

From Marx to Levinas: an Antihumanist Ethics

*Serap Ayşe Kayatekin*¹

*Jack Amariglio*²

Introduction

In the excellent collection the *Handbook of Economics and Ethics* (2009), expertly constructed and edited by Irene van Staveren and Jan Peil—a text that called out to be written by many critics within the official discipline of Economics—we are introduced to a slew of sources and concepts that comprise the interventions within and outside of Economics that have placed ethical discourses, their logics, and their major auteurs, at the center of a new uprising in economic thinking. And yet, while this Handbook is a major advance over the status of ethical considerations from previous generations within mainstream and even some heterodox economics, as it is both suitably cumulative and comprehensive, it is not at all a surprise, to us at least, that but for a brief reference by our oft-time collaborator, David Ruccio (Ruccio, in van Staveren and Peil, (2009, 386), the massive work on contemporary ethics by the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, is left out by the overwhelming number of contributors to these entries. The writers of these entries include many, if not most, of the top economists who write on the role that ethical thought and behavior come to play in everything from the mechanics of the market to the moral stances of the founders of the discipline and still further to the current hot topics of happiness and hedonism (speculative greed, anyone?) in economic subjectivity. Yet, to a person, with the one exception we have noted, these contributors have not sought the impressive oeuvre of Levinas as a means to reconstruct, from the ground up, a new and perhaps more radical, because antihumanist, ethical theory for economics.

The neglect of such late 20th century French philosophers and other continental and even “outré” philosophical scholars as Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Althusser, Cixous, Irigaray, and many others—that is, philosophers who are far from the dominant Anglo-American mainstreams in their own fields—is of a piece with the relative indifference to and the bypassing of Levinas and his work as a place from which one can begin to reshape nearly all approaches to ethical stances, and certainly ones that have long dominated the economics profession.

Levinas is not granted his own entry in the *Handbook of Economics and Ethics*; the best that can be done (and Ruccio does his best) is that he arises as just another name in a broader “postmodern assault on modern ethics.” Yet, if Levinas’s work were to be accorded a place of prominence even within this postmodern assault, it would start with his disorienting insistence on grounding ethics in a position about alterity, about

1. School of Arts, Sciences and Technology, Division of Humanities and Social Sciences, The American College of Thessaloniki, Pylea, Greece.

² Department of Economics, Merrimack College, MA, USA.

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the ultimate and infinite responsibility for the “Other.” This turns out to be poison for all positions that start from the category of “the same,” as is the case with most humanist thought (the bulk of economic thinking here included), where the central tenet is that ethics must have something to do with administering a set of obligations and responsibilities, that are the result of reasoned argument, leading to the recognition of the potential common humanity—the sameness—of us all. There are no golden rule exercises (“do unto others as you would have done unto you”) to help save face and faith within a Levinasian approach, nor are there adages to consult that are the result of an applied reason from which would emerge congenial or not-so-congenial determinations of our essential (most western) humanity.

We elaborate on this momentarily, but it is at least worthwhile to point out that most economists writing on ethics within or in relation to economics have a very small source base for their mostly humanist positions. This mirrors quite closely the situation that has prevailed for the longest time, which is that economists, from neoclassicals and Keynesians, even to institutionalist and many Marxists, have held on tightly to a narrow set of philosophical heroes, starting from Locke, Hume, Kant, Bentham, and then, later, perhaps Veblen, or Commons, and most recently Sen, Rawls, Nozick, Nussbaum, and still others besides. Yet, in tracing these lineages, we can see that most economists, and certainly the ethicists among them, have studiously avoided the lines of thought that descend from Nietzsche and other “non-analytic” continental thinkers, such as Kierkegaard through to Heidegger, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty or in recent years, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Bourdieu, and, of course Levinas. We are still waiting for the book that explains how it has come to pass that that in the much ballyhooed “marketplace of ideas,” only certain psychologists, or certain science writers, or in this case, certain philosophers or scholars of ethics are the ones raised up to the highest privilege of contributing preferred and continually repeated and utilized theoretical entry points. While others, perhaps more famous in other disciplines and theoretical terrains, are simply pushed to the side by mainstream thinkers, whose ongoing work on ethics and economics comes up empty where a giant of ethical thought like Levinas is concerned. Perhaps Ruccio has it exactly right when he claims that Levinas’s intervention is often read as a commentary and extension of notions of undecidability and infinity (of responsibility for the other) and, as such, runs up against sneeringly dismissive reactions from “real” and “grounded” and “scientific” ethicists. Perhaps these ethical thinkers are more acceptable to a majority of academic economics because they adhere to the general norms of analytical linguistic usage and/or “logic, or because they put forward their ethical propositions in a vaguely”post-positivist,” Anglo-American style. Nonetheless, this style results in a straitjacket for discourses that continue to contend that meanings, including ethical meanings, and actions connected to these meanings, are always/already more indeterminate and harder to pin down than most ethicists and their economist followers would condone, let alone embrace.

Perhaps another reason why Levinas is a peripheral voice for economists searching for philosophical ground upon which to build their theories is that Levinas was aggressive till the end of his life in using his particular brand of antihumanist discourse to push back against the ontological bias that he firmly believed served as a major ideological backdrop, but also genocidal foreground, for the plight of ultimately holocausted Jews during the 1920, 30s, and 40s, and especially in Nazi-occupied

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Europe. (a point made in numerous essays of Levinas commentary, but perhaps driven home most forcefully in Howard Caygill's *Levinas and the Political*. (2002)

In any event, the magisterial nature of Levinas's work and the level of engagement with many of the most important continental philosophers of his time, and of course his standing at the top of the list of the philosophers of the Jewish Holocaust and his deep immersion in debates in contemporary Judaism, positions him, curiously enough, talking mostly at cross purposes to the leading lights in the Economics of Ethics (Amartya Sen, for instance). It is surely our hope to make something of Levinas and his ethical discourse for ourselves and for our colleagues in economics, but particularly for heterodox and even more narrowly, Marxian economic and social theory. Only the barest minimum has been done to see if Marx's "ethics" and his theories in which "the others" "play a most decisive role, can be part of a synthetic ethical discourse drawn from both of these major thinkers. The best way forward, we think, is to query Marx with some of the key concepts bequeathed by Levinas, and, in turn, to specify the meanings of notions of otherness, self, ontology, and much else for Marx. We think it can be shown that, in his writings, Marx was "troubled with" these critical concepts. It is our view that Marx produces a specific ethics whenever and wherever in his texts he is assaulting the individual alienation and the class exploitation that particular "others" are subjected to, not as a common fate of "man," as a species-being, but rather as non-centered or non-self-unified members of particular, concrete economic classes. In *Capital*, for example, "others" hold class positions that designate a loosely constructed, but also an open form of subjectivity, which becomes a place from which to attack the very category of "otherness" (or its supposed opposite, human sameness) and the class exploitation that is the fate of these "others." This concretely produced otherness—this almost abject subjectivity—is inestimably useful in bringing forth common action in a more or less instinctive moment/movement. Marx's ambivalent attitude to ontology is what we will be looking at in bringing out the possible connections to Levinas's main concerns.

The thought of Levinas has enjoyed a growing influence in the last decades across a broad spectrum of academic fields. An increasing number of scholars have begun to engage with his work in an ever-widening field of disciplines such as philosophy, theology, psychology, linguistics, sociology, and anthropology. Although a range of philosophers have explored his work in connection to different philosophical strands (such as phenomenology, deconstruction), explorations of (possible) connections of Levinas's thinking to that of Marx, let alone Marxist economics, have been negligible with very few exceptions (Gibbs 1992, Critchley 2000). At first sight, this relative silence is somewhat inexplicable. For example, one can say that Marx's relentless critique of capitalism has ethical underpinnings. Though this need not be true in order to demonstrate that Marx's concepts of alienation and exploitation may be read (like all concepts, with no necessity attached, but, clearly affected by all other terms around them) as connoting the routine denial of justice, whether class-based or universal, to the vast majority of workers and their families and cohorts.

Marx launched his criticism of capitalism as a historically-specifically unjust, unfair society, which had to be transformed. Human agents, he thought, and especially those largely denied the benefits of the bourgeois economy and society, would build a society better-suited for their needs. This project of building a better society was primarily dependent on the extent to which humans could rid themselves of class

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exploitation, which was at the top of Marx's list of social forms that perpetuated injustice and subjugation.

One of the conditions of existence of a more just society in a class-based social formation, like capitalism, is the transformation of the processes of the production, appropriation and distribution of class-based economic surpluses. This transformation involves the ascension in the economic hierarchy of those class processes, perhaps communism, that may be more productive of social justice because less economically exploitative of the mass of workers than capitalism.

While not an ethicist, Marx's fundamental concerns led him to consider ethical stances appropriate to the opposition to capitalism and, on a grander scale, any social system in which the working classes were "robbed" by non-working owners, for example, of "their" labor. Now what is our concern here is how does the Marxian critique of bourgeois values, and his own antipathy to universal, "humanist" ethical positions, derived largely from his later writings, square with Levinas's more consistent and persistent ethical critique as the first order of business (hence :first philosophy) with the world as received?

Ethics is the core of Levinas's work and, as we have already noted, The Holocaust is the background against which his work has to be understood. But Levinas's project extends beyond that of avoiding the repetition of genocide: it embraces a radical critique of Western philosophical tradition which, from the Greeks onwards, has an inherent undercurrent of violence and annihilation which, often enough, explodes into outright calamity and mass catastrophe, such as the Holocaust.

In a sense, Levinas wanted to blend two intimately connected questions for modernism, especially in Europe's violent involvement with modernization. Along the path to modernization various European nations resorted to picking off or eliminating all those determined to be below the level of the modern. Or, in an equally murderous way, they first suspected and then annihilated groups whose supposedly pre-modern sympathies and "secret" oaths made them apparent natural enemies of the enlightened modern European state.

Thus, in his basic philosophy, Levinas sought to reveal the fundamental problem of 'alterity' in western ontology, that is in the way "the other's" nature, character, and place were adjudged "factually" and objectively as a form of human existence, which, of course, is linked to perceiving the 'inhumanity' of many "others" as a basic fact of existence. He believed that unless we confront this problem, a problem that western ontology holds in abeyance, the potential for mass violence such as genocide will always be available as a form of subjective experience.

Marx, we know, unveiled the processes of class exploitation that are at the heart of modern capitalist society, and he sought to show how the transformation of such class structures account for great social transformations. Among these transformations are those that attempt to reverse or destroy the current order of modernist ontology in which there remains a basic tension between an undistinguished humanity (the family of man), for which justice is a presumed and necessary right, and those concrete classes, and individuals (think lumpenproletariat) for whom justice is thin on the ground .

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If Marx is the radical critic of capitalism's specific ontology, for which he is careful not to substitute a revised humanism (perhaps presaging, even blearily, Levinas's more radical and thoroughgoing critique of western ontology as far back as the ancient Greeks), then Levinas is the radical critic of Western ontology *in toto* and certainly with special reference to the way that ontology, in his view, led to the thought processes that produced, organized and rationalized the mass murder of the Jews and other victims of the Holocaust. So, without going any farther, we need to explore, the connections between these two great critics of modernity and its humanist alibi and auto-critique. Will we be able to bring one to bear on the other to further enrich their criticism? Can Levinas's general critique of ontology be used to interrogate Marx's critique of capitalist modernity? Can Marx's critique of class exploitation be deployed to provide further texture to Levinas's critique of ontology? These are the questions that guide our basic exploration of what the cross-fertilization of Levinas and Marx may offer to the field of economic ethics and to all economic ethical theorists that are less than content with the usual contemporary references to the ethical propositions of utilitarianism, Rawlsianism, and even those put forward by the current favorites (for heterodox economists, at least), Sen and Nussbaum

Levinas's Critique of Ontology: Levinas and Antihumanist Ethics

The core of Levinas's work can be interpreted as a radical critique of ontology—ontology--in western philosophical traditions. For Levinas, argues Simon Critchley, ontology is the 'general term for any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding' (2002, 11) In both its idealist and empiricist variations, philosophy is first based on the idea of Being; it is first and foremost the endeavor, the process of understanding, and of comprehending Being. In this act of understanding, there is a very particular relation between the 'I' and the 'Other'. In trying to understand the Other, the I takes it and appropriates it, rendering it the Same. Philosophy, for Levinas, is all about this reduction of the Other. Understanding the Other, knowing the Other is the process of utilizing particular "knowledge procedures" to make the other, in thought and action, like myself. When I know the Other, when I understand the Other, the Other has become like me, he/she has shed any specificity that remains unknown, or at least as something deemed central to his/her being, which is a form of Being's existence.

Levinas's work starts from an observation: that, in fact, the history of western philosophy reveals to us that the attempt to understand, to comprehend, is identical with that of taking the Other and making it the Same. This has all the force of a Nietzschean "'will to know," and all of the, perhaps, pent up, tense and aggressive power of the adage and encouragement to "understand." To understand the Other at all costs involves violence. The desire to comprehend is imposing. This appropriative nature of philosophy, or at least its ontological phase, its nature of reducing the Other to the Same, led Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, to declare it 'digestive philosophy.' (Critchley 2002 16) We can say, in other words, that for Levinas philosophy, as the understanding of Being, culminates in the elimination of alterity. The essential quality of western philosophy which eradicates all alterity in order to construct a conception of human commonality and the unlimited right and access of the understanding is

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Levinas's utmost concern and the driving force of his lifelong project. He argued that it is possible to derive ethics from ontology, and some specific notion of common, shared existence, but it is not desirable. Let us see this argument in detail.

Levinas believed that ontology's inherent quality to eliminate otherness via the dual work of appropriation (thereby reducing the difference) and by not being able to apply understanding to that which is finally judged to be irrevocably different and therefore outside of the norms that reason has created for a common practice based on a shared ethics was a fundamental source of violence in this world. He argues that an ethics based on ontology which reduces alterity to sameness is fundamentally fatal. Levinas's antihumanism has its source exactly in this same observation: if we base our ethics on the sameness of humanity, that is to say, on the idea that we are all human, and that this implies rules of moral etiquette from which we should not deviate, we open the door to violence.

It is not too difficult to see why. Putnam writes, for example, that an ethics which derives from ontological foundations opens the door for genocide. For, if ethics derives from the notion that we are all human, all that is necessary for an intra-species violence is to believe that some people are not 'really' human, that is, their species-being is held in abeyance, at best, and is determined to be non-conforming to a basic definition of live and species-life. (2002) If the motivation in ethical behavior is the understanding that the Other is really not the Other, but in fact is the Same, then those circumstances in which we are not able to see the Same in the Other (the Me in the Other) have proven over the course at least of modern history to lead to potentially deadly circumstances. The full spectrum of these consequences for non-inclusive allness ranges from indifference to genocide.

Western history is made of constant confrontations with the ontologically-determined or ontologically-defined Other. The planters of the ante-bellum South of the United States considered their slaves as chattel. For many, slaves were human but also not quite, so, therefore they were sub-human. This was the perception which partly legitimized the ownership and thus purchase and sale of human beings. This perception did not much change after the Civil War. In the sharecropping relations of the post-bellum era, former slaves were still looked upon as belonging to a stratum below that of human beings, which perception justified their place at the bottom of a hierarchy reminiscent of medieval Europe. (In Victorian England of the 19th century, working classes did not make it to fully human status. They were somewhere below that privileged point. It is precisely due to their sub-human status that they did what they were doing; laboring, and that their fate as laborers could be hardened into one more hereditary trait, only to be shaken if and when mutations (today we would call them genetic mutations) arose in individual cases.

And, without a doubt, the Holocaust, which is the primary background to all of Levinas's work, is one period in modern history where the failure to acknowledge the humanity of an Other did result in several simultaneous genocides. Nazism worked with a very strictly defined hierarchy of humanity, in which some groups were deemed more human than others. Their eugenics program along with the annihilation practices were justified on purifying "the race" and given greater chance for a superior genetic pool and people such that "humanness" would more adequately be applied to those who were the results of these experiments. The need to produce a

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common humanity, the will to know what these humans essentially consisted of, and the ultimate and homicidal refusal to acknowledge the humanity of all then became the reason for the annihilation of one group by those who did the categorization.

When looked at from the perspective of Levinas's philosophy, the history of European liberalism based on the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity have contained an irresolvable contradiction in its midst. The imperial and colonial expansion of Europe in tandem with these principles shows us exactly how the search for common humanity is inherently beset with an aggressive search to seek out and know all those initially perceived as different, to which then a puzzle or paradox presented itself, and is therefore beset with the resolution of this puzzle in the form of the possibility of not finding, or failing at finding that common humanity. Those who were not deemed human or not quite human were also not deemed worthy of equality, liberty or of being invited to the fraternity (instantly exclusive of sorority to start with). This is the point Critchley makes: he argues that the current ambivalence that besets European liberal thinking is due to the realization that attempts at establishing a political order (of peace) based on the (Greek wisdom) of autonomy, equality, reciprocity and solidarity have also legitimized the violence of imperialism and colonialism. (2002 25)

If philosophy is the search for ontological truth, then ethics comes before philosophy. This reworked order of logical and perhaps even historical appearance makes it possible then to reverse the relation between ontology and ethics. The reversal allows us to consider being not driven first and foremost by a will to know, but, instead, being as a relation to the Other which is not reducible to comprehension. (Critchley 2002 12) Ethics therefore is 'otherwise than knowledge' (*ibid* 11) It does not come from knowledge. It is not knowledge. It is a relation of 'otherwise than being'.

In order to understand Levinas's argument on ethics, we have to keep in mind that ethics is a critique (*ibid* 15). Ontology can never provide us with the ground for ethics, because in ontology we cannot find the space for radical critique. Ontology's main purpose is to assert and reassure that what is there—being—can be understood, and this doesn't require the technique of critique. Ethics cannot derive from ontology, for ontology cannot 'confront other-qua-other' Philosophy, for Levinas, cannot be challenged by another other than itself. It is incapable of confronting the other on the other's own terms. (Treanor 2007 31) 'Levinas arguments assert that philosophies based ontological foundations do not allow the self to encounter anything truly foreign, anything other than which merely orbits the self as a satellite' (*ibid* 19) In ethics, in that relation which cannot be reduced to ontology, the alterity of the Other, the 'otherness' of the Other remains intact.

Ethics is not grounded upon Reason. It cannot be based on any 'because'. Acts of 'goodness' which rely on explanations as to why the act has been undertaken are not genuinely ethical acts. If I explain my desire to help another on the basis of the humanity of the Other, then I am not being truly ethical. This is because, any explanation of an act of goodness which bases itself on Reason simultaneously delineates the circumstances when I will not be willing to help the other. If I help the Other who is starving by the reasoning that starvation is deadly for human beings, does it mean that my desire for help may not be forthcoming if the starving Being is not someone I consider human? Principles of ethical behavior, for Levinas, are

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suspect, for when people are in need we stretch out our hands to them. This behavior is not 'explained' on the basis of anything. Ethical behavior is not what it is because we help the Other because he/she also is a human being. Ethical behavior is ethical when in the relation to the Other, the Other keeps its alterity. For Levinas, this relation to the Other where the Other maintains its radical Otherness is our fundamental obligation.

In a fascinating essay on Levinas's thinking and its relation to Judaism, Putnam argues that, to be human in the normative sense means to say *hineni. Here I am*. This is a command without a commander, it is a primordial obligation which is not grounded on any reasoning. Putnam argues that if you have to ask the question 'why' for this obligation, if you wonder why you 'should put yourself out for him/her?' you are not yet human' (2002 39).

This command (without a commander) to say '*hineni*', the ethical command is not reciprocal and is infinite. It is something one feels or intuits, rather than arrived at by reasoning. (*ibid* 54) Putnam goes on to argue that Levinas is more like Hume in thinking of ethics as a relation, a reaction. But there is an important difference: in Hume since the essence of ethics is one's ability to *sympathize* with others, it still relies on the perception of sameness of the other with me. We may be able to sympathize with some, but not all. And, if we fail to sympathize with some but not others, then we are not ethical. Ethics, in this sense is a universal position, yet it is not based upon a humanist first principle or assumption. Sympathy works on the basis of our ability to think the other like me: 'What would I do if I were in his/her position?' The necessity of understanding the Other, of positing the Other in terms of a Being that is similar to Me, reveals the cracks inherent in ethics which derive from philosophy (based on ontology).

For a relation to the ethical the complete and absolute alterity of the Other has to be perceived and respected. Only in a relation to another in which the radical (complete) alterity of the other is kept, can we talk about ethics. Only in a relation in which we are free from all 'ontological necessities, cares' can we speak of being ethical.

The ethical relation for Levinas needs to be asymmetric: it is not based on reciprocity, in fact is characterized by 'radical nonreciprocity' (Ciaramelli 1991 88) In fact, ethics should precede reciprocity. Because, a search to found ethics on reciprocity is to seek, once again, a 'sameness' with the Other. (Putnam *op cit* 39) This is exactly what is missing, for good reason, in Levinas' ethical formulation. For, in making one's self available' to the Other, in saying *hineni* I, and only, I am obliged without any expectation whatsoever of a similar obligation from the Other. This responsibility is my responsibility and mine only. Bauman, in his book *Modernity and the Holocaust*, argues eloquently, that the nonreciprocity of the ethical relation is the core of subjectivity:

Indeed, according to Levinas, *responsibility is the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity*. Responsibility which means 'responsibility for the Other' and responsibility 'for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me'. This responsibility, the only meaning of subjectivity, of being a subject, has nothing to do with contractual obligation. It has nothing in common either with my calculation of reciprocal benefit. (1999 183)

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In stretching my hand to the Other I expect nothing from him/her. His/her obligation is his/her affair only. My responsibility for the Other is infinite, without any inquiry. The infinite responsibility is a *calling*; it comes from within. It is not the application of a principle arrived at in whichever way to human relations.

This responsibility, this promptness to say “Here I am” (as Abraham did in Genesis 22:1, 7, 11) to the Other without taking time to inquire about his reasons, is the very humanity of being.[..] (Chalier 1991 124)

In this primordial obligation towards the Other, in going beyond ourselves, we realize our true humanity. In freeing ourselves from the ego and presenting ourselves without any expectation to the Other, we find our true ‘homeland’: ‘[.]a homeland which has nothing to do with becoming rooted or with being the first owner.’ (*ibid*, 124) Chalier likens infinite responsibility towards the Other to the maternal body:

As the maternal body answers for the Other and makes room for him or her inside itself, it is evicted from its harbor and disturbed so far as to be out of breath, and this is precisely the signification of subjectivity. It is the ethical signification of the maternal saying. The “pre-original not resting on oneself” of the maternal body entails anxiety and listening but it lacks free choice. It is the time for an inalienable mercy for the Other, an infinite patience when facing an election that gives birth to the self in the very moment that it interrupts its essence.’ (*ibid* 126)

| In this profound ‘being-for-the-other’, in this constant state of being ‘hostage’ there is no choice, no exercise of free will. The maternal body does not exercise choice in the way it makes way for the Other within it. The relation of the mother’s body to the Other within does not depend on a conscious decision. It has nothing to do with desire, want, or need. It is not the mother’s purposeful ‘service’ to the Other.

Levinas insists that the ethical relationship is not an expression of commitment. For ‘[.] commitment refers [.] to an intentional thought, an assumption, a subject open upon a present, representation, a logos.’ (1998 136-137) Commitment assumes an ego which, upon reflection, has made the conscious decision to serve the Other. Commitment to the Other reflects the acting upon of a principle arrived at through different thought processes.

In all forms of human relationships where there is commitment, desire to help, charity, altruism, there is an ego. In Levinas’s terms the ethical relationship is different from those. In the latter relationship the ‘I’ ‘does not posit itself, possessing itself and recognizing itself; it is consumed and delivered over, dislocates itself, loses its place, is exiled, relegates itself into itself, but as though its very skin were still a way to shelter itself in being, exposed to wounds and outrage, emptying itself in a no-grounds, to the point of substituting itself for the other, holding on to itself only as it were in the trace of its exile. (*ibid* 138)

This way of relating to the Other is not an act of goodness coming from principles. It is an act that is beyond the ego, in which the ego goes beyond itself, and becomes something other than itself. The ethical act is the radical act of *substitution* for the Other.

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Ciaramelli states that the ethical relation of radical nonreciprocity is prior to ontology, to 'I am'. (1991 88) As written earlier, this relation does not derive its meaning from the universal *logos*. What imposes this command on me is the transcendence of the Other. It is the immediate presence of the Other which I cannot comprehend which impels me to present myself to him/her.

In his work, Levinas presents us with one of the most radical critiques of ontology, and therefore European philosophy. In arguing for an ethics which does not derive from ontology, Levinas takes an absolute position against the humanist tradition. Rather than founding an ethics which comes from the search for a common humanity, the deadly consequences of which have ranged from small acts of charity (which, to be clear, may "help" an other, but also tends to burden him/her with a never ending stigma of a subsumed or subordinated existence) to genocide, he proposes an ethics which acknowledges the complete alterity of the Other, if this is indeed possible. This way, Levinas thinks, the violence inherent in philosophy can be confronted.

Levinas's radical critique to ontology suggests an alternative, an anti-humanist ethics. In this way, his work should also be considered a fundamental critique of European modernity.

From Marx to Levinas

Can we take Levinas's work to initiate a particular critique of modernity? Can his ethics be directed to modern capitalism as the dominant social order? Can Levinas's ethical concerns be reworked together with those of another great critic of modernity: Marx? How can we combine Marx's critique of capitalism as a class society and Levinas's ethics pertaining to modern society more generally? Can there be a productive dialogue between these two thinkers?

As we mentioned above, though the literature on the intersection between Marx and Levinas is sparse (at least in English), Robert Gibbs (1992) is one of the very few thinkers who has made an attempt to explore the possible connections between the work of Levinas and that of Marx. In his article entitled 'A Jewish Context for the Social Ethics of Marx and Levinas,' he reveals similarities of political concern that underlie the work of both thinkers. His analysis is based on interpretations of the 'early Marx.' In what follows, we summarize the argument he presents in this article. Gibbs argues that Marx's work is a critique of the view that the person is a self-sufficient, competitive individual, who freely maximizes his/her satisfaction, the interest-seeking 'economic man.' According to him, Marx's analysis is based on the notion of socially-constituted human beings. Marx, in his early work, argues that while human beings in any society have been socially constituted, only under communism does humanity experience true sociality, because only in a communist society do we encounter the situation 'where one exists for the others and they exist for me' (175). For Marx, writes Gibbs, the basic injustice of capitalism is that 'people serve commodities'; the materialism unleashed in capitalist societies is a kind of 'animal materialism.' Communist society will be different from capitalist society: people will no longer look at things merely as commodities with a price, but will see them as products with a social use. This way, as the use value of a commodity takes precedence over its exchange value, objects will cease to be things 'in which we lose ourselves through our labour' and become, in the sense of Levinas, 'expressions of ourselves.' Thus,

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Each person's hunger will be that of his fellow, and so the satisfaction of those needs will be a social action. In civil society, the satisfaction is social, but only in the modes of oppression (the banker's profit on the farmer's loan is part of the cost of the bread we eat.) (180)

Gibbs argues that in this vision of a society where people are for each other, Marx also reveals a Jewish vision. This, for Gibbs, is a very important source of Marx's parallel with Levinas. Both thinkers in their vision of a different (and better) society draw upon an ethics which is decidedly non-individualistic. Marx and Levinas both reject the view of a society comprising individuals who 'use their freedom to enter a contract.' Gibbs draws fascinating parallels between the 'Jewish people' of Levinas and of Judaic thought and the 'proletariat,' in the work of Marx, described in expressions such as 'a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society, which is not of civil society,' 'a sphere which possesses a universal character through its universal suffering' 'can win itself only through the *complete redemption* of humanity.' (184) According to Gibbs, there is also a fundamental similarity between Marx and Levinas that drives their work; this, for example, is the way they approach 'knowledge':

The primary concern of both thinkers is the transformation of praxis, not the cognition of truth. By this I do not mean that truth is not also a goal, but it is a practical goal – even theory receives practical justification. For each thinker, social ethics is the focus and indeed the fulcrum of their work (183).

Here, we see yet again, the precedence ethics takes over understanding in Levinas's work, and this accords well with Marx's famous remark in the Theses on Feuerbach that the significance of theory—it's "point"—is motivated by the desire to transform reality. For both thinkers, truth is not an end in itself; its relevance is determined by the necessity to change it.

Gibbs's analysis is very important in uncovering the significant similarities between the works of Marx and Levinas, their insistence on a particular sociality and their shared rejection of individualism, and their jointly-held view that the motivation to change the world precedes the comprehension of it.

Yet, Gibbs himself notes the shortcoming of this work, which is that the 'historic dialectic and economic analyses' have been pushed aside. While Marx certainly discusses both the historical dialectic and economic and class analysis in his "early work," their contours are not as fully developed, nor are they better distinguished from the theoretical humanism that guides much of his early writing

Without a doubt, in a more complete analysis, one of the central concepts in all of Marx's work, and certainly the Marx of *Capital*, that of class has to take central stage. Those processes of production, appropriation and distribution of surplus labour, have to be part of the analytical consideration if we are to bring to bear the comparison of Marx and Levinas at the mature height of their respective work.

Gibbs's article insinuates the importance of this without taking up the task. His analysis draws on the fundamental differences between capitalist and communist societies. This observation is sufficient to notice the necessity of class, since one of

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the most important differences that mark capitalist society from a communist one in traditional readings of Marx is the existence of exploitative class relations in the former and their absence in the latter.

Levinas did not directly engage the work of Marx, at least in any extended discourse upon it. Yet, he offers us a hint that may be used to reveal yet another connection between his work and that of Marx. In an intriguing passage from *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas confronts the inescapable question: can the infinite responsibility of being for the Other lead to oppressive relations? Does this exposure, this 'pure susceptibleness' mean that the ethical relationship can turn into forms of slavery?

Here is how he answers this question:

No freedom, no commitment undertaken in a present, a present among others, recuperable, is the obverse of which this responsibility would be the reverse, but no slavery is included in the alienation of the same who is "for the other". (Levinas 1998 135)

We can take this passage and generalize its concern to exploitative class relations.

Here, it seems, we have another path leading from Levinas to Marx and back to Levinas. A further exploration of this tantalizing passage is likely to enrich the insights of both thinkers.

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