

# Kearney's *Ethical* Imagination, or Levinas and Hermeneutics

*Jack Marsh*

## Preview

In this paper, I examine Kearney's call for an ethical imagination from a specifically Levinasian perspective. I begin by reviewing Kearney's proposal, querying the structure of his ethical imagination. I then give a brief sketch of Levinas' thought with special attention to his theme of *le tiers*, and the necessary passage from ethics to the politics of justice. I will argue that Kearney's diacritical method exemplifies an appropriate approach to the said, the region of justice, history, and politics, while suggesting that Levinas offers Kearney a more radical anthropology than can be found in Ricoeur. My wager is that a basic tension that manifests in Kearney's determination of the ethical imagination may ideally correlate to the aporetic passage from ethics to politics in Levinas such that they exhibit a specific complementarity. I conclude by exploring the problems and promises of my argument and the motives for my thesis.

## Kearney's *Ethical* Imagination, or Levinas and Hermeneutics

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Imagination gives offence to poverty. For shabbiness has charm only for the onlooker. And yet imagination needs poverty, to which it does violence: the happiness it pursues is inscribed in the features of suffering.<sup>1</sup>

Theodor Adorno

### Introduction

Adorno once characterized his “micrological” method as exhibiting a form of “solidarity with metaphysics at the time of its fall.”<sup>2</sup> In surveying the work of Richard Kearney, one is confronted with a kindred solidarity; indeed, one is provoked to (and by) responsibility. Kearney has ceaselessly questioned the extravagant claims of the paragons of post-modernity, without thereby regressing to an uncritical modernism. His own diacritical hermeneutics has trenchantly sought to stake out a middle way between romantic and radical hermeneutics, a *tertium datur* that turns on ethical and political problematics. His interventions are peppered with as many references to and engagements with the social sciences (psychoanalysis and critical social theory) as they are with the more strictly “philosophical” discourses. As will become evident, Kearney combines the specific hermeneutic acuity of his dissertation director, Paul Ricoeur, with the ethical sensibility—indeed *pathos*—of his dissertation examiner, Emmanuel Levinas.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I examine Kearney’s call for an *ethical* imagination from a specifically Levinasian perspective. I begin by reviewing Kearney’s proposal, querying the structure of his ethical imagination. I then give a brief sketch of

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2002), 170.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Continuum, 2003), 408.

<sup>3</sup> David Tracy, “God: The Possible/Impossible,” in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, ed. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 340.

Levinas's thought with special attention to his theme of *le tiers*, and the necessary passage from ethics to the politics of justice. I will argue that Kearney's diacritical method exemplifies an appropriate approach to the said, the region of justice, history, and politics, while suggesting that Levinas offers Kearney a more radical anthropology than can be found in Ricoeur. My wager is that a basic tension that manifests in Kearney's determination of the ethical imagination may ideally correlate to the aporetic passage from ethics to politics in Levinas such that they exhibit a specific complementarity. I conclude by exploring the problems and promises of my argument and the motives for my thesis.

### **Kearney: The Ethical Imagination**

In *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney surveys the Western tradition's treatment of the imagination from its founding currents to its current crises.<sup>4</sup> Kearney suggests that the post-modern challenge to onto-theology and humanism is entirely appropriate in the face of tradition's more extravagant claims— inevitable progress, autonomous self-determination, the valorization of instrumental reason, and so forth—and especially in the wake of the horrors of the Twentieth Century. Yet if there are no decidable epistemological limits that may un-problematically adjudicate between appearance and the real, Kearney insists there must be ethical limits:

Here and now, in the face of the post-modern logic of interminable deferment and infinite regress, of floating signifiers and vanishing signifieds, here and now I face an *other* who demands of me an ethical response. This call of the other to be heard, and to be respected in his or her otherness, is irreducible to the parodic play of empty imitations. The face of the other resists assimilation into the dehumanizing processes of commodity fetishism ... Beyond the mask there is a face.<sup>5</sup>

Kearney goes on to articulate the ethical significance of the "face" in the wake of the collapse of representation in explicitly Levinasian terms. The face is enigmatic, it resists assimilation "in our cognitive projects."<sup>6</sup> The supplicating destitution of the other makes an ethical demand upon me, a "„where are you?"— before I ask epistemological the question—who are you?" And this ethical priority entails a correlative priority of praxis over theory. We are responsible to the suffering of the other before we know his or her credentials. Ethics has priority over epistemology and ontology."<sup>7</sup>

Kearney goes on to insist that the demand of the face calls for discernment: "ethical action is not uncritical action."<sup>8</sup> The face of Hitler and the

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Kearney, *Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

face of a *Shoab* victim would indeed call for different responses. Even when human suffering is exhibited for ideological purposes, as in the media coverage in the wake of 9/11, “the ethical power of the powerless manifests itself.”<sup>9</sup> In the face of ideology, of power, and of mass-media, it is this peculiar power of the powerless that countermands the incipient logic of late capitalism; as Kearney insists, “For the sake of others, we must always be discerning in our response to the other.”<sup>10</sup>

The ethical response Kearney imagines does not, he insists, entail fleeing the challenges of post-modernism. We think and live in the wake of a deconstructed imperial humanism and onto-theological authoritarianism. Kearney argues that this deconstruction is, however, a first rather than final step: he calls us to “an ethical reinterpretation of imagination capable of responding to the challenges of postmodernism.”<sup>11</sup> The ethical imagination is responsible because it is first of all a response to the other, a response to suffering and exploitation. As response, this first word of this imagination would be critical, but it would also be poetical, it must be both diagnostic and inventive.<sup>12</sup> Kearney more fully specifies the structure of this post-modern ethical imagination in his *Poetics of Imagining*: “The vexed character of the post-modern imaginary solicits a new hermeneutic perspective capable of (1) critically interpreting its „terminal paradoxes“ (the phrase is Milan Kundera’s), and (2) responding to its threatened paralysis by inventing—in the sense of both creating and discovering— alternative ways of being in the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Kearney deploys the convergence of the ethical and the imaginary under three temporal headings: the *utopian* (future), the *testimonial* (past), and the *empathic* (present). The *utopian* imagination is the capacity to project future possibilities, to “unrealize repressive realities in favor of emancipatory possibilities.”<sup>14</sup> The *testimonial* imagination is the ability to “bear witness to „exemplary“ narratives legaced by our cultural memories and traditions.”<sup>15</sup> Such testimony deepens and even educates utopian longing through appeal to historical experience. The *empathic* imagination is the ability to be receptive to the other. Kearney asks us: “Can we be responsible for the other if we are not first receptive to the other? ... if we can’t hear its call, if we cannot empathize?”<sup>16</sup> Following Paul Ricoeur, Kearney now articulates the schematizing power of the imagination, its ability to “discern the dissimilar in the similar” and the “similar in the dissimilar ... transforming the manifold of experience into a certain temporal/spatial unity.”<sup>17</sup> This activity of the imagination produces an index for

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Post-Modern* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 219.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 226.

identity in and through temporal difference. It synthesizes these three temporal horizons outlined above, opening the possibility of historically meaningful action.

We should note at this point that Kearney's basic strategy does not change between *Wake of Imagination* and *Poetics of Imagining*. Although Levinas is only mentioned twice in passing in *Poetics of Imagining*, Kearney cites critical modernists such as Kundera and Ricoeur along with Western Marxist critics such as Adorno and Marcuse, each with reference to "reaching through the labyrinths of depthless images to the other."<sup>18</sup> It is the irruptive visage of "human beings who suffer and struggle"<sup>19</sup> that call for the deconstructive critique of the authoritarian modernist subject, *while at the same time* this very visage calls for a stabilization of the dizzying procession of post-modern images. It is the other, in its call for ethico-political responsibility, which provides the index for critique of both totalitarian tradition and a tribalistic present.

At this point I would like to note that Kearney implies that the legitimacy of the post-modern criticism of humanism and onto-theology rests solely on its ethical and political import. What lends force to Derridian "textuality" is the actual practice of scapegoating and exclusion rather than a putatively necessary textual movement or structure.<sup>20</sup> What lends force to Foucaultian archaeology is a desire to enact some alternative manner of relation irreducible to the coercion of disciplinary power and its service to regimes of truth. It is extant social and ecological suffering and exploitation that lend such methods legitimacy. But beyond such methods, Kearney provides clues for transformation. In this respect he is as much a critical modernist as he is a critical post-modernist. He can be classed amongst the Frankfurt School, Levinas, American Pragmatism, and of course, Ricoeur, in his commitment to the imperative of egalitarian social transformation.

I will note, at this point, that there remains a basic tension in Kearney's account of the ethical imagination: the claimed priority of ethics considered next to the claimed constitutive status of the productive imagination. I will explore this tension below by suggesting it can be addressed in one of two ways: (1) by resolution in a Ricoeurian direction which would render ethical alterity and imaginative activity co-original and reciprocal, thereby blunting the critical and disruptive force Kearney explicitly grants to ethics and its effect on poetics; (2) in a Levinasian direction, through maintaining the priority of ethics and relocating imaginative activity at the level of the said, at the level of constituted cultural and political consciousness. I will first give a sketch of Levinas's ethics, his said/saying distinction, and the significance of his theme of *le tiers*. This sketch will allow us to query the depth of Levinas's influence on Kearney as well as to evaluate the promise his diacritical method holds in the wake of Levinas's ethics.

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<sup>18</sup> Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 222.

<sup>19</sup> Kearney, *Wake of Imagination*, 388.

<sup>20</sup> As if such a structure or movement, whose effects are ubiquitous, are any less metaphysical than onto-theology.

**Levinas: Saying, Said, and *le Tiers***

After describing the crystallization of the I in *jouissance* and labor, Levinas observes, “Labor ... already requires discourse and consequently the height of the other irreducible to the same, the presence of the Other ... already human egoism leaves pure nature *by virtue of the human body raised upwards*, committed in the *direction of height*. *This is not an empirical illusion but its ontological production and its ineffaceable testimony.*”<sup>21</sup> This “height” appears in the face of the other as a “relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality.*”<sup>22</sup> This is not the onto-theological bestowal of a theoretical ethic or dogmatic content, but rather a traumatic encounter with alterity “*within* the totality and history, *within* experience.”<sup>23</sup> The relation to the other is a kind of breach in immanence, an “infinity [that] overflows the thought that thinks it. Its very *infinite* is produced precisely as this overflowing.”<sup>24</sup> The height of the other discloses the command “you shall not kill.” Yet this height precisely appears as destitution and nudity, as “a resistance that has no resistance—ethical resistance.”<sup>25</sup> This strange and compelling convergence of command and supplication is important in that infinite responsibility precisely proceeds through sensibility and flesh; it is a pre-theoretical and always anterior relation, not the delivery of a transcendent concept or content. The height that commands is none other than the naked, the widow, and the orphan: “This gaze that supplicates and demands, that can supplicate only because it demands, deprived of everything because entitled to everything, and which one recognizes in giving ... this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give.”<sup>26</sup>

The ethical relation is precisely a giving prior to all sense, both opening the possibility of thought while always exceeding it. Levinas calls this pre-theoretical and affective anteriority, “saying,” and representational language that is already justice, “the said.” When I speak I say the other-in-me. The very singularity of the self is opened by this always prior affective contact with the alterity, such that it indelibly elects the subject to ethical responsibility and political accountability: “The saying extended toward the said is a being obsessed by the other, a sensibility which the other by vocation calls upon and where no escaping is possible. At least no escape with impunity. The other calls upon that sensibility with a vocation that wounds, calls upon an irrevocable responsibility, and thus the very identity of the subject.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 117.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2002), 78.

This wound, a radical affectedness of the self by the other, breaks the principle of identity *as ordinarily conceived*, an an-archic trauma that keeps the self from an encircled return to itself. This disruption is that of moral election, a responsibility that precedes me and even extends beyond my death; as such the self is an “irreplaceable hostage.” Levinas asks, “Has not the Good chosen a subject with an election recognizable in the responsibility of being hostage, to which the subject is destined, which cannot evade without the subject denying himself, and by virtue of which he is unique?”<sup>28</sup> This uniqueness or “irreplaceability” consists in that “[no] one can substitute himself for me, who substitutes myself for all.”<sup>29</sup> The *ipseity*, that is, the very singularity of the self is in this for-the-other, in this substitution of “myself for all.” No longer is “I” said by a self-certain subject in pure freedom before Being. The self’s I is in its “*here I am*,” in an acknowledgment of irrecusable accusation. The self’s singularity is in the pre-ontological election to the Good as substitution: “My substitution—it is as *my own* that substitution for the neighbor is produced . . . It is in me—in me and not in another, in me and not in an individuation of the concept Ego—that communication opens.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet the relation does not end here. For Levinas, the asymmetrical relation to the other always entails a relation with *le tiers*: “The third looks at me in the eyes of the Other . . . It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice. The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”<sup>31</sup> With the structural, not chronological, introduction of the third, Levinas moves from his initial critique of political ontology, through his analysis of the ethical relation, to a reconstruction and articulation of the project of politics and a qualified ontology. This move is possible through what he calls “substitution.” With the third, the self *qua* elected is responsible for the responsibility of the other, who is the other of another. This moment introduces political accountability into the situation and with it a relative notion of autonomy. It shows that ethics itself can lead to injustice: if I divest myself utterly before the face of the other, I’ll have nothing left to give the other other. I here quote Levinas at length:

Doubtless, responsibility for the other human being is, in its immediacy, anterior to every question. But how does responsibility obligate if a third party troubles this exteriority of two where my subjection of the subject is subjection to the neighbor? The third party is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply their fellow . . . Who passes before the other in my responsibility? What, then, are the other and the third party with respect to one another? Birth of the question. The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice. Henceforth it is necessary to know, to become consciousness.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

Comparison is superimposed onto my relation with the *unique* and the incomparable, and, in view of equity and equality, a weighting, a thinking, a calculation, the comparison of incomparables, and, consequently, the neutrality—presence or representation—of being, the thematization and the visibility of the face in some way de-faced as the simple individuation of an individual; the burden of ownership and exchange ... and, through this, finally, the extreme importance in human multiplicity of the political structure of society, subject to laws and thereby to institutions where the *for-the-other* of subjectivity—or the ego—enters with the dignity of a citizen into the perfect reciprocity of political laws which are essentially egalitarian or held to become so.<sup>32</sup>

The passage from ethics to politics, from the preconscious sensible heteronomy and asymmetry to the conscious, intelligible reciprocity of juridical and political sociality, Levinas provides the critical limit to both a monological reason and to the heterological cacophony of the aesthetic abyss.<sup>33</sup> To totality, the ethical relation is an-archic. To anarchy, ethical relation calls for the distribution of responsibility and thus justice. Yet how do we envision this transition? Ethical transcendence is anarchic, disturbing the totality of political ontology, *while at the same time* calling on politics and ontology for the sake of justice. There is an obvious tension in this passage from ethics and critique to politics and ontology. Justice and *le tiers* precisely require presence, representation, non-romantic deliberation, procedural norms, science, and so forth, effacing the infinite and singular with the universal; that is to say, effacing alterity with identity. Yet these necessary projects and processes are always spurred on and disturbed by the ethical transcendence they efface. Political ontology, even in the service of justice, is always open to closure, to corruption, to hypocrisy, and so forth. “There is anxiety in committing the crimes even when the concepts are in agreement with each other. There is an anxiety of responsibility that is incumbent on everyone in the death or suffering of the other.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Kearneyan Diacritics with Levinasian Anthropology?**

What I would like to suggest is that the tension we observed in Kearney between his claim of the priority of ethics over epistemology and ontology and his claims for the productive imagination finds a complimentary tension in Levinas in the passage from pre-conscious ethical singularity—saying—and the conscious

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<sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Emmanuel Lévinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>33</sup> We should briefly note that Levinas is a severe critic of aesthetic celebrations of horror and sublimity, as much as religious celebrations of the sublime sacred. He counts both as forms of paganistic irresponsibility. See for example: Emmanuel Levinas, “A Religion for Adults,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> Levinas, “Peace and Proximity,” 164.



domain of representation, history, and justice—the said. For Kearney, the claims for the productive imagination effaces his explicit claim to the priority of ethics, in that the imagination functions to both produce and transform its own sense: its operation as Kearney actually determines it prioritizes activity, identity, and presence, however mobile or fluid or finite or provisional they have now become.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Kearney explicitly appeals to the constructed, open-ended nature of its production in order to defend his utopian imagination against the charge of totalitarianism.<sup>36</sup> But it is clear in the texts we have reviewed that Kearney seeks to grant the observance of social and ecological suffering and exploitation a disruptive status within the poetic activity of imagination, motivating it to responsibility.

For Levinas, the passage from ethics to politics and history involves a necessary effacement of the other’s alterity. Levinas’s utopian politics precisely call for a humility and an openness to novelty, to the *unforeseen*. It is a radically democratic in addition to its prioritizing of the social good. Richard A. Cohen summarizes Levinas’s position thus:

By recognizing a break between the present and the future, messianic politics submits to a radical caution or humility regarding the means—ultimately the coercive practices—appropriate to a politics of justice. While it knows where it is going, toward justice, it does not precisely know, in the face of contingent history, how to get there or where precisely it will end up. In the face of the irreversibility of time and the novelty of the future, it admits an essential humility regarding the manner in which politics of the present is capable of transcending itself toward the future.<sup>37</sup>

Levinas distinguishes his messianic politics from political idealism in the very terms Kearney distinguishes his imagination from epistemological idealism:

Must we underline the current relevance of this difference between rationality, „reading the future in the present,“ and the wisdom that still learns from every new human face? In the first, the sage is exposed to ideology, to the abstractions of totalitarianism; it can lead from „scientific socialism“ to Stalinism. The sage of the second wisdom [i.e.,

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<sup>35</sup> At best the other remains co-original, which would blunt the force of Kearney’s critique of post-modernism, and the radicality of the “other” he references. He inherits this problem from Ricoeur, it seems to me, who still privileges subjectivity in spite of all his protestations to the contrary. An originally indirect and hermeneutic conscious may not be the posited cogito of the Enlightenment, but in that its first move is that of self-designation, it remains active prior to the world through which it discovers itself.

<sup>36</sup> Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining*, 227

<sup>37</sup> Richard A. Cohen, “„Political Monotheism“: Levinas on Politics, Ethics and Religion,” in *Essays in Celebration of the Founding of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations*, ed. Cheung, Chan-Fai, et al., (2003), 29. <[www.o-p-o.net](http://www.o-p-o.net)>. Accessed 21 October 2010.

messianic politics] is not immobilized in a system, resists cruel abstractions, can be renewed, and is open to each new encounter.<sup>38</sup>

Levinas's version of an emancipatory politics of justice precisely requires a diacritical method capable of engaging the concrete social situation; capable of diagnosis and critique of the concrete socio-political present; capable of the experimental projection and enactment of alternative possibilities that yet remain open-ended. Levinas's allusions to "wisdom that still learns from every new human face" shows that his openness is indeed a discriminating one. At the socio-political level, it is precisely such a discrimination that Kearney has recently called for.<sup>39</sup>

It would seem that for Kearney to maintain his appeal to the priority of ethics to hermeneutics and ontology, he would require a Levinasian rather than a Ricoeurian philosophical anthropology. For Levinas the very structure of subjectivity is ethical. The pre-conscious moral election of the self, its first word *qua* response, „here I am"—taken with its substitutionary structure—provides a defensible notion of subjectivity, no longer subjectivity as a mastering and idealizing center of meaning, but a subject whose freedom is conditioned by its responsibility for the other. The question remains as to the relationship between the radically passive ethical subjectivity and the conditioned activity of the ethical imagination. Levinas claims that this passage is necessary yet transgressive. Kearney's account of this relation is ambiguous on precisely this same point.

## Conclusion

Levinas's account of ethical immediacy accounts for the exteriority necessary to retain the force of alterity *qua* supplicating demand, a radical index for critique that is not, however, iconoclastic for its own sake. Yet on Levinas's own terms, this account must translate into concrete attendance to those who suffer and the perpetual engagement of the political scene to effect a more utopian, more messianic, and more egalitarian social situation. In order to effectively concretize these concerns it is necessary to turn, as Levinas himself maintains, to history, tradition, narrative, and science, to transition from the domain of the saying—the ethical and sensible pre-conscious—to the region of the said—determinate and concrete society. The site of transition, and a specific type of transgression, is, I suggest, precisely something like Kearney's ethical imagination. If we admit the ethical/enjoying pre-conscious, taken with historically determinate narrative traditions—a sensitization to the other with the concrete demands of politics and justice—Kearney's ethical imagination successfully negotiates the two. The activity of the imagination must be construed as conditioned by the more basic

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<sup>38</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *New Talmudic Readings*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> See Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003).

passivity of ethical election. This passivity is, as Levinas always says, more passive than any receptivity. It is not the reception of any specific content, but rather the very opening of the subject. It is affective sensuous irruption of the other within the same. This basic passivity constitutes and conditions—via substitution—an active yet finite and responsible “self”: a self capable of ethical attendance, political intervention, and indeed, imaginative projection and participatory social transformation.

The convergence or complementarity I suggest here admittedly requires a more thorough study. My wager here was informed by the conviction that the deconstructionist *appropriation* of Levinas is a (tiresomely typical) misconstrual of his thought. Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics seems to suggest itself as an appropriate method in its (1) early appeal to an ethics of alterity; (2) its critical/diagnostic moment, which appeals to critical social theory; and (3) its aim of socio-political intervention and transformation, explicitly democratic and intersubjective. My wager is complicated, however, by the tension in Kearney between his fidelity to Ricoeur and his Levinasian sensibility. In *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney explicitly affirms, “Ethics has priority over epistemology and ontology.”<sup>40</sup> This claim doesn’t seem to be possible within the bounds of Ricoeur’s anthropology and hermeneutics: ethics is intimately bound up with historically determinate notions of the good, and hermeneutic subjectivity has the first and final word (however much that word is negotiated). At most Kearney could hold that ethics and ontology are equiprimordial, and thus reciprocally determining; but in this case Kearney would lose the radicality of Levinas’s ethics in terms of its shattering of monological totalitarianism and its stabilizing of the violently indeterminate. Kearney himself repeats some of Ricoeur’s criticisms of Levinas in *The Wake of Imagination*, *Poetics of Imagining*, and in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*.<sup>41</sup> The basic charge is this: the encounter with alterity must leave intact a capacity for judgment, so we may discriminate in our response to the other, and know whether we welcome Messiah or Satan, as it were. Ricoeur problematically claims that Levinas lacks such a capacity, and Kearney insists in all three books, even when he is explicit in his Levinasian sentiment, that such a capacity must be maintained. The problem is: *Levinas in no way disagrees* (and parenthetically, has articulated the same criticism against aesthetic irrationalism and the sublime sacred). Ricoeur’s criticisms of Levinas are problematic, and at best, an expression of basic disagreement in their founding orientations. To mention only one in that it is apparently relevant to Kearney’s reading of Levinas, Richard Cohen notes:

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<sup>40</sup> Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*, 388.

<sup>41</sup> One notices that in his more recent work, Kearney has sounded a more critical note against Levinas. It seems to me that in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, Kearney lumps Levinas in with Derrida, critiquing not Levinas’s own account of *il y a*, but Derrida’s (mal)reading of it. Kearney takes Ricoeur’s charge of Levinas’s non-discrimination, or the collapse into an “abstract otherness,” and applies it to deconstruction and psychoanalysis, and to any postmodern aestheticism that celebrates the horror of the sublime at the expense of ethical discernment and the healing, cathartic, and redemptive potential in narrative. Levinas would be on Kearney’s side in this argument, articulating the difference of level I allude to below.

After acknowledging in his own way and for his own purposes their difference in level, Ricoeur writes: “In Levinas, the identity of the Same is bound up with an ontology of totality that my own investigation has never assumed or even come across.” And this is precisely right ... because concerned as Levinas is to account for the emergence of alterity, the emergence of alterity as such, it follows that the appropriate conceptual alternative must be totality. Because Ricoeur never accounts for the emergence of alterity, he never comes across, as he says, “an ontology of totality.” Their difference, then, comes down to asking different questions and thus exposing different answers. The Levinasian rebuttal, then, is to point out that this difference cannot authorize Ricoeur, or anyone else at *a conditioned level, in this instance a level of inquiry that takes radical alterity for granted, to criticize its own conditioning level, where alterity first takes shape.*<sup>42</sup>

It seems to me that Cohen’s rebuttal to Ricoeur equally applies to Kearney if Kearney is indeed repeating Ricoeur’s argument. In Levinas, the ethical relation precisely opens the capacity for judgment, discrimination, and justice. Levinas clearly distinguishes throughout his entire corpus the difference between ethical alterity qua height and goodness and pagan aestheticism that celebrates the sacred sublime and valorizes the absurd. Discrimination and judgment already require a subtending identity: something *shared* by self and other, and as such, Levinas’s descriptions *account for* the very possibility of judgment which Kearney (and Ricoeur) only presuppose. Put bluntly: the transcendental imagination is dependent upon an ethical sense that always *opens* and precedes it, a sense that recurs in all its synthetic performances.

I have tried to show how Richard Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics of the ethical imagination is an appropriate method to concretely engage a Levinasian ethical sensibility. In that Levinas accounts for the emergence of alterity as such and its aboriginal ethical sense, he opens an ethical anthropology capable of supporting a critical social theory and a transformational social praxis. In that the passage between the conditioning, pre-conscious ethical relation to the conditioned, conscious political relation involves a transgression of the former by the later, perhaps Kearney’s ethical imagination is the appropriate vehicle for such transgression: a constituted activity of political intervention and social transformation which opens the possibility of non-violent reconciliation. Perhaps.

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<sup>42</sup> The following is nothing less than a devastating Levinasian response to Ricoeur’s criticism: Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis, and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 302. My emphasis.