us is only "one among others" and 2) an existential perspective from which the individual feels responsible to do what he can to stop the horror of murder, even at great cost to himself, because the particular Other he faces comes before himself. Although ordinary "Kantian" morality gives us a basis for condemning genocide, it is full of excuses when it comes to the

individual's opportunity to be a rescuer: to serve "the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor," those who do not have the power to enforce protection by the social contract.

Relative to the "might makes right" naturalism of the unabashedly egoistic strand of Western ethics - represented by Thrasymachus and Hobbes - Kantian morality proudly presents itself as being "unnatural" - or of pointing to a higher and more demanding potential for human nature than that of gratifying our appetites. What we lose from the perspective of our selfish inclinations, we gain beyond measure from the standpoint of our distinctively human capacity to act as legislators of the moral law and citizens of "the kingdom of ends." In this regard, Kant would seem to concur when Levinas asserts that "ethics is against nature because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first."

Yet relative to Levinas's image of what the "unnaturalness" of ethics demands of us, Kantian reason remains firmly planted in nature's hatefulness towards ethics. The true test for responsibility only arises at the point where, for the good of the Other, I may have to pay an unreasonably high price. The Holocaust would never have happened if individuals had passed this test: if they had not only been able to acknowledge the face of the Other beyond the stereotypes imposed by Nazi ideology, but also been willing to jeopardize their own comfort and even survival for these Others in spite of the fact that shutting them out conformed with Nazi justice. But it was only natural to ask: Why should I take it upon myself to break the law and thereby risk my family's safety in order to save a public enemy whom it is acceptable, even required, to regard with contempt?

When I choose to protect myself rather than expose myself for the Other's sake, I attest to the priority my life has over his when the chips are down. Egoism rears its head when I put my own desire to be (*conatus essendi*) before his and prove myself to be

unwilling to substitute my life for his. Levinas does not deny the natural goodness of life itself, for "the Other's material needs are my spiritual needs," and my being-for-the-Other would be no spiritual achievement if my life were no good to me. Although you and I share in this goodness, each does so in an absolute - and ultimately non-relational - way. I compromise my responsibility for the absolute Good-in-itself of your life unless I am willing to risk my life in order to save yours.

The "bad Samaritan" cannot excuse himself by lamenting, "But justice doesn't require us to risk everything for the sake of mere strangers." According to Levinas, conscience does not let us off the hook so easily, but haunts us with the reminder that we should be ashamed of ourselves if the blood of innocents is on our hands. It is not enough to refrain from committing murder if one has failed to be one's brother's keeper.

Levinas suspends the universal not, as in Kierkegaard, for the sake of a religious particularity at odds with the ethical, but for the sake of an ethical imperative higher than the mere universality of justice: a commandment emanating from the particular, fragile, incomparably valuable life of an Other. What Levinas calls "substitution" goes beyond the reciprocity of ordinary morality in the direction of the particular Other whose welfare and life I may usurp when I merely observe my negative duty not to murder - and before whom I may have no right when it's either his life or mine. The real meaning of "Thou shalt not murder" is "Thou shalt love thy neighbor," and this, Levinas says, is "an odd recommendation for an existence summoned to live at all costs." ^{xvii}

But Levinas's demanding ethics of rescue - of good Samaritanism - not only conflicts with our ordinary "Kantian" morality that emphasizes our negative duties. The radical implications of Levinas's ethics are also resisted by advocates of the *agape* (or neighbor-love) tradition who think that Levinas simply goes too far over to the Other at the expense the integrity of the self.

In his account of the *agape* tradition, John Davenport, drawing on the work of Gene Outka, agrees that there is some truth in Levinas's claim that "the intersubjective relation is non-symmetrical," and this grain of truth is essential to any ethics of neighbor-love.^{xviii} First, our most basic responsibility to Others does not arise from our own volitional acts. The human self emerges in the first place only as responsive to the transcendence of the Other in his own right. Personal existence opens up in the experience of non-self-ownership and the passions to which we are susceptible in virtue of being beyond ourselves. Freedom, as the capacity to choose between good and evil, is already invested with responsibility. Second, our most basic responsibility is not conditioned upon the Other's respecting or caring for us in return, but requires reaching out even without a guarantee of mutuality.

At this point, however, Davenport distinguishes between two main strands of the *agape* tradition. The self-renunciatory strand, with which Davenport identifies Levinas, sees neighbor-love as requiring total self-sacrifice: an altruism that disallows any concern about the self's own well-being. The reconciliatory strand, by contrast, situates neighbor-love in an unstable middle-ground between 1) the ascetic demand for total self-renunciation and 2) the formal symmetry of self-interested parties contracting for mutual advantage.

Davenport contends that only the reconciliatory strand is credible, for reciprocity is not necessarily narcissistic, and it has a role to play within *agape* itself. Though my most basic responsibility to the Other is non-volitional, the exercise of responsibility involves coordinating multiple claims, given the concrete relationships I have with particular Others. Though every Other faces me with his basic right not to be harmed, some command my more positive responsibilities, depending on the situation and my prior relationship with them. Furthermore, though my most basic responsibility to the Other includes no assurance of mutuality, neighbor-love is consistent with self-love and personal integrity to the extent that *agape* requires resistance to the Other's effort to exploit me and opposition to his aggression towards third parties. On the reconciliatory view, justice is an integral part of love, not a limit upon it, because *agape* does not involve "writing my neighbor a blank check."

The central flaw in Levinas's ethics, according to Davenport, is endemic to the self-renunciatory strand of the *agape* tradition: namely, it deprives reciprocity of any meaningful role within *agape* and so drives a wedge between love and justice. Self-renunciatory love, with its unconditional devotion to the particular Other, even to the persecutor, must stand defenseless before injustice. Davenport's objection mirrors the so-called "persecutor issue" persistently voiced by my own aforementioned students and colleagues when they first encounter Levinas.

Levinas insists time and again, however, that being the servant or hostage of the Other does not mean becoming his slave. States Levinas:

If I am alone with the Other, I owe him everything; but there is someone else. Do I know what my neighbor is in relation to someone else? Do I know if someone else

has an understanding with him - or is his victim? Who is my neighbor? It is therefore necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incomparable. The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other I must establish with other men; there is thus a necessity to moderate this privilege of the Other; from whence comes justice. ^{xix}

The persecutor must be resisted in the name of "the other Others" - and "even myself" - to whom his face refers. Still, Levinas insists that justice receives its inspiration from the effort to attend to the individual. The need to make and impose impartial political and legal judgments should not lead us to "forget the uniqueness of the other person," presumably even the persecutor, "whose right is, after all, at the origin of rights, yet always a new calling." ^{xx}

The real issue, then, is what Davenport's reconciliatory strand of the *agape* tradition instructs us about our responsibility towards strangers in need: in particular, victims of persecution, who cannot count on the legal justice system to protect them. Here is where Levinasian responsibility requires genuine sacrifice and self-renunciation in favor of the Other "whose death I fear more than my own." That justice ought to be the political or institutional outgrowth of neighbor-love begs the question of what my responsibilities are when institutions do not protect my neighbor who is hungry, thirsty, sick, homeless or defenseless.

The real implication of Davenport's claim that reciprocity rooted in self-love is compatible with *agape* may well be the likelihood that a person of integrity will be so attached to his own kith and kin that he will fail the acid test of responsibility. One senses that Davenport's "reconciliation" may really be a way of protecting the ordinary "Kantian"

virtues - on the grounds that good Samaritanism as a way of living would leave one with a decentered and disintegrated self. But it is unclear when aversion to the risk of self-sacrifice in the name of balancing neighbor-love and self-love becomes an excuse: a rationalization for slamming the door on "the orphan, the widow, the stranger and the poor." Davenport's reconciliatory *agapeism* verges on becoming so watered down that one can scarcely imagine a cause for which one would jeopardize the so-called "integrity" of the self, centered as it is on loved ones to whom I have prior responsibilities by virtue of their already being part of my social world.

V

In his sublime sermon, "On Being a Good Neighbor," Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us that the "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan is "anyone who lies at life's roadside."^{xxi} What makes the Good Samaritan a paragon of neighborly virtue is that "concern for others is the first law of his life." King describes this altruism as being universal, excessive and dangerous. It is "universal" because it opens its arms to all human beings, regardless of the accidents of race, religion, or nationality. It is "dangerous" because it requires that one risk one's position, prestige and life - and even the comfort and safety of one's own family - for the sake of strangers. It is "excessive" because it demands that one show compassion and not mere pity: that one walk the extra mile with the victim, not merely make sure someone else gets him what he needs. Perhaps this is the only ethics that can inoculate us against the moral collapse that accompanies genocide. But is human nature up to the task?

Levinas reminds us that a conscience awake to the needs of "anyone who lies at life's roadside" knows no bounds. For it is not enough even to substitute oneself for those one happens to encounter; perhaps one is hiding behind egoism by not going out of one's way to seek out the Other. We are being dishonest if we do not admit that the saint embodies the regulative ideal of the ethical life - and that any way of living short of saintliness should be haunted by shame. The commandment to "love thy neighbor" is, as Levinas concedes, not recommended for those who take their own lives too seriously.

But we are equally haunted by another Jew, Sigmund Freud, who reminds us: "The commandment is impossible to fulfill; such an enormous inflation of love can only lower its value, not get rid of the difficulty." ^{xxii} We cannot but ask whether the words of this "atheist" are closer to Jewish teaching than those of the Talmudic master, Emmanuel Levinas.

ⁱ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 89.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 98.

ⁱⁱⁱ The two main works in which Levinas elaborates this argument are Totality and Infinity (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) and Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981) both translated by Alphonso Lingis.

^{iv} For a clear account of Levinas's version of the Athens/Jerusalem distinction, see "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" in Face to Face with Levinas, ed. Richard Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).

^v Levinas, Totality and Infinity, p. 84.

^{vi} For Levinas's first extended critique of Buber, see Levinas's essay, "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" in The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Blackwell,

1989). Most instructive, too, is a dialogue between Buber and Levinas represented in Sydney and Beatrice Rome, eds., Philosophical Interrogations (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). For later discussions of Buber, see "Martin Buber's Thought and Contemporary Judaism," "Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Philosophy," and "A Propos of Buber: Some Notes," in Levinas, Outside the Subject, trans. Michael B. Smith (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1993).

^{vii} Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 88.

^{viii} "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," p. 24.

^{ix} Ibid., p. 26.

^x For his interpretation of the relation between care and justice, see Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks," in In the Time of the Nations, ed. Michael Smith, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

^{xi} Levinas, "Judaism and Christianity" in In the Time of the Nations, p. 164.

^{xii} Levinas, Ibid., p. 162.

^{xiii} Levinas, Difficile Liberte: Essais sur le Judaisme, 2nd edition (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), p. 193. This passage is translated by Adriaan Peperzak in "Judaism According to Levinas," Ch. 3 of Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 27.

^{xiv} For Levinas's "official" account of the relation between "Saying" and "the Said," analogous but not identical with his earlier distinction between "Infinity" and "Totality," see Otherwise than Being.

^{xv} For his account of why helping those in need is an "imperfect" duty, see Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton (New York: Harper and Row, 1964). On the worry that "impartialist" accounts of morality, whether Kantian or Utilitarian, are too self-abnegating, see Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," Journal of Philosophy (Volume LXXIX, No. 8, August, 1982).

^{xvi} Bernard Williams, "Is International Rescue a Moral Issue?," Social Research (Volume 62, No. 1, 1995), p. 67.

^{xvii} Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks," p. 133.

^{xviii} See John Davenport, "Levinas's Agapeistic Metaphysics of Morals: Absolute Passivity and the Other as Eschatological Hierophany," Journal of Religious Ethics, 1998.

^{xix} Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, p. 90.

^{xx} Levinas, "The Bible and the Greeks," p. 135.

^{xxi} Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor," in ed. Gary Perspece, Introduction to Ethics (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995).

^{xxii} Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 90.