

Thinking Transcendence with Levinas: From the Ethico-Religious to the Political and Beyond

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Emmanuel Levinas has been credited, or at least associated, with a number of so-called “turns” in contemporary thought. The first, which still remains the prevailing reading of Levinas and which is drawn primarily from his groundbreaking work *Totality and Infinity*, credits him for the “ethical turn” in contemporary philosophy by the priority he gives to “ethics as first philosophy.” To simplify a great deal, before Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and more broadly poststructuralist theory and deconstructive philosophy, were seen as largely nihilistic endeavors—that is, as simply negative thought procedures containing no fundamental commitments and contributing little to the positive efforts at determining meaning, fostering shared values, and clarifying a greater understanding of the good. After Levinas, however, it has been precisely this nihilistic narrative of deconstruction that has itself been deconstructed.

This reversal is something that informs not only the reading of Derrida, deconstruction, and poststructuralism, but after the Levinasian ethical turn, even ethical theory itself must answer to the radical challenge issued by that of deconstruction and must made to account to the call of the Other. As Derrida puts it in his eulogy for Levinas, our thanks to Levinas is due at least in part for his entire recasting of the ethical, for with Levinas we are faced with an “ethics before and beyond ontology, the State, or politics, but also ethics beyond ethics.”¹ Or, as argued by Simon Critchley, the rupture marked by the before and after Levinas in the reading of Derrida marks “a third wave in the reception of deconstruction, beyond its literary and philosophical appropriations, one in which ethical—not to mention political—questions are uppermost.”² We will return to the question of Levinas and the political, and more specifically, the relation of the ethical to the political, in due course, but regarding Levinas’s recasting of the

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 4.

² Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 3.

ethical, Critchley writes:

The conception of ethics . . . will differ markedly from the traditional conception of ethics qua region or branch of philosophy. . . . My claim is not that an ethics can be derived from deconstruction, like an effect from a cause, a superstructure from an infrastructure, or a second critique from a first critique. . . . Rather, I hope to demonstrate that the pattern of reading produced in the deconstruction of—mostly, but by no means exclusively—philosophical texts has an ethical structure: deconstruction „is“ ethical; or, to formulate the same thought less ontologically . . . deconstruction takes place (*a lien*) ethically, or there is duty in deconstruction (*Il y a du devoir dans la deconstruction*).³

The ethical turn prompted by Levinas, therefore, is not away from philosophy to its prior origin in ethics, but an “ethics beyond ethics,” or more radical still, in the words of John Caputo, an ethics “against ethics,”⁴ which gives rise to the paradoxical, if not the entirely contradictory, possibility of a “postmodern ethics.”⁵

The second turn with which Levinas is associated and which is almost as prevalent as the first credits or blames Levinas for what has been termed the “theological turn of French phenomenology,” and more broadly, for the return of religion within contemporary philosophy. For some, such as the French phenomenologist Dominique Janicaud, Levinas is a closet theologian, smuggling God into what is otherwise intended to be a methodologically pure and value-free philosophical discourse. Seen in this way, the theological turn—for which Janicaud sees Levinas as the prime progenitor—is an unfortunate development in contemporary philosophy, one that blurs the boundaries between reason and faith, and one that allows what is in fact an ideologically driven faith perspective to cloak itself in the language of neutrality and as an objective quest for truth.⁶ For others, however, perhaps most prominently the Dutch philosopher Hent de Vries, the philosophical turn to religion is a welcome one that in contrast to Janicaud’s critique actually helps to purge philosophy itself of its own ideological bias against the religious. For de Vries, in other words, it is not so much the theologian who is guilty of an ideological bias, but the modern philosopher by making religion into what it is not, or at least not what religion is

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ See John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁵ As Edith Wyschogrod writes, “A postmodern ethics? Is this not a contradiction in terms? If postmodernism is a critical expression describing the subversion of philosophical language, a „mutant of Western humanism,” then how can one hope for an ethics when the conditions of meaning are themselves under attack?” In Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xiii.

⁶ See Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology,” trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

primarily or exclusively meant to be, whether it is treated as ““truth in the garments of a lie” (Schopenhauer), „anthropology disguised as theology” (Feuerbach), „ideology and false consciousness” (Marx), „infantile neurosis” (Freud), „the nonsensical expression of feeling, diffused by metaphysicians without poetic or musical talent” (Carnap), a „category mistake” (Ryle), a „form of life” (Wittgenstein), and so on.”⁷ This ideological bias runs throughout the modern period by philosophy’s inordinate (and we should add, ironic) faith in reason and its consequent inability to appreciate, let alone understand, the language of religion. It is with this in mind that Levinas’s incorporation of religious language and themes into his own philosophical project is seen as a welcome expansion and as a spark igniting the much broader philosophical turn to religion in contemporary thought.

Meanwhile, with the recent prominence of Italian theorists such as Antonio Negri and Giorgio Agamben, the French political philosopher Alain Badiou, and the ever-ranging Slavoj Žižek, not to mention the global threat of terrorism, the hyper-militarized response from the United States and its allies in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the still raging crisis in the Middle East, much of contemporary thought has taken a decidedly political turn as the very nature of the political and its status within contemporary thought has been a topic of much recent attention. Further, perhaps the most forceful theological movement during the last decade has been that of radical orthodoxy led by the British theologian John Milbank. For many, radical orthodox theology represents a welcome relief from the modern legacy of the Enlightenment and its consuming interest in matters of epistemology. It begins with the assertion of the moral bankruptcy of secular reason and seeks a more reliable foundation for values in culture through the assurances provided by a unified, comprehensive, and autonomous system of religious belief. While beginning as a critique of liberal theology that follows the dictates of secular reason, it extends to a more generalized critique of classic modern liberalism itself. According to this critique, with the modern assertion of the autonomous self as the arbiter of all truth and reality, the liberal values of openness and tolerance ultimately are left bereft of any grounding whatsoever as the very reason for the universal respect for the dignity of all—namely, the sanctity of the divine creator—is denied, if not outright in theory, then at least in practice by the secularization of our moral reasoning and public discourse. Though radical orthodoxy is a much more traditionalist movement than the various political theorists mentioned above, what they share in common is an appreciation for what they identify as a crisis within modern liberal political theory. For many, therefore, the political turn in contemporary philosophy and theology amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift within contemporary thought, a crisis so resounding that any thinker worth

⁷ Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 2-3.

considering must speak on its terms in order to garner a hearing.⁸

The question this raises for us with regard to Levinas is an important one—namely, as the postmodern return of religion has turned to the political, is this an extension of, or turn away from, the ethical as conceived by Levinas? What exactly is the connection between Levinas’s conception of the ethical to the political? Or, put otherwise, is the promise of deconstruction also its limit, and does the political turn in contemporary thought mark the eclipse of Levinas? After all, a Levinasian ethic is characterized first and foremost by the impossible—the unconditional demand of the Other, the infinite scope of responsibility that precedes and exceeds all intentionality. For Levinas, responsibility comes prior to freedom, and as such, its obligation is absolute, but also absolutely undecidable and indeterminable. The political, on the other hand, is concerned with the art of the possible, the negotiation of and for power, and at least with modern liberal thought, is predicated on the free acts of autonomous political subjects. Does Levinas have a political philosophy? If so, does he belong to the tradition of modern liberalism? And finally, what does any of this have to do with Levinas’s talk of God, and more specifically, his employment of the ontological argument for God’s existence?

It will be my argument that it is precisely this political context that gives Levinas’s discussion of God such urgency. While Levinas himself steadfastly refused the designation of theology, and most certainly would have rejected the term political theology just as assuredly, what I am proposing here is exactly of that sort—to read Levinas’s discussion of God for the political theology latent within it. In so doing, my effort is at least twofold: first, to attempt to place Levinas in conversation with many of the contemporary theorists who are seeking a new understanding of the political; and second, again to demonstrate the enduring appeal and importance of Levinas, not only as an ethical and/or religious thinker of the first order, but also as someone whose entire thinking, in the words of Roger Burggraeve, “can be interpreted as an immense effort to bring to light the roots of violence and racism, and as an attempt to overcome this in principle by thinking otherwise.”⁹

Levinas’s “Proof”

Truth be told it makes no more sense to speak of Levinas’s “proof” for God’s existence than it does to think of Anselm’s ontological argument as a proof in the modern sense of the term. As many have observed, the idea that one could somehow prove God’s existence is a distinctly modern project betraying a prior

⁸ For a more extended discussion of the various implications of this so-called political turn in religious and theological thought, see Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming 2011).

⁹ Roger Burggraeve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love: Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002),

turn to the Cartesian subject as the final arbiter of truth and reality.¹⁰ Indeed, as John Caputo argues, the very attempt to prove God's existence is the best proof for the death of God in the modern consciousness because more than anything else it has put the conscious subject in the place of God and thereby betrays the doubt that it means to erase. In other words, once the existence of God becomes a question of logic and put to reason, the animating religious spirit of God is already dead. As Caputo writes:

So in modernity, the question of God is profoundly recast. Instead of beginning on our knees, we are all seated solemnly and with stern faces on the hard benches of the court of Reason as it is called into session. God is brought before the court, like a defendant with his hat in his hand, and required to give an account of himself, to show His ontological papers, if He expects to win the court's approval. In such a world, from Anselm's point of view, God is already dead, even if you conclude that the proof is valid, because whatever you think you have proven or disproven is not the God he experiences in prayer and liturgy but a philosophical idol.¹¹

Perhaps more than anything else, it is this difference that marks the chasm between the medieval mind and the modern mind—the one where thought proceeds almost exclusively within the realm of faith, and thus, God's existence is assumed; the other where religious truth is held in suspicion, and thus, even the very idea of God is left wanting its own rationale and must be proven in accordance with the prevailing episteme.

From the medieval to the modern and into the postmodern, the comparison between Levinas and Anselm is not an accidental one as neither falls prey to what Levinas once termed the "temptation of temptation," which is otherwise known as the "temptation of knowledge." By giving priority to knowledge, philosophy subordinates its prior commitment to wisdom. And just as this degraded, if not fallen, philosophy stands in contrast to wisdom, so too does knowledge to living. With Anselm and Levinas, on the other hand, the self does not constitute itself, and the thinking self is not its own master. On the contrary, thought is beholden to life as the self is beholden to an-Other; and the more one thinks, the more one realizes the infinite scope of the responsibility that exceeds and precedes one's own intentionality. In this way, Levinas's treatment of the ontological argument for God's existence exposes him as a quintessential postmodern thinker. As he writes in "God and Philosophy," "It is not the proofs of God's existence that matter to us here, but rather the breakup of consciousness, which is not a repression into the unconscious but a sobering or a waking up that shakes the „dogmatic slumber“ that sleeps at the bottom of all

¹⁰ For example, see Leonardo Messinese, *The Problem of God in Modern Philosophy*, trans. Philip Larrey (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2005).

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 46.

consciousness resting upon the object.”¹² Perhaps more than any other postmodern thinker, it is Levinas that calls into relief both the limitations and danger of the egocentric model that predominates in modern thought from Descartes to the present.

Likewise, his philosophical turn to religion is neither coincidence nor passing fad, but rather constitutive in the sense that there is a realization of how thought itself follows a certain structure of faith. So finally, then, we come to the question of the status and function of the proof for God’s existence within Levinas’s thinking, and in so doing, we find at least one representative case of a postmodern thinker who indeed employs the ontological argument, but thinks it otherwise than ontotheologically. In other words, rather than functioning as a founding narrative, Levinas’s employment of the ontological argument is a narrative of disruption wherein he leads us not to a point of realization of the necessity of God, but instead, to our inescapability from God—the former functioning as a rational argument compelling cognitive assent, tempting us with a knowledge severed from life, while the latter redoubles the ethical imperative that runs throughout Levinas’s oeuvre.

Before venturing further into this line of interpretation, it is important first to establish the contours of Levinas’s own argument as it is most clearly expressed in his essay “God and Philosophy.” From the start, Levinas makes clear his argument that the traditional readings of the proofs—in his words, “the thematization of God in religious experience”—have missed their primary significance, which is, as mentioned above, a narrative of disruption that leads to the breakup of “the unity of the „I think.”” Next, given Descartes’ prominence in the founding of the thinking subject, we might expect that what follows in Levinas’s analysis would be a critical exposé into where and how Descartes’ *Meditations* goes wrong. But on the contrary, Levinas writes, “In his meditation on the idea of God, Descartes has sketched, with unequalled rigor, the extraordinary course of a thought proceeding to the point of the breakup of the I think.” And though it is true that “Descartes maintains a substantialist language here, interpreting the immeasurableness of God as a superlative way of existing,” he nevertheless makes an even greater, though unwitting, contribution wherein it is not the proof that matters as it becomes the critical link for the reestablishing of an entire metaphysical edifice, but instead, the inestimable excess that lies at the root of consciousness.

After all, from whence comes the idea of the infinite? As an idea, Levinas tells us it exceeds the finite mind’s capacity to think. Yet still, here it stands before us as an idea that has already been thought and that remains a desire even within a form of contemporary thought that deliberately restrains itself to the immanent realm of ideas that can be thought in actuality. As Levinas writes: “the actuality of the cogito is thus interrupted by the unencompassable; it is not thought but undergone.” And more, “The idea of the Infinite, the Infinite in

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 62-63.

me, can only be a passivity of consciousness . . . more passive than any passivity, like the passivity of a trauma through which the idea of God would have been placed within us. An „idea placed within us.“¹³

In other words, by tracing the idea of the infinite to the thematization of God, we learn of an unexpected reversal and overturning that lies hidden within Descartes’s own logic—namely, before consciousness comes the idea, that it is not the thinking self that thinks God as its highest thought, but the idea that gives birth to thought: “The placing in us of an unencompassable idea overturns this presence of self which is consciousness. . . . It is thus an idea signifying within a significance prior to presence, to all presence, prior to every origin in consciousness, and so anarchic, accessible only in its trace.”¹⁴ As the birth of thought, it is also an act of devastation and awakening: “The Infinite affects thought by simultaneously devastating it and calling it; through a „putting it in its place,“ the Infinite puts thought in place. It wakes thought up.”¹⁵

What, then, is the meaning? Though this act of devastation, disruption, and interruption is comparable to a trauma, Levinas is careful to distinguish it from a pure act of negativity. As he writes, “The in- of the infinite is not a non-or not of some kind: its negation is the subjectivity of the subject, which is behind intentionality.” And further, “the not-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought is, in some way, a positive relation with this thought.”¹⁶ It is positive due to the nature of desire, which, as Levinas describes it, is the

“more in the less” [that] awakens with its most ardent, most noble, and most ancient flame, a thought destined to think more than it thinks. . . .

The negativity of the In- of the Infinite—otherwise than being, divine comedy—hollows out a desire that could not be filled, one nourished from its own increase, exalted as Desire—one that withdraws from its satisfaction as it draws near to the Desirable. This is a Desire for what is beyond satisfaction, and which does not identify, as need does, a term or an end. A desire without end, from Being: dis-interestedness, transcendence—desire for the Good.¹⁷

So the meaning is this: the human subject is redefined as first and foremost an ethical subject. The idea of the infinite—the very thought that cannot be thought by the finite mind, an idea “placed within us”—marks the human consciousness with transcendence, which is experienced as a desire beyond satisfaction and without end. This is a desire for the “more in the less” that makes love possible, as the self is taken outside itself, drawn to and beholden by the other. And it is at this point that Levinas’s argument comes full circle and the religious language proves absolutely essential, for while the ethical subject is constituted by its

¹³ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 67.

subjection to, and responsibility for, the other, there is another other that in the words of Levinas is “otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond.” This other other, which is known as God, “is not simply the „first other,“ or the „other par excellence,“ or the „absolutely other,“ but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence.”¹⁸

It should be clear from this reading that the ethical, which Levinas elsewhere identifies as “first philosophy,” is here given over to a prior origin: First comes God, or at least epistemologically speaking, the idea of the infinite now conceived of as God, to which the self responds, “Here I am.” The self is thereby constituted as a distinctly ethical subject, a subject constituted by its relation with the Other, but an other who is other otherwise to the point of transcendence, a point of beyond that draws the subject outside itself in the desire for the Good. Or, if you prefer Levinas in the extreme, the self as substitute for and hostage to the Other.

Levinas engages in a theo-logic that begins with the idea of God or the idea of the infinite, an idea that though conceived as an idea, still cannot be thought unless it is thought from elsewhere than the conscious mind. Consciousness, therefore, rests on an already subjected, and thus disrupted, ground. The idea of God is an “idea put into us,” an idea that is thought only as a trace that bears witness to the infinite responsibility of the self to an-Other. As such, it is true as Levinas tells it that the idea of God speaks more as ethics than religion or theology, and ethics so conceived is an ethics that precedes and goes beyond philosophy because it remains an idea that understands more than it understands, thinks more than it is even possible to think, and that carries a responsibility that is always outstanding.

It is a strange logic that begins securely with the indubitable and unified thinking self and the idea of God from which all reality can be securely known and proceeds to the breakup of consciousness and a transcendence to the point of absence. Stranger still, perhaps, to insist that the in- of this infinite is not entirely negative, that this devastating and overwhelming idea of the infinite that is put into us somehow has positive ethical ramifications. Add to this mix Levinas’s language of the divine comedy, about which he writes, “A comedy taking place in the ambiguity between temple and theater, but wherein the laughter sticks in your throat at the approach of the neighbor, that is, if his face or his forsakenness.”¹⁹ Who is it that is forsaken here? And by whom? Is it the God who is otherwise than being, who is transcendent to the point of absence? Is it the rest of us who are left behind? If this is a proof for God’s existence, it is a proof that absolutely shatters the tradition. By tracing the idea of the infinite within the ontological argument for God, the one thing that we can securely know is that we are on our own, face-to-face with our neighbor, bearing witness to the absence of

¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹⁹ Ibid., 69-70.

God.

The Political and “Beyond”

From the ethico-religious to the political and beyond, Levinas leads us on a journey of thought and human relation that follows the trace of transcendence entirely within the immanent logic of a single thought, albeit the thought of God in the idea of the infinite. But from this thought of God we are left alone together in our forsakenness facing our impossible obligation with no one to save us but ourselves. In this way, Levinas stands firmly within a long line of Jewish prophets handing us over in our God-forsakenness and in so doing simultaneously elevating and radicalizing the ethical demand placed on us all.

This radicalization of the moral imperative stands as yet another example of how Levinas remains forever in close proximity to, but in fundamental disagreement with, Heidegger. For while Heidegger is led to almost the exact same point of analysis, if not despair, he finds recourse in the mystical and the poetical, and asserts with resignation our now foundering state of being:

Philosophy will not be able to effect an immediate transformation of the present condition of the world. This is not only true of philosophy, but of all merely human thought and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poeticizing, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of foundering for in the face of the god who is absent, we founder.”²⁰

For Levinas, however, who admits in his intellectual biography that his thinking “is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror,”²¹ foundering is not an option. So whereas Heidegger retreats from the political to the mystical, Levinas probes ever deeper into the critical nexus that is political theology by connecting his analysis of the idea of the infinite with his commitment to justice. This leads us to two observations about the nature of the political in Levinas’s thought:

(1) The political is the natural progression and complexification of the ethical. Towards the conclusion to *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas asserts the following progression, or at least trajectory: “From responsibility to problems.”²² It would seem to most that the ethical responsibility that Levinas describes is already problem enough. But to the extent that the ethical is defined by the face-to-face relation, by the proximity to the neighbor, it remains a straightforward, if

²⁰ From ““Only a God Can Save Us”: *Der Spiegel’s* Interview with Martin Heidegger (1966),” in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Wolin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 107.

²¹ Levinas, “Signature,” in *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 8 (1978): 177.

²² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 161.

not simple, relation. Responsibility is absolute, without excess or remainder. The problems come when we introduce a third party. It is at this point that the measure of politics figures into the face-to-face relation. As Levinas writes:

If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would have not been any problem, in even the general sense of the term. A question would not have been born, nor consciousness, nor self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters. The third party is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other, and not simply his fellow.²³

And further, “The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. It is of itself the limit of responsibility and the birth of the question: What do I have to do with justice? A question of consciousness. Justice is necessary.”²⁴

Indeed, beyond the ethical, as if counted in the natural progression from two to three, stands the necessity of the political. With the political comes a complexification of the ethical, not because the responsibility is any greater— indeed, how could it be any greater than a responsibility that is already absolute and infinite in its scope—but because it is now bound up together in self-consciousness and in the day-to-day negotiations that mark the self’s being in the world. Politics, so conceived, is being in the world and of the world. Thus the commitment to justice is as necessary as politics is inevitable.

(2) While the political stands as the natural progression beyond the ethical with the introduction of the third, in order for the political to avoid being purely political, it must continually return to its source in the ethico-religious. It is precisely this connection between the ethico-religious and the political that Derrida explored in a speech entitled “A Word of Welcome,” which was delivered at the Sorbonne during an homage to Levinas one year after Levinas’s death. As Derrida states, “The border between the ethical and the political here loses for good the indivisible simplicity of a limit. No matter what Levinas might have said, the determinability of this limit was never pure, and it never will be.”²⁵ Having established the connection, Derrida then questions the nature of its relation, one whose limit or boundary point is admittedly “never pure,” and neither is it entirely clear by virtue of Levinas’s own statement that suggests an ethical realm beyond the political.²⁶ Does Levinas’s phrasing here betray the negation of politics that is endemic to the global capital order? Does this mark a

²³ Ibid., 157.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Derrida, *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*, 99.

²⁶ As Levinas writes, “Then ethical language succeeds in expressing the paradox in which phenomenology finds itself abruptly thrown. For ethics, beyond the political, is found at the level of this reverting. Starting with the approach, the description finds the neighbor bearing the trace of a withdrawal that orders it as a face.” Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 121.

retreat from the lessons learned in his own analysis of the idea of the infinite in which we are left alone in our shared forsakenness following the trace of transcendence to the point of absence? Not according to Derrida. Recall from Levinas's analysis of the ontological argument the meaning of the in- in the idea of the infinite. Levinas insists that this in- of the infinite be understood in its positive relation following the structure of desire. Likewise, Derrida insists that the "beyond the political" of which Levinas speaks not be understood as a negation but as an opening up into the transcendence that already lies within the immanent order: "Beyond-in: transcendence in immanence, beyond the political, but in the political. Inclusion opened onto the transcendence that it bears, incorporation of a door that bears and opens onto the beyond of the walls and partitions framing it."²⁷ When the political is so understood, it presents the possibility of an "ethical conversion" within and on behalf of our present and existing politics.²⁸ With this, Levinas leaves us with the hope that our politics is never purely political, that by returning politics to its source in the ethico-religious it can transcend the cynical reasoning that drives those who are only interested in power and profit, and upend those who falsely equate their own thematization of God—whether in its moralizing or nationalistic guises—with the prior and more fundamental idea that stands as its source.

As Derrida notes, Levinas's politics follows the structure of the messianic as it is driven by the hope for a justice that is always to come. This is enough to affirmatively answer the earlier question of whether Levinas has a political philosophy. But as Levinas teaches us in his discussion of the question of the third, the more difficult problem remains—to bring to light the roots of violence and exclusion, to think and to act otherwise, not only with the single other to whom I might give myself in love, but to each and every other from time immemorial to time everlasting, and most of all, here and now. This, of course, remains a guiding commitment of classic liberalism, and as such, it reveals both the promise and limit of Levinas's politics. That is to say, so long as the existing present is held in relief by the messianic promise of the future, the hope for justice that Levinas so clearly expresses can never amount to more than a politics of decision. This perhaps is the ironic consequence of the deconstructive insistence on structural undecidability. And while not going so far as Brian Treanor who is more critical of deconstruction for what he calls its misplaced passion for "undecidability itself," his concern with the skeptical impulse to avoid error rather than to seek truth is an important lesson, especially when considering the political implications of ethico-religious thought.²⁹

While it is true as the postmodern theologian Charles Winquist has written, that "epistemic undecidability does not prevent or even inhibit ethical decidability,"³⁰ for politics to have the positive and potent ethical force for good that Levinas desires, it must be more than the expression of individual preference

²⁷ Derrida, *Adieu*, 76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁹ See Brian Treanor, "Blessed are Those Who Have Not Seen and Yet Believe" in this volume.

³⁰ Charles Winquist, *Desiring Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 141.

or conviction. To make politics more than a politics of decision, this requires a thematization of the political that Levinas is always careful to avoid. This paper has explored this caution on Levinas's part by way of analogy through his discussion of the ontological argument for God. But it is only when applied to the political that this caution is revealed as a detriment undercutting the basis for collective action. The tragedy of this form of politics, as Kenneth Surin argues, whether in its Levinasian or Derridean version, "is that it has no way of inserting the subject into the domain of the actually political. We are left instead with a paralyzing Kierkegaardian pathos that provides no way of imagining resistance at the level of a politics of collective action."³¹

Put otherwise, what keeps politics from being purely political, the only thing keeping it out of the hands of those who would resort to any measure in order to get their hands on power, is the good will and conscience of individuals.

If only we could be so trusted.

³¹ Kenneth Surin, "Rewriting the Ontological Script of Liberation: On the Question of Finding a New Kind of Political Subject," in *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, eds. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 255.