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Michael Morgan *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Pp. vii + 259. £55.00 (Hbk), £16.99 (Pbk). ISBN 978 0 521 14106 2.

Emmanuel Levinas is often described as a puzzling figure for both philosophers and theologians, in part because his thought does not fit comfortably in either category. He is a philosopher who employs a plethora of religious vocabulary to critique the western philosophical tradition; yet at the same time he insists that philosophy is needed not only to give meaning to theological concepts but also as a basis for his critique that theological discourse is always an inadequate way of talking about God. If his thought is perplexing to professional philosophers and theologians, one can only imagine how those without a strong background in either discipline might receive his project. Michael Morgan's book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, is a most welcome addition to the body of secondary literature on Levinas, particularly as an introduction of his thought to readers and students (undergraduate and postgraduate alike) seeking a careful and concise presentation of his project. Refusing to succumb to the temptation which besets many Levinas commentators, Morgan insists that Levinas should be read in a way that does not seek to impose a rigid separation between philosophy and religious (particularly Jewish) thought. Moreover, he identifies many of the questions that are often asked by readers familiar with Levinas, and seeks to answer them in a way that not only demonstrates a thoughtful reading of his work but also, when he feels it is warranted, a willingness to employ some imagination.

Morgan's purpose for coming to this project was to abridge and revise his earlier and much more comprehensive volume *Discovering Levinas* (2007) with a view to introducing Levinas's project to those seeking a helpful entry point into understanding his thought. In the present work, Morgan aims to provide a clear presentation of Levinas's ideas and texts, and he also continues to make the case for reading Levinas in a certain way, whose claims about ethics could be recognized as 'deep and radical' yet not 'incompatible' with ordinary life (p. vii). He acknowledges that he does not seek to offer complete readings of Levinas's work. He chooses instead to focus on key concepts and themes, using the relevant texts in order to clarify the concepts and themes he deems central to Levinas's thought. Such a strategy is invaluable to those making an initial foray into Levinas's work, since they now have a profitable interpretive guide with which to explore many of his most significant texts in greater depth.

For an introductory text, Morgan's book is ambitious in its scope. It covers a broad range of topics associated with Levinas's ethical discourse, including the

face, subjectivity, benevolence, justice, and the political (Zionism in particular). Morgan begins by highlighting four features of Levinas's life and thought that help the reader understand his significance. First, one must understand Levinas's historical context, both philosophically and in terms of the influence of the Holocaust on his thinking. Second, Morgan elaborates on Levinas's relationship to Judaism and its texts, particularly the Bible and the Talmud. Third, Morgan notes Levinas's place among those philosophers critical of the western philosophical tradition whilst maintaining a link to that tradition. Finally, and for Morgan most importantly, he features Levinas's role in the twentieth-century debates about the foundation and meaning of ethics in everyday life. Morgan argues that Levinas's response to the problem of the authority and content of the ethical is 'unlike any other twentieth-century response' or, indeed, any other attempt to deal with similar problems. Though the content of ethical values is not unique – care for others, responding to their material needs, reducing suffering – what is distinctive for Morgan is the 'role [Levinas] gives to the ethical in our understanding of human existence and also the *way* in which he accounts for the *force* and content of the ethical' (p. 8).

In chapter 1, Morgan places Levinas in conversation with Vassily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (1959) in order to introduce some of Levinas's major themes (he argues that Levinas uses the novel in his own work as a 'pedagogical device'), such as the face and the critique of totality. Grossman's novel is about the crisis of the modern world in the twentieth century, in which he paints a vast portrait of dehumanization and suffering perpetrated by the various totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Stalin. The interaction with *Life and Fate* illustrates one way in which Morgan seeks to demonstrate how Levinas's philosophy expresses itself in and about the everyday world in which we live. It is a positive development to see more attention given to the significance of Grossman's novel for the later thought of Levinas, if for no other reason than how it provides Levinas with many concrete examples with which to illustrate many of his core themes.

Chapter 2 seeks to place Levinas's philosophy within the broader context of phenomenology. Morgan observes that while Levinas acknowledges broadly using the phenomenological method to uncover what has hitherto been hidden or forgotten, Levinas's interpreters (and perhaps Levinas himself) cannot decide between an empirical description of the face-to-face encounter (a concrete experience that one can recognize in everyday life) or a transcendental one (condition for the possibility of ethics and indeed of all economic existence and knowledge). Morgan more or less argues for a reading that mitigates between transcendental and empirical insofar as the face is not an everyday experience even if it can designate some kind of experience or quasi-experience. The face-to-face relation, he argues, is an event and not a structure, but the 'reality' of this event also has a transcendental condition of our everyday lives. Thus, Morgan is right to argue that Levinas's method cannot, in an orthodox sense, be

phenomenological; it can only resemble it. Morgan's analysis shows how Levinas uses certain aspects of the phenomenological method while also moving beyond it. In this sense, Morgan observes that Levinas's philosophy has a certain kinship to Plato and the Neoplatonists insofar as what is ultimate is genuinely transcendent and not simply discoverable through an investigation of nature or the cosmos.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the ethical content of the face-to-face relation. In chapter 3, Morgan provides a clear analysis of the meaning of the 'face' in Levinas's project, a notion which is central to his thought yet is far from easy to understand. Chapter 4 looks at another key aspect of Levinas's thought: the critique of totality and the presentation of infinity as that which challenges the 'conventional' approach that philosophy uses to reflect upon our lives, our world, and our experience. Morgan suggests that what Levinas challenges is not the sufficiency of philosophy; rather, he challenges its assumption of its own completeness and comprehensiveness, its conviction that philosophy's meaning is wholly self-contained.

Chapter 5 explores some of the more difficult aspects of Levinas's description of subjectivity, such as the absolute passivity of the self because it is responsible before it is anything else. The chapter seeks to explain some of the difficult concepts associated with passivity, such as 'persecution', 'hostage', 'obsession', and 'substitution', in order to show that such terms are 'extreme and provocative' but not 'unintelligible' or 'inapplicable' to everyday life, as they might first appear (p. 114). Chapter 7 provides a very helpful and clear explanation of Levinas's notion of time in the context of other accounts of time and temporality in the period from the turn of the century through the Weimar period. Morgan rightly stresses that understanding Levinas's notion of time, particularly the concept of 'diachrony', is important in order to appreciate fully what he says about ethics and religion.

The book concludes with a brief discussion of some commonly raised critiques of Levinas and offers a response to such critiques. Perhaps the most interesting discussion relates to the charge that Levinas's ethics is irrelevant; that is, it is unhelpful or inapplicable to ordinary life. Morgan argues that while Levinas never says what one should do or not do, there is always room to be made for very particular deliberations about what to do and how to act, even if these deliberations are always subject to revision or what Levinas calls a 'better justice'.

I would like to focus the remainder of my review upon the two chapters which are most directly related to the two claims Morgan makes for how one should read Levinas, namely, that his philosophy is compatible with everyday life and that his ethics of responsibility does indeed carry a 'normative' or 'moral' force. Let me begin with the second claim, which is the subject of chapter 6. In this chapter Morgan pursues the often-ignored question of how God is related to the face-to-face and its ethical import. Ethics and the idea of God are, for Levinas, intimately related and decisive for how ethics can be binding for him.

There is always a risk whenever one attempts to appropriate Levinas's thought for theological purposes. Levinas consistently stays within the bounds of philosophical analysis and philosophical exploration. As Morgan rightly points out, Levinas's writings on ethics and religion are not confessional discussions, and the outcomes are not parochial but universalist. Levinas begins with an insight from Schelling, Kierkegaard, Buber, and Rosenzweig, namely, that God can never be captured by thought or concepts. The unique 'fact' of God always remains outside any system, however sophisticated or comprehensive. Although Morgan correctly asserts that one draws near to God only when one becomes an 'atheist' in the Levinasian sense, he perhaps goes too far towards a purely atheist reading of Levinas when he says that 'God' in *Totality and Infinity* is a 'myth', which does not 'refer to a real being but rather expresses something – a relationship significant only for human existence' (p. 143). The problem with the view that 'God' merely designates a word that signifies the moral 'height' or 'force' that comes from the face is that Levinas would then have no clear answer as to what accounts for this 'height' or 'force', which Morgan himself acknowledges. Even if one claims that God is unknowable and unthematizable, there is still implicit in this claim (as I believe there is in Levinas) the assumption that one acknowledges the possibility of God as a 'reality', even if such a possibility can only be affirmed in terms of what Levinas calls in *Otherwise than Being* a 'flickering of meaning', which is thus subject to contestation and even derision.

Indeed, the examination of Levinas's later works lead Morgan to conclude that the word 'God' cannot be a meaningless term, for indeed there is no other way in which ethics could be binding for Levinas. The trace that is left behind is the trace left by the transcendence of *illeity*, of 'He' that has forever passed by, which in religious vocabulary is called God. Thus, Morgan is right to say that the 'normative force' of the face is the trace of God; it is 'what makes that face not only vulnerable to me but also binding for me' (p. 154). If the word 'God' means anything for Levinas, it calls attention to a source of authority that, as Infinite, eludes all description. Nevertheless, if one can somehow acknowledge it and its impact, as Levinas argues, beyond any reason that would simply be proofs or evidence for God's existence, such impact is 'encountered' in the face of the other person and in the way in which the face 'speaks' with a force carrying the authority both to command me and to plead with me to respond.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the relation between Levinas's ethics and their applicability to everyday life, set in the context of his views about Judaism's role in the contemporary world. Of particular interest is Morgan's discussion of Levinas's rejection of theodicy, or more exactly, his claim that suffering such as that experienced in the Holocaust is beyond theodicy, is untouched by it. However, Morgan rightly observes that Levinas detects something unique in the experience of suffering, namely, that, in one's responsibility, each of us suffers over the suffering of the other person. Here is a sense of the good that does explain or

rationalize evil but rather shows how the good cannot be destroyed by evil, no matter how banal. The immediate response to suffering is not to reflect upon it, but to respond, to be affected or concerned for the other's suffering. It is what Levinas calls in the essay 'Useless suffering' (from *Difficult Freedom*) the 'just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other' (p. 94).

Another interesting if not more controversial discussion is Morgan's exploration of Levinas's complex views about Zionism, for perhaps no subject carries greater potential for seeing the relevance – or perhaps irrelevance – of Levinas's project than this one. Morgan is right to show that Levinas's views are at best nuanced and difficult to discern clearly. Sometimes it appears that Levinas thinks that Israel serves an ethical purpose, to acknowledge Jewish suffering and to reduce it. In many ways this provides a more complete picture of what Levinas means by justice. At other times, however, Levinas seems to argue that Israel primarily exists as a 'historical necessity' or what Morgan calls a 'political expediency' in order to protect Jewish survival.

To add to the complexity, Morgan takes up Levinas's now infamous remarks in a radio interview in which he responds to the 1982 massacre of Palestinian refugees in the camps at Sabra and Shatila. The interpretation of these comments is one of the most contested within Levinasian scholarship. Some argue that Levinas's comments, which suggest that the Other is not necessarily the enemy but can first of all be my kin, my immediate neighbour, and therefore one has to make choices when one's kin is being harmed by other Others, run completely contrary to everything he states in his philosophical project. Morgan, however, believes one should interpret these comments in a more nuanced, yet not apologetic, manner. Forsaking the view that the Palestinian would be considered an 'Other' to the Jew, Morgan prefers the view that for Levinas, while it 'may be difficult to appreciate fully', responsibility sometimes means that Zionism's ethical role must have as a matter of priority, as a matter of justice, the protection of the existence and well-being of Jews in the aftermath of a 'history of enormous suffering and persecution after the Holocaust' (p. 229). Even if this point is valid, one could certainly question whether Israel's use of force could be said to be fulfilling that role even in the broadest sense. In addition, Morgan fails to point out that Levinas does not always appear to acknowledge – as he so often does with other political entities – that the State of Israel can also be tempted by nationalism, callousness, and belligerence.

My final comment, which relates more generally to the question about Levinas's philosophy and its applicability, is to ask why Morgan did not provide any significant examination of the interdependent relationship between love (which in his later work is associated with responsibility) and justice. In interviews from *Is it Righteous to Be?*, as well as in the essay 'Philosophy, justice, and love' in *Entre Nous*, Levinas argues that once responsibility becomes justice, out of the concern to weigh one's responsibilities between the unique other and other others, justice can become warped or tyrannical if it does not reconsider an appeal to the unique

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individual. In this sense, justice has to return to love in order to become a more perfect justice. This, to me, represents a more productive way forward for articulating ways in which Levinas's philosophy can find concrete expression in everyday life.

Morgan concludes his book with the admonition that in reading Levinas one should follow one's understanding about what he says with regard to the ethical relation by acting towards others with concern for benevolence and justice. As someone who has read Levinas and has written on the relation between love and justice in his thought, I can hardly think of a better way to end this very satisfying and well-written introduction to Levinas's thought. I would recommend this book to those who, like me, are concerned to take up Morgan's admonition to articulate ways in which one can act in everyday life that are faithful to the spirit of Levinas's project.

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