

Religious Recognition

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Levinas and the Ambivalence of Recognition

DOI 10.1515/opth-2016-0050

Received January 29, 2016; accepted June 22, 2016

Abstract: This paper argues that Emmanuel Levinas' critique of the "ontological imperialism" does not amount to a perfunctory and rejective attitude towards ontology. Against the commonly held interpretation of Levinas, I argue that if we keep in mind that the understanding of the other is grounded on and determined by ethical recognition of the person, ontological recognition of the other person does not necessarily entail violent relation towards of the other person. Moreover, ethical recognition provides a standard of evaluation for ontological recognition and traditional theological discourse. The distinction between the two forms of recognition is essential to Levinas' account of "religious life". The two forms of recognition are nevertheless interconnected, if not reducible to one another. It is only when we lose sight of the fundamental ethical perspective that the ontological recognition is in danger of becoming violent and repressive.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, ethics, ontology, recognition

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that Emmanuel Levinas's critique of what he calls "ontological imperialism" does not amount to a rejection of ontology. I further argue that Levinas does not claim that to take somebody else as an object of ontological knowledge is necessarily a form of violent imperialism. Such a commonly-held view results from a narrow interpretation of his philosophical project, in which ontology and ethics are seen as conflicting opposites. According to Levinas, ontology consists in apprehending and knowing the individual in her generality, which amounts to possessing the individual and thereby depriving her of individuality and alterity. In this respect, ontology is driven by imperialist tendencies.

Levinas' philosophy, which promotes the primacy of ethics and the irreducibility of the other human being to any preconception that we might have of him, is often characterized as a struggle to overcome ontological imperialism and, consequently, ontology as such. While Levinas' ethical thought undeniably opposes ontology and defends the primacy of ethics, it does not inevitably imply that the two are intrinsically in conflict and lead irrevocably to the rejection of ontology in general. Rather, it is clear that there is a more positive reworking of ontology at play in Levinas' thought. I will focus on the reworking of ontology by identifying two "forms" or "types" of recognition in his philosophy: the first, I call ontological recognition, and the second, ethical recognition.

I will proceed by first offering an elucidation of the two types of recognition in Levinas' thought. In my reading of his ontological recognition, I focus primarily on his only recently published notes and manuscripts on meaning and metaphor. Second, I will show that these forms of recognition are not mutually exclusive in his thought. In other words, he does not favor the so-called "ethical recognition" to the detriment of the "ontological recognition". Instead, I will argue that ontological recognition should be seen as grounded on ethical recognition. Finally, I will attend to Levinas' account and appropriation of religious language

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and discourse. While ethical recognition is identified as the necessary condition of religion and religious discourse, the distinction between the two forms of recognitions is essential to Levinas' account of "religious life". Moreover, ethical recognition provides a standard of evaluation for ontological recognition and traditional theological discourse. The two forms of recognition are nevertheless interconnected, if not reducible to one another.

Ontological Recognition and the Metaphoricity of Meaning

In order to understand what I call Levinas's ontological recognition, it is useful to have a brief look at how Levinas uses the notion of ontology. Levinas' use of the term is indebted to (post)-Kantian and phenomenological thought, especially to the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. For Levinas, as for the phenomenologists in general, the ontological elucidation of the general structure of the world cannot be separated from the human point of view. As Sami Pihlström acutely observes, Kantians and phenomenologists (as well as pragmatists) emphasize the importance of the acting, cognizing subject endowed with conceptual capacities. Thus, ontology is to be understood as a transcendental, rather than scientific and "objectivist", examination of the ways in which the world is (or can be) viewed, experienced, categorized and taken to be *significant to us*. As such, ontology is a human endeavor and must be conducted from the perspective of the cognizing human subject and its relation to surrounding reality. That is, ontology is not only the study of what beings are, but of *how* beings signify for us.¹

Following his teacher, Edmund Husserl, Levinas maintains that subjectivity is always already related to the world. *Intentionality*, directedness to the world, is the essence of the conscious subject. This is to say that consciousness is always consciousness of something: intentionality refers to the essential *correlation* between the experiencing subject and the world. However, as Levinas reminds us, this is not the whole story. Intentionality, as Levinas writes, does not mean that consciousness "bursts" towards the object or that we are "immediately among things".² Exterior objects do not enter into relation with consciousness, nor is the relation between two mutually interlocked psychic contents established *within consciousness*. Instead, intentionality is closely related to the question of meaning or sense. In this respect Levinas's view accords with the phenomenological account of intentionality understood as a bestowal of meaning or constitutive activity, in Husserlian terms *Sinngebung*: "[Intentionality] is essentially a meaning-bestowing act (*Sinngebung*)."³

Levinas thus begins by assuming that things in the world always mean something to us. They always appear as meaningful. The subject-object relation is no longer treated as a relation between two "real" objects. As Richard Cohen explains, the exteriority of the "object" of the intentional subject who thinks about it, "has a different sense than that of the object of the pre-phenomenological attitude, the naïvely encountered so-called 'real' object. Unlike the real object, the intentional object is the object *as meant*, the object as an object *of consciousness*."⁴ Intentional experience, the constitutive activity of the experiencing subject, is always *thematization* and *identification* of something *as* something. In this context Levinas uses the notion of "narrative intentionality", which for him is essential to thought in general. The object of experience is never separated from its signification. Using the paradigmatic example of perception, Levinas says that we

¹ Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics*, 41–42. Transcendental phenomenology, its method, and relation to Kantian thought has been widely discussed and received numerous interpretations. For a clarifying analysis and discussion on the matter see Heinämaa, Hartimo, Miettinen, *Phenomenology*.

² Levinas, *En découvrant*, 176–177.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Cohen, *Ethics*, 108. Cohen continues by stating that "[t]his is a big difference. The phenomenological epoch (i.e. reduction) opens the scientific inquirer – the phenomenologist – to the character of consciousness as meaning bestowing *Sinngebung*." For a good analysis of Levinas' reception and critique of Husserl see Bustan, *De l'intellectualisme à l'éthique*; Drabinski, *Sensibility and Singularity*. For discussion on Levinas's reception and critique of Husserl with regard to the theme of recognition see Sohn, *The Good*, 20–40.

do not perceive *this* or *that*; instead, to perceive is to “understand” (*entendre*) this *as* this or that *as* that.⁵ The manner in which beings appear to the intentional subject corresponds to the manner in which they are constituted or identified by the subject as this or that.⁶

For Levinas, this “as-structure” is the basic structure of ontological recognition. To recognize something is to identify it *as* this or that. The as-structure also reveals the essential metaphoricity of meaning. In the posthumously published writings and notes⁷ Levinas develops a theory of meaning in which the phenomenon of metaphor occupies a central role. However, he is much-less interested in the linguistic phenomena of metaphoric expressions and the underlying inner structure of metaphor as such. This more fundamental question of *metaphoricity* as such corresponds, in Levinas’ thought, to the very problem of transcendence and, as we will see, is significant for the solution of the tension between the ontological and the ethical forms of recognition.

Levinas begins his notes by bringing up the more-or-less standard view of metaphor, according to which metaphor, as a linguistic figure, implies a *transference of meaning*. This transference of a word’s meaning into a new sense brings into contact things which at first sight seem to have nothing in common. The form of contact may be, for example, analogy and association by resemblance between the two things.⁸ However, according to Levinas, we lose sight of the movement of transference which is essential to metaphor if we approach it only in terms of resemblance. He writes: “When resemblance is explicitly thought, we are not in contact with what is essential to metaphor: the movement of transference and amplification is lost.”⁹ Levinas claims that once we focus our attention on the essential feature of the metaphor, namely, the transference of meaning, we see that the metaphor is not simply a linguistic and rhetorical device. Transference of meaning or metaphoricity is an essential feature of language and of human understanding insofar as all recognitive understanding is linguistic. In fact, for Levinas, resemblance already presupposes the transference of meaning that expresses the “this *as* that”-structure which is the essential feature of our intentional relation to the world.

In his analysis, Levinas thus focuses on the movement of transference of meaning or the phenomenon of *metaphoricity*. Moreover, he connects the notion of metaphoricity understood as such to the notion of transcendence. He writes: “[The] marvel of metaphor: the possibility of moving *outside of experience*, to think further than that which is given (...) The metaphor is (...) *transcendence*.”¹⁰ What Levinas means is that

5 Levinas, *En découvrant*, 304–305. See Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 59–60, 127–133; Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 60–64; Levinas, *De Dieu*, 231–235.

6 Ontological elucidation of the “general structure of the world” is the study of this intentional correlation and the intentional constitution of the world: “how beings signify for us”. As Levinas writes: “According to Husserl, in order to elucidate the rationality of what is thought, it is necessary to investigate the way in which what is thought – including being, notably – appears in thought. This recurrence of what is thought to the thought that thinks it constitutes, from thought to thought, a new concreteness, the radical one, relative to the concreteness of thought and of being, notably, in its appearing and in the ontological foundation of its quiddities or its essences, the ones by the others. The radical ascent of all that is thought to its meaningfulness in the thought that thinks – and, consequently, the reduction of all that is thought to the ultimate concreteness – would be inescapable for the philosopher. It would release thought from its belonging to the gathering of beings and things and free it from the role which, already subject to influence, it plays as the human soul among beings, things, and forces of the world (...) Through the ‘this’ or the ‘that’ which is ineradicable in description of the meaning-bestowing activity, a notion such as the presence of something is drawn from the moment of the birth of meaning. The presence of something: *Seinsinn*, the meaning of being according to Husserl, which will become in Heidegger (...) being of beings.” (Levinas, *De Dieu*, 232–234.) As Levinas explains elsewhere, phenomenology teaches that immediate presence among things does not yet comprehend the sense of things and does not replace truth. Husserl, Levinas maintains, invites us to move beyond the immediate and introduces “intentional analysis capable of teaching us [what it means for things to be].” (Levinas, *En découvrant*, 176–177.) See also Husserl, *Méditation*, 65–78, 85–98. Here, I refer to the French translation of Husserl’s famous *Cartesian Meditations* used by Levinas. This text was first translated into French by Levinas himself and his colleague Gabrielle Peiffer.

7 See Levinas, *Carnet*; Levinas, *Parole et silence*.

8 Calin, “Métaphore absolue”, 131–132. As Aristotle writes in the *Poetics*: “Metaphor is the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy.” Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b.

9 Levinas, *Carnet*, 237.

10 Ibid., 231–234.

meaning does not reside in the immediate givenness of an object of experience. Instead, in order to recognize something as this or that, it must be placed in a larger whole that Levinas, following Husserl, calls a “horizon of meaning”. All meaning is metaphoric in the sense that in order to grasp what a given object means, one must have already transcended the given object by placing it in the horizon of meaning.

Levinas’ account of meaning may be characterized as holistic, for it takes the meaning that an object of experience has for us in any given situation to be connected to and pointing to other meanings and objects. That is, it is connected and points to a larger background horizon of sense from which it draws its significance. Only by inhabiting a location in this horizon can things mean what they mean.¹¹ According to Levinas, the relevant horizon of meaning is the cultural–linguistic context in which cognizing and intentional subjects are situated and which they share with one another. Consequently, there is no fixed or literal meaning, but all meaning is context-relative and is more or less figurative. A perceptual object given to consciousness, for example, is never given in itself as such, but as something that occupies a place amongst other objects and, finally, as located and understood in a cultural-linguistic context. The notion of pure receptivity or pure given is a myth and an abstraction¹². For Levinas, “[t]he world signifies through language (...) Language is the fact that that which is thought (...) signifies, that is, is transcended in its fixity and is as something else: it is metaphor (...) all meaning signifies in a context.”¹³ In a passage from the manuscript entitled *Signification*, we find textual support for the interconnectedness of thought, language and culture in Levinas’ thought: “Thinking is simultaneously apprehension and expression, that is, language. Culture is not something added to a neutral and previous knowledge of nature. It is perception itself (...) These coincide with communication, because expression is made to the other person. Perception, culture and language are interdependent (...) The human is cultural.”¹⁴

Given that what a particular object means is determined by the place it occupies in a larger horizon or context, the intentional subject is required in order for the object to appear as a fixed unity, as this or that. The subject is not only a passive “spectator”, but is also “an actor”.¹⁵ To recognize something as this or that is to identify a meaningful fixed unity, the meaningful object of consciousness, in the context of the panoply of meanings and perspectives. Ontological recognition – that is, how we identify, thematize and understand the reality that appears to us – is a two-way street. It is a correlation between the meaning-bestowal activity of the subject and the world now understood as horizon of meaning. Broadly speaking, to borrow Michael Morgan’s way of putting it, for Levinas meaning is born by means of languages and cultures which develop as a result of human activity.¹⁶ Our relation to the world, intentionality as meaning-bestowing activity, is characterized by a “simultaneity of freedom and belonging”¹⁷. Inherited and learned meanings are constructed and transformed through our engagement with reality and interpersonal relations. Identification is an act of “assembling”¹⁸ or “synthesizing”¹⁹, as Levinas writes, fixing unity in multiplicity. Levinas refers to this synthesizing activity in Kantian terms as “the synthesis of apprehension and recognition”.²⁰

In short, the basic structure of what I have called Levinas’s understanding of *ontological recognition* is the identification of *this as that* against a larger horizon of meaning. However, it is clear that for Levinas ontology alone is insufficient. Left to itself, it leads to highly questionable consequences. We can list at least three worries. First, there is the concern that nothing really falls outside the grasp of the conceptual capacities of the cognizing intentional subject. In his manuscript on metaphor he writes: “the order of meanings (...) is the

11 Ibid., 230: “[As] if everything were a seed of everything; all things carrying within themselves the design of all others (...) This multiplicity and polyvalence is the internal character of signification (...) Meaning depends on metaphoricity in the sense that metaphoricity is the very participation of an object with other things than itself. (...) There is (...) cultural objects, because there is metaphoric meaning (and not the other way around).”

12 Levinas, *Humanisme*, 19.

13 Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 337.

14 Ibid., 364.

15 Levinas, *Humanisme*, 26.

16 Morgan, *Discovering*, 117.

17 Levinas, *En découvrant*, 184.

18 Levinas, *Humanisme*, 26.

19 Levinas, *En découvrant*, 35.

20 Levinas, *Autrement*, 64.

order of culture, the order of being which is *adequate to thought*.”²¹ There is nothing that cannot be identified, understood, and appropriated to the needs of the subject. Second, since objects always appear *as meant*, they are never approached as such, but only “by the detour of the universal”²² or through a neutral “third term” which secures the comprehension of beings.²³ This, according to Levinas, amounts to depriving beings of their independence, particularity, and alterity. The other person, for example (and most importantly) would never be approached and encountered as an irreducible singularity, but always as a “member of a genus”. He famously calls this the “reduction of the other to the same” and “ontological imperialism”.²⁴ Third, he claims that the metaphoric character of meaning amounts only to a *relative transcendence* which is reductive.²⁵ Since metaphoricity means that things signify only against a larger horizon of meaning, that everything is context-relative, there is no place for genuine transcendence. Nothing is really other. Everything is defined against a larger whole. Things and what they mean may, of course, *differ* from one another. However, their difference with regard to one another is constituted in a reciprocal dependence and reference to each other. It is difference within identity, within a whole or totality. For this reason, Levinas writes that “ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.”²⁶ However, Levinas’s intention is not to reject ontology or to deny the importance of ontological recognition, because it is the essential manner in which we understand the world and things in it. Instead, he questions the *sufficiency* ontology (as he understands it). Ontology must be grounded in something else, in ethics and ethical recognition. As Levinas maintains: “[...] ethics comes before ontology. It is more ontological than ontology.”²⁷

Ethical Recognition of the Other Person

It is well known that the chief aim of Levinas’ entire philosophical enterprise is to articulate and describe a form of alterity which is absolutely transcendent. In the manuscripts and notes on metaphor he starts with a question: “Is another form of sense possible which is not that of language and culture?” Answering in the affirmative, Levinas claims that our relation to the other human being constitutes another form of significance which is not relative but absolute. He writes: “The other order of significance (...) exceeds the capacity of the one who thinks, is the order that only makes language of words possible. It is the order where the face of the one to whom language is spoken [presents itself].”²⁸

As we noted before, Levinas argues that identification of something as something, what I call here ontological recognition, requires language. Language, in turn, presupposes interlocutors: persons communicating with each other. And what interests Levinas here is the role of the interlocutor in communication. Is the one to whom I speak *merely* another subject similar to myself, someone with whom I share, shape and arrange the common world, and whom I can define and understand? According to Levinas this is not the case. It is not enough, he writes, “to understand the significance of the interlocutor as that of a You appearing to the I.” The meaning of the interlocutor as interlocutor “is not a meaning that may be translated by words. It is not in the same sense metaphoric as are the meanings that constitute the world.”²⁹ The interlocutor is first and foremost the other as other. She is someone who cannot be fully understood,

²¹ Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 341–342.

²² Levinas, *En découvrant*, 310.

²³ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 32–39. Levinas famously writes that this approach is characteristic of the entire Western philosophical tradition. According to Levinas, the neutral or third term has had many different names: “idea”, “concept”, “sensible qualities” and most notably “horizon” and “being”. Levinas says that “ontological imperialism” is most visible in phenomenological tradition. Husserl notion of “horizon” plays the same role as the notion of *concept* in the classical and German idealism. The same can be said of Heidegger’s notion of “being”. Both Husserl and Heidegger maintain the primacy of the subject and understanding. See, for example, Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 35–37. Levinas, *De Dieu*, 177–178.

²⁴ See Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 33–38.

²⁵ Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 337–338.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 37.

²⁷ Levinas, *De Dieu*, 143.

²⁸ Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 342.

²⁹ Ibid.

classified, or identified. The other person cannot be reduced to a pre-established system of relations of cultural meanings. Levinas's famous term *face of the other* refers to the irreducibility of the other person to comprehension. She does not point beyond herself, to larger a context, but signifies independently of a context.³⁰ Few years earlier Levinas had written: "The manner in which the other presents herself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we call the face (...) The face expresses itself."³¹ Communication with and speaking to another is to orient and turn oneself to the other person who is other, exceeding all understanding and analysis of her. This is what Levinas means when he says that the other person is infinite. In his own terms: "The original essence of expression and discourse does not reside in the giving of information of an interior and hidden world. In expression a being presents itself (...) In the *face* the being that manifests itself assists its own manifestation (...) and thus calls for me."³² In my relation to the other person in discourse, the other person is the one *to whom* I speak and express the world. This means that whatever the theme of the discourse, even if the other was this very theme, she remains outside of what is said as the one to whom it is said. Thus, in the face-to-face encounter the metaphoricity and transcendence are absolute. This encounter is a relation to someone who exceeds understanding, remains outside any context: "All language is interpersonal language, in the abstract that breaks up history. The transference here means something else than comprehension. It is precisely this kind of transference that may be reserved to the absolute sense of the metaphor (...) the metaphor *par excellence* or idea of the infinite is the ethical meaning."³³

The face-to-face encounter with the other person has a fundamental ethical meaning and content. In a manner which comes close to Hegel's famous description of recognition in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*,³⁴ Levinas describes the face-to-face encounter as a struggle: "Discourse is (...) a struggle between thinkers, with all the risks of freedom. The relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors."³⁵ However, Levinas's account differs decisively from Hegel's. For Levinas, the relation between the subject and the other must not be understood as a struggle between opposite antagonistic forces which leads to synthesis. The process of recognition in Hegel runs through different stages of struggle and ends in a mutual and reciprocal recognition. For Hegel, the two parties eventually form a community, "a determinately universal identity of the 'We'"³⁶. For Levinas, however, this would result reducing the other to the same.

As Robert R. Williams states, it is true that for Hegel mutual-reciprocal recognition contains an essential ethical feature as it requires the renunciation of coercion. The encounter with the other reveals that initial understanding of the self as absolute is false as it excludes the other whose recognition is essential to the self. The presence of the other reveals to the self "that it is not universal rather is a particular opposed to another particular."³⁷ The self sees itself as other, and that, may be experienced as a loss of self which is unsupportable and must be overcome. This being-other must be negated or cancelled. However, the other must not be eliminated, since "this deprives the self of the possibility of the other's recognition, which the self needs and on which it depends."³⁸ Instead, the otherness of the other must be negated by entering into relation and mediation with the other. The "authentic 'cancellation'" of the other means affirmation of the other and allow the other to go free. The opposition between the self and the other is transcended. The other's essential recognition cannot be forced. Mastery and domination of the other must be abandoned. The other person must be affirmed and recognized not only in her identity, but also in her difference. This process of recognition must be mutual and reciprocal, for it to succeed. From this mutual and reciprocal recognition emerges a concrete and mediated universal: the 'We'. The original absolute self-identity is decentered and subjectivity is enlarged into intersubjectivity. This results from the mutual and reciprocal cognitive action.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 43; see also Levinas, *Liberté*, 48–51; Perpich, *Ethics*, 38–44.

³² Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 374.

³³ Ibid., 342–344.

³⁴ See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 104–119.

³⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 70; see also Morgan, *Discovering*, 67.

³⁶ Williams, *Hegel's*, 56.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 55.

Both parties depend on the other and the other's recognition. The community or totality (the 'We') constituted through the reciprocal recognition is one in which both parties are both united, regarded as the same as the other, and at the same time separate and affirmed in their difference.³⁹

For Levinas the Hegelian account remains insufficient and reductive.⁴⁰ Even though the other is allowed to go free and affirmed in her difference, this is nothing more than a difference within a whole: the universal "We". The other person is always recognized *only as different* from others, and, difference is structured by identity (and vice versa). For Levinas, as Oona Ajzenstat explains, Hegelian dialectics is totality. The intended result of the struggle of autonomies is participation and order, a subsuming of the other into a structure of the same, totality. Ajzenstat writes that this struggle for Levinas "exists for the purpose of creating a stable synthesis or harmony; moreover a synthesis or harmony already exists in the struggle insofar as the two parties struggling can already exist in the struggle can already be seen as mutually dependent, mutually defined, two parts of the whole that is the struggle."⁴¹ Williams is surely right in noting that, in his criticism of Hegel, Levinas focuses too much on identity. But this does mean that Hegel neglects or excludes the difference between the self and the other.⁴² The problem with Hegel's account is not that it excludes difference. Rather, the problem is that it approaches the other and relation to the other only in terms of difference and opposition. In Levinas' view, to describe the other merely as *different from* and *opposite to* the subject is to think that the other person is defined in relation to the subject. The other person is reduced to a whole or totality against and through which she is viewed and grasped. Oppositional difference and reciprocity amounts only to a relative alterity. Such a Hegelian account, for Levinas, would amount to what I call "ontological recognition", and to what Levinas refers to as relative metaphoricity and transcendence. In contrast to the Hegelian account, Levinas maintains that the other person's alterity is absolute. The self and other remain absolutely separate: "[The subject] and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and *absolve* themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separate."⁴³

Levinas's version of the "struggle between thinkers" does not lead to a union of the two parties involved. In my relation to the other person, the other constantly challenges my conception of her and resists all attempts to define and reduce her to the same, to totality. The other person resists all domination and demands to be acknowledged and accepted in her incomparable and unique singularity. The other person

³⁹ For a more complete and thorough analysis of Hegel's account of recognition in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, see Williams, *Hegel's*, 46–64 and Anderson, *Hegel's Theory of Recognition*, 100–137.

⁴⁰ See Williams, *Hegel's*, 408.

⁴¹ Ajzenstat, *Driven back to the Text*, 209. Ajzenstat stresses that, depending on how one interprets Hegel, one may emphasize Hegel's synthetic telos, that is, the achievement of Absolute Knowledge. In this case the distinction between struggle and synthesis forms a part of a greater synthesis. On the other hand, one can stress the way in which Hegel's view elucidates the continuing course of history, in which case the aforementioned distinction forms part of an ongoing greater struggle. However, in either case the two are simply two sides of the same coin: "Struggle leads to synthesis; struggle has synthesis as its purpose; struggle is synthesis and synthesis a temporary ceasefire that covers over struggle." *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴² See Williams, *Hegel's*, 50. Levinas explicitly states: "The negation that claims to deny being is still, in its opposition, a position on a terrain upon which it is based. Negation carries with it the dust of being that it rejects. The reference of the negation to the positive in the contradiction is the great discovery of Hegel, who would be the philosopher of the positivity that is stronger than negativity." Levinas also names "the search for the other person's recognition in Hegel" as one of the rare moments in the history of Western philosophy when "the relation of transcendence shows itself, if only in an instant in its purity, in the philosophies of knowledge". Hegel's account, however, does not go far enough in its analysis of the transcendence of other and in the end "affirms the identity of the identical and the non-identical. All overflowing of the Same by the Other passes henceforth for an incomplete thought, as romantic." Levinas, *De Dieu*, 177–185.

⁴³ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 104. On the next page Levinas writes: "The positions we have outlined oppose the ancient privilege of unity which is affirmed from Parmenides to Spinoza and Hegel." See also Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 83–84. For reasons of space, Levinas' complex and difficult reading of Hegel's philosophy unfortunately cannot be analyzed in detail here. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Levinas's reading is indebted to Franz Rosenzweig's and Alexandre Kojève's readings of Hegel, and is at times problematic. Levinas rarely cites or mentions directly Hegel's work and when he does it is done with a critical tone. However, at same time Levinas recognizes Hegel's importance as a philosopher whose thinking cannot be neglected. Furthermore Hegel's presence in Levinas's writing is evident, especially, in his phenomenological description of desire, need, satisfaction, freedom and work, just to mention a few topics. For a good and illuminative analyses of Levinas's relationship to Hegel see Benso, "Gestures at work"; Cohen, *Alternance*, 19–47. For a critical analysis of Levinas' interpretation of Hegel see Williams, *Hegel's*, 408–412.

“puts the *I (Moi)* into question”.⁴⁴ The “putting into question” is, Levinas explains, “a summons to respond (...) the other person provokes an ethical movement”.⁴⁵

Levinas defines this “putting into question” as a resistance to the subject’s powers and will to comprehend, possess, and ultimately as a resistance to the power to kill. The presence of the other person confronts the subject with a choice either to let her live, or to kill her. The relation to the other person, as one commentator puts it, is not just a matter of thinking that she is. It is, first and foremost, my responsibility for her mortality and vulnerability.⁴⁶ She engages me as responsible, calls and summons me to respond for and to her. This relation is fundamentally asymmetrical and non-reciprocal. The other person is not comparable to myself and my responsibility for and to the other does not depend on her being responsible for and to me. I am called to respond infinitely for and to her. However, this “putting in question”, Levinas’s claims, does not lead to a negation of the subject, of the *I*. Contra Hegel Levinas says that “the other person is not a scandal for reason that puts it in a dialectical movement”⁴⁷ of endless struggle.

Even though the other person exceeds understanding and is absolutely transcendent, my relation to her is not without meaning. It signifies, according to Levinas, the ethical summons and command, but also the vulnerability and destitution of the other human being. The other person, before anything else, is first and foremost the one who needs my care and charity. In his interview with Phillippe Nemo, Levinas summarizes the meaning of the face of the other person in biblical terms: “there is an essential poverty in the face (...) the face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence (...) The face is signification, and signification without context (...) the face is meaning all by itself. You are you (...) But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical (...) it is that whose *meaning* consists in saying: “thou shalt not kill.”⁴⁸ The ethical meaning of our relation to the other human being is a summons and an imperative to share the world with her, to make room for her, and to give from my own. However, although the subject is put into question, called to respond and preserve the life of the other, she is not forced to do so. Nor is the other “allowed to go free” in order to ensure her recognition. In the relation to the other, the subject is always already called to respond and to give freely. This is the core of Levinas’s understanding of ethical recognition which is “a recognition prior any cognition”,⁴⁹ that is, immediate form of recognition of the other person’s singularity and vulnerability, an the ethical summons expressed by the face of the other that precedes any calculation and understanding of her as this or that, as a mere object among others. Levinas writes: “To recognize the other person is to recognize a hunger (...) To recognize the other person is to give. But, it is to give to a master, to someone who is approached as You (*vous*) (...) [Here] the ethical dimension of signification announces itself.”⁵⁰

Ambivalence of the Other Person and Recognition

In the remainder, I will elucidate the relation between the two forms of recognition, ontological and ethical respectively. I will argue that the relation between the two should not be understood as antithetical, and that ontology is not something to be rejected all together. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*⁵¹, Jean Grondin rightly points out that Levinas is wary of ontological accounts of intersubjectivity and their attempts to categorize and thematize the other person. To be sure, Levinas criticizes the inherent reductionism of such accounts, and often denounces them as “violent” and “imperialistic”. However, I do not think as Grodin does, that

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 343.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Pihlström, *Pragmatist Metaphysics*, 140. Richard A. Cohen acutely explains that for Levinas the proper understanding of and the very essence of intersubjectivity is an ethical structure: the moral and asymmetrical priority of the other person over the self, the self responsible for other person. See Cohen, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 244.

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 223.

⁴⁸ Levinas, *Ethique et infini*, 83-84. See also Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 215-220.

⁴⁹ Levinas, “Socialité et argent”, 107. See also Sohn, *The Good*, 29.

⁵⁰ Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 373. See also Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 73-74; Sohn, *The Good*, 28-36.

⁵¹ Grodin, *Introduction*, 243-246, 250.

Levinas regards “the desire to *understand* somebody else necessarily [as] a form of totalitarianism.”⁵² On the contrary, ontological recognition is necessary for our everyday interaction with other persons and our surrounding reality. It is quite evident, that we understand and interpret others in various different ways. Others occupy and play many roles, mean different things, and hold various social statuses in our lives. There are, as Morgan remarks, social relationships, etiquette, and a certain kind of reciprocity.⁵³ Levinas does not deny this. When Levinas rejects representation of the other, as Diane Perpich notes, he is not making a statement of facts or state of affairs. The statement is itself an act of ethical recognition.⁵⁴

Hence, the two forms of recognition, ontological and ethical, go hand in hand in our everyday relations and interaction with other people. Yet, they are not reducible to one another either. They must be distinguished from one another and this distinction must always be kept in sight. The simultaneity of the two recognitions is manifest in Levinas’s description of the other person in *Signification et Sens*, which brings to the fore the ambivalent character of the other person.

I find myself facing the other person. She is neither a cultural meaning nor a simple given object (...) Certainly, the other person’s manifestation is produced, first of all, in the same way that all meaning is produced. The other person is present in a cultural whole, illuminated by that whole, like a text by its context. Comprehension of the other is therefore a hermeneutics, an exegesis. The other person gives itself in the concrete of the totality to which it is immanent (...) [But] the other person not only comes to us from a context but signifies by itself, without mediation (...) Whereas the phenomenon is already, in whatever score, image, captive manifestation of its mute plastic form, (...) the face is alive. Its life consists in *undoing the form* where every being (...) is already dissimulated.⁵⁵

Here, Levinas draws an important distinction between the other person as object and as face. The other person is always simultaneously recognized both ontologically and ethically. The other person remains as the “alter ego, the living, a fragment of matter or, if one wishes, of a biological system, but in the ethical intrigue resonates the meaning of the face to whom I am indebted before any knowledge that would recognize her as same as this or that.”⁵⁶

The passage just quoted was written in 1964, during what may be called Levinas’s “middle period” between his two major works *Totalité et infini* and *Autrement Qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*. Certain formulations in Levinas’s earlier work may suggest that he changed his views on the way in which the other person is present to the subject. Moreover, in his later writing Levinas formulates the ambivalence of the other person more clearly. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the commitment to a notion of the other person as an ambivalent “quasi-phenomenon” is present already in his earlier work.⁵⁷ Already in 1952 Levinas writes: “To speak, at same time as to know the other person, is to make oneself known to her. The other person is not only known, she is also welcomed (*salué*). She is not only named, but also invoked

⁵² Ibid., 245.

⁵³ Morgan, *Discovering*, 62.

⁵⁴ Perpich, *Ethics*, 192.

⁵⁵ Levinas, *Humanisme*, 50–51 (emphasis added). See also Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 342; Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 236–237.

⁵⁶ Salanskis, *L’humanité de l’homme*, 106. Michael Sohn also alludes to this ambivalent character of the other person. He writes, for example, that “the recognition of the other is not recognition *merely* of one object or thing among, nor is it the identification of a fact according to its qualities. Rather, it is the radical encounter wherein one’s primordial subjectivity is individuated into a call for responsibility.” (Sohn, *The Good*, 36.) However, Sohn more or less reserves the notion of recognition of the other to the ethical relation and does not (in so many words) consider the possibility of an ontological recognition and how it might be related to the ethical in Levinas. But, as the above quote shows, Sohn is certainly aware of the essential ambivalence character of the other person. Sohn is more interested in laying out the philosophical background and structure of Levinas’s *ethical recognition of the other person*. Sohn correctly locates the roots of Levinas’s own view in his adaptation of Husserl’s phenomenology and Levinas’s critique thereof. (In this regard it is interesting to notice that Sohn, even though he notes the influence of the Hegelian tradition in Levinas’ thought, does not offer a comparison between Hegel and Levinas and their understanding of recognition which in my view is vital in order to have a full picture of Levinas’s view.) Sohn draws a very illuminating and useful distinction between the objective side (the idea of the infinite) and the subjective side (pure sensation). Sohn’s analysis and the distinction he draws cannot, unfortunately, be discussed here in detail. One must, nevertheless, point out that my own contribution here is not so much a critique of Sohn’s analysis as it is more a continuation of this discussion and analysis of certain aspects that are not present in Sohn’s brilliant work.

⁵⁷ Roland, *Parcours*, 95.

(...) I do not only think of what she is for me, but also and at same time, and even before, I *am* for her. In applying a concept to her, in calling her this or that, I am already calling to her. I do not only *know*, I am in society.”⁵⁸ A decade later in *Totalité et Infini* Levinas makes a similar point by introducing the distinction between *what* the other person is and *who* she is. Levinas writes that “certainly the *who* is most of the time a *what*.”⁵⁹ We encounter the other person not in isolation or “outside the world”,⁶⁰ but in the shared context of everyday life, in a common world which is structured and governed by cultural, social and political rules and etiquette. Within this cultural whole, we communicate, have different social statuses and identities. We are brothers, friends, immigrants, members of social groups, and so forth. And how we understand and identify others and ourselves, *what* we are, is largely dependent not only on the shared cultural context, but also on the ways in which we identify and recognize others and how other see and interpret us within this whole. However, as should be clear by now, in Levinas’ account the other is not reducible to *what* she is. By facing me, in discourse, she also places into question *what* I think of her or take her to be. She is also a *who*: “*Who?* answers to the (...) presence of a being who presents itself without reference to nothing (...) The *Who?* envisages a face.”⁶¹

We can obtain a clearer picture of what Levinas means by taking a look at Diane Perpich’s *Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* in which she explicates his theory and his rejection of representation in dialogue with the modern discussion of “identity and recognition politics”. According to Perpich at issue in identity-based politics are the claims for recognition of *difference*. Claims that are usually made in a particular social and political context by different more or less marginalized or repressed social groups and their members. The problem of such claims, from a Levinasian point of view, is that “they cast the agents of such claim as a *what* - female, black, gay, Jewish, for example, - while arguably claiming recognition for those subjects as, each of them, singular faces or *whos*.”⁶² Here, the distinction between *who* and *what* is lost. Perpich continues by offering three reasons for why socially ascribed identities fail to grasp who a person is. First, it is a mistake to think that one is able to fully inhabit a given identity, because such identities are not static. They change with changes in time and place, and are experienced in different ways in different historical and social contexts. Second, social identities are multiple, shifting and intersecting. Only context determines which identities matter the most to an individual at a given place and time. Who a person is, “is no more conveyed by the whole assemblage and constellation of [her] identities than it is by any given identity”.

Third (and most importantly from Levinas’ point of view) every representation of identity – that is, ontological recognition – is potentially alienating. This is so because socially ascribed meanings “shape and misshape” persons’ self-understanding and fundamentally make of a person “something that can be laid hold of by others”.⁶³ People are respected, held in high regard, but they are also often judged, persecuted, and controlled based on *what* they are and how they are represented by others. Or, as Levinas writes in the above citation, depending on the *image* and *form* they have in a particular context. In another passage from *Totalité et Infini* Levinas expresses the same point in (quasi-)religious terms: the other person is present “at the very limit of saintliness and caricature.”⁶⁴ To identify or represent the other person is to begin the process of reducing her from a *who* to a *what*, the other to the same.⁶⁵ Recognizing the other person as this or that is to in a sense to caricaturize her.

This is not to deny that *what* the other person is may be of great importance and value for herself as something that needs to be recognized and accepted by others. Kwame Anthony Appiah is surely correct in reminding us that identity provides a source of value, because adopting an identity is to acknowledge it as a feature that structures one’s journey through life while providing assistance as a source value to choose from the options laid out along journey. Furthermore, identities create solidarity, for example, between those

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 22.

⁵⁹ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 192. Perpich, *Ethics*, 186–190.

⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 187.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁶² Perpich, *Ethics*, 193.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 216.

⁶⁵ Perpich, *Ethics*, 191.

who share the same identity, which might be, all things being equal, a good thing.⁶⁶ However, at same time, the other person is much more than what we take her to be or any given identity that she may inhabit. No social identity (*what* the other is) exhausts the whole of who one is – which is not a matter of difference or combining “a set of overlapping and interwoven identities”, to borrow Perpich’s words.⁶⁷ Fundamentally, she is a uniquely singular person who in her facing me demands to be recognized as such and puts me and my will to power into question. And, the ethical recognition of the other person is what Levinas refers in the quote above as saintliness.

Referring to traditional Jewish thought, Levinas writes that saintliness (hebr. *kadosh*) means separateness and purity.⁶⁸ Ethical recognition of the other person means the acknowledgement of her saintliness, that is, her uniqueness, separateness from me and irreducibility to any given cultural and linguistic context. More importantly, saintliness contains the idea of separateness with regard to the everyday and to the order of being. It is an “attitude” in which the mundane structure of things is suddenly altered. In my relation with the other person my joyous and egoistic existence where things are for me is put into question. Holiness is the interruption of my “perseverance in being” (*conatus essendi*).⁶⁹ I am summoned to responsibility and to share the world, my place under the sun, with the singular other person. During an interview from 1986 Levinas states: “However, with appearance of the human – and this is my entire philosophy – there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. That is unreasonable. [The human being] is an unreasonable animal (...) But we cannot not admire holiness. Not the sacred, but saintliness, that is, the person who in his being is more attached to the being of the other than to his own. I believe that it is in saintliness that the human begins; not in the accomplishment of saintliness, but in the value. It is the first value, an undeniable value.”⁷⁰

Cultural meanings, identities and values are historical, multiple, fluid, intersecting, and constantly changing. To attach all meaning to culture, Levinas writes, is certainly a way of recognizing the value of all cultural personalities and backgrounds. But, according to Levinas, this polysemy of meaning is disorienting and calls it “the absurd”. The absurd is not the lack of meaning or senselessness of existence or any such thing. It is the fact of there being too much meaning without any unifying principle. What is required is a ground and non-relative standard or principle for orienting cultural meanings and their construction and according which they can be evaluated, measured and eventually judged.⁷¹

According to Levinas, the ethical relation to the other human being who demands ethical recognition provides both such a ground and standard. In our everyday encounters, the other person may appear and be identified in numerous ways. The encounter with the other as face is not detached from our everyday social world. Levinas claims that meanings are shaped and constituted through linguistic and cultural interaction and expression. Expression and communication, in turn, presuppose not only a speaker, but also someone to whom one speaks. They presuppose the other as a face who demands responsibility. Levinas calls the other-as-face “the unique sense” which is *prior* to all that is said and without which there is no expression, language or meaning. Levinas famously writes that the other person who faces me is not included in the totality of being which is expressed. Instead, she “arises behind every assembling of being as she to whom I express what I express (...) She is *sense* primordially, for she gives sense to expression itself, for it is only by her that a phenomenon such as meaning is, of itself, introduced into being.”⁷²

The ethical relation is a dimension of our interpersonal relationships: “a new dimension which is opened in the sensible appearing of the face.”⁷³ However, at the same time, it is also the most fundamental and determinative dimension which precedes and grounds ontological recognition. While the two forms of recognition are simultaneously present in our lives, they are not reducible to each other. As always in Levinas,

⁶⁶ Appiah, *Ethics of Identity*, 24.

⁶⁷ Perpich, *Ethics*, 193.

⁶⁸ Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, 89.

⁶⁹ See Wallenius, *Filosofian Toinen*, 59–62; Perpich, *Ethics*, 172–176.

⁷⁰ Wright, Hughes & Ainley, “The Paradox of Morality”, 172–173.

⁷¹ Levinas, *Humanisme*, 38–39.

⁷² Levinas, *Humanisme*, 50. See also Morgan, *Discovering*, 117–124; Cohen, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 242–245.

⁷³ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 216.

ethics is prior to ontology as the dimension which provides *sense* to human life, culture and meaning.⁷⁴ It is the necessary condition for the possibility of sense – the necessary condition for the ontological recognition. As Levinas writes: “[B]efore Culture [...] meaning is situated in Ethics (...) Norms of morality do not belong to history and culture (...) they make all meaning possible, even cultural ones.”⁷⁵

Ethics and ethical recognition meaning also provide a non-relative measure or standard that “allows us to judge Culture.”⁷⁶ To judge or evaluate culture can mean many things, but most importantly it signifies the necessary failure of every ontological recognition of the other human being. The other person is always more than what she means to us. Ethical recognition is a guiding standard that keeps ontological recognition in check and judges it. In our relation to the other person we are constantly reminded of her uniqueness and we verify our conception of her. Of course, we may be deaf and indifferent to the other as a face that calls me to respond and acknowledge her as a unique person who needs my care. However, to do so is “to fail to deal with her in the deepest human way.”⁷⁷

Recognition, the Divine, and Religious Life

The ethical dimension does not only ground ontology and cultural meanings, but also religion and religious discourse.⁷⁸ According to Levinas, the relation with God is inseparable from the ethical recognition of the other person. Furthermore, just as ontological recognition, and (identity) politics, religion also must be

⁷⁴ See Morgan, *Discovering*, 123.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Humanisme*, 58–61. In the manuscript *Signification* he writes: “[E]thics represents the condition of all culture and meaning (...) language does not initially reside in the movement of communication in the perfectly neutral intersubjective space and in which the interlocutors would occupy symmetrical positions. The priority of language indicates precisely a certain polarization of this space, an asymmetry of the intersubjective.” Levinas, *Parole et silence*, 379. Levinas puts here into operation his own version of the phenomenological reduction. In Levinas’s hands, the reduction of “all which is thought to the ultimate concreteness” is the uncovering of the ethical relation and recognition as the very ground of ontology. In *Totalité et infini* Levinas argues that the ethical relation is the very condition for the possibility of objectivity, of a common world. In discourse the world is given to other person – sociality is realized as the giving of the world. Ontology and objectifying knowledge depend on the ethical relation. (See for example Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 13–15; 69–75; 229–232. See also Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 82; Levinas, *De Dieu*, 251–254.). The ambivalence of ethics and ontology does not mean the reduction of one to other or effacement of the one by the other. Instead, it is a conjunction in which the two remain separate, and the primacy of the ethical dimension or perspective is affirmed. Thus, I am full agreement with Raoul Moati who writes: “[For Levinas] there is no clandestine relation to the world as world. To be in relation with the world means to have already been in relation with the other, to have already assumed the clandestine events of being (...) The receiving of the face does not imply the disembodiment of the human being, but coincides with the a concrete metaphysics realized as ethics (...) Ethics is a concrete metaphysics in which the reference to the sensible and terrestrial condition is constant, and in which the relation to the beyond of the world – articulated as the idea of the Infinite – requires a world of possessions to be offered.” (Moati, *Événements nocturnes*, 248–249.) The ambivalence is also beautifully described by Jean-Michel Salanskis: “We are constantly shared by two perspectives: 1) one that leads us to conceive all the layers of meaning that affects the human subject in terms of the social as a contingent clothing which has nothing to do with the infinite price of subjectivity; 2) another that leads to understand the belonging of the subject to a certain world, however contingent it may be, as that through which the subject learns the higher dimension of his own subjectivity, its value and mission.” Salanskis, *L’humanité de l’homme*, 159.

⁷⁶ Levinas, *Humanisme*, 58.

⁷⁷ Morgan, *Discovering*, 123.

⁷⁸ It goes without saying that it is not possible to give here a full and detailed analysis of Levinas’ nuanced and complex ethical reading and appropriation of religion and religious discourse. I will refer to relevant and essential connections between his account of recognition and his account of the divine. For more detailed analyses and discussions of Levinas on religion and religious discourse see, for example, Wright, *Twilight*, 71–96; Salanskis, *L’humanité de l’homme*, 165–226; Morgan, *Discovering*, 174–207, 336–414; Kosky, *Levinas and Philosophy of Religion*; Meylahn, *The Limits*, 79–162. It should also be noted that Levinas’s philosophy has attracted the attention of many philosophers of religion and theologians. However, many of these thinkers have been interested mainly in Levinas’s theory of the ethical relation and the primacy of ethics. Such eminent figures, just to mention a few, as Michael Purcell, Merold Westphal, and Graham Ward have written on and considered the relevance of Levinas thought to theology and have also applied his thought, most notably Purcell, in their own theological work. It should be mentioned that Levinas’s theory of ethical recognition of the other person is given due attention by Jan-Olav Henriksen in his work *Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy* (Henriksen, *Desire, Gift*). See for example Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*; Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology*; Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard*; Ward, *Barth, Derrida*.

kept in check by ethics and ethical recognition. Religion (just as politics and philosophy) is in danger of becoming a repressive ideology, a degenerate form of religion, if we lose sight of the fundamental ethical perspective.⁷⁹

Despite the religious undertone of his thought and his frequent use of the notion of God, Levinas is very critical of traditional theological enterprises precisely because they reduce God to an object of human understanding. What he means here by theology is the Western theological tradition.⁸⁰ According to Levinas, traditional philosophical theology, be it natural or revealed, remains ontological because it is characterized by the theoretical enterprises which, by objectifying the divine, attempt to provide rational accounts and descriptions of God and the divine essence. According to Levinas, however, such accounts are not forthcoming.⁸¹

One of the central problems of theology is that it follows “the easy itinerary in which pious thought too hastily deduces theological realities.”⁸² Levinas’ aim is to avoid such an “easy itinerary” and find another way to “speak legitimately of God”. If all descriptions of God are fundamentally false and distortions, how is one to speak legitimately of God? What does the word “God” mean? According to Levinas, one must start from the description of the ethical relation and ethical recognition: “The passage from the Other to divinity is a second step, and one must be careful to avoid stumbling by taking a too large a step.”⁸³ Levinas’ major claim is that religious language acquires meaning only through the relation to the other person. For Levinas the religious dimension is opened and has meaning only through ethics, as he understands it. According to Levinas, there is no direct encounter with or experience of God. In *Totalité et Infini* Levinas writes: “The invisible God does not only mean an unimaginable God, but a God accessible in justice. Ethics is a spiritual optics [...] The other person [...] is essential for my relation with God”. Furthermore, it is only through the ethical recognition of the other person that “God” and other theological concepts draw their meaning.⁸⁴ Levinas also claims that this idea is already present in Jewish thought. In fact, it is the central teaching of the Judaic faith: “God that is not objectified in the face in which He speaks [...] approaches precisely through the sending towards the other [person], obligating human beings to answer for each other, each one being responsible for the lives of all others. This seems to me fundamental to Judaic faith in which the relation to God is inseparable from the Torah. *It is inseparable from the recognition of the other person.* The relation to God is already ethics.”⁸⁵

It must be stressed that the critique of traditional theological discourse is not meant as a denial of the importance of religion and its expressions to everyday human life. What Levinas is saying is that theology misses what is truly at stake in religion and religious discourse. It covers up the true ethical meaning of the religious dimension it tries to account for in the first place. In this context, it is interesting to note that Levinas takes into account the criticism made to him that he has not paid enough attention to theology, and

⁷⁹ Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, 107–109. Merold Westphal comments: “Religious representation easily becomes the ‘alibi’ for historical oppression of every sort. If Levinas is willing at times to risk sounding as if he wants to reduce religion to ethics, it is because he knows how easily religion drifts to defacement.” Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard*, 51.

⁸⁰ Levinas, *De Dieu*, 95.

⁸¹ Levinas extremely wary of all forms natural and philosophical theology which “start with from a pretentious familiarity with the ‘psychology of God’ and with his ‘behavior’” and goes so far as to regard them as theosophy. In one of his Talmudic readings Levinas states that he distrusts “everything that could pass, in the texts studied, for piece of information about the life of God, for a theosophy.” Levinas, *Quatre lectures*, 33.

⁸² Levinas, *En découvrant*, 327. See also Westphal, *Levinas and Kierkegaard*, 49–51.

⁸³ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 247.

⁸⁴ Levinas writes: “Without the meaning drawn from ethics, theological concepts remain empty formal frames.” Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 76–77.

⁸⁵ Levinas, *A l’heure*, 201–202 (emphasis added). In another text Levinas describes the way God makes himself known to Israel in similar terms as the ethical recognition of the other person. God does not reveal himself through pre-established signs of kingship as do human kings of flesh and blood. Instead, He is recognized and acknowledged immediately. This immediate recognition of God, Levinas argues, is expressed in the verse from Exodus (15:2): “Behold my God, I will glorify Him.” Levinas writes: “God is recognized at first meeting: re-cognition without prior knowledge. Without crown or following, without signs for recognition. In the Hebrew text of Exodus, instead of the “Behold my God” of the translation, we have the more brutal demonstrative: ‘Zeh Eli’ which means ‘that one is my God’.” Levinas, *A l’heure*, 26.

acknowledges the importance of a recovery of theological issues. Levinas writes: “We have been reproached for ignoring theology. We do not contest the necessity of a recuperation or, at least, the necessity of choosing an opportunity for such a recuperation. However, we think that this recuperation comes after the glimpse of saintliness which is primary.” Levinas starts by recognizing, as Morgan acutely states, the widespread use of religious language and theological concepts, while also claiming that such language is not descriptive. In *Totalité et Infini* “God” as a theological concept is a myth. It does not refer to any real being. Nevertheless, as such it does perform a function; it expresses something that is most significant for human life and existence, that is, the ethical dimension and the infinite responsibility for and to the other human being. Fundamentally, for Levinas, religious language is an expression of saintliness, that is, of the significance and worth of the unique and singular other person, and of the ethical responsibility that orients human life.⁸⁶ In short, for Levinas, religion is ethics. Ethics is what gives religion its *raison d'être*.

The “relation with God”, as Levinas puts it, is “not a theology, a thematization”⁸⁷ of God, but the ethical relation itself: “Ethics is not corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. Ethics is an optic: everything I know of God and everything I can hear of his word and reasonably to say to him has to find an ethical expression [...] The justice rendered to the other person, my neighbor, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God. It is as intimate as prayer and liturgy which, without justice, are nothing.”⁸⁸ All theological enterprises which follow the “easy itinerary” fail, according to Levinas, to recognize the ethical dimension which is primary and grounding. His intention is precisely to uncover the primordial ethical meaning which grounds and is already present in all religious and theological language. Bearing this in mind, I will turn to Levinas’ discussion of Rabbi Haim Volozhiner’s account of the distinction between “God on our side” and “God on his own side” in “*A l’image de Dieu, d’après Rabbi Haïm Volozhiner*.”⁸⁹

It is not necessary to lay out here all the aspects of this distinction. What concerns us here, are the main features of Levinas’ own ethical interpretation of the distinction. Thus, “God on his own side” is the hidden, infinite, and absolutely transcendent God who cannot be grasped, defined, thought nor named. “God on our side” is the revealed God associated with the imperfect world, “the order of Creation”. At first sight, Levinas states, it seems that the notion of “God on his own side” refers to the non-biblical notion of “the God of metaphysics”. However, according to Levinas, for Rabbi Haim Volozhiner this notion is first and foremost a *religious* notion. It does not describe nor name God, but rather it indicates the direction towards which “the soul must be oriented in prayer”.⁹⁰ Such an orienting is possible despite the fact that the terms used in prayer refer to the world or to the association of God with the world (God on his own side). The notion of “God on his own side” and the notion of “God on our side” are simultaneously present in prayer. Levinas calls this conjunction “radical contradiction”. This radical apparent contradiction and paradox is found in the syntax of Jewish blessings “which start by addressing God in the second person [i.e. God on our side] and conclude referring to God in the third person [i.e. God on his own side].”⁹¹ This radical juxtaposition in which neither notions could efface the other, nor are they reducible to one another, is the core of the important notion of Jewish thought, *Tsimtsum*. In Jewish thought, especially in the Chassidic tradition, the concept of *Tsimtsum* expresses the concurrent ideas of God revealing himself only by hiding himself, by hiding his face or glory.⁹²

For Levinas the conjunction of the two notions represents, as Richard A. Cohen puts it, the conjunction of this world and another, the conjunction of the human and the divine. I agree with Cohen that in Levinas’ hands the conjunctions “rest not on an impossible ‘knowledge’ (mystification) but on the imperatives of morality obligated to infinity.”⁹³ Thus, I further agree with Cohen that religion, for Levinas, is not an escape from the worthlessness of an imperfect creation, but rather the perfecting of this creation whose highest

⁸⁶ Morgan, *Discovering*, 180–182.

⁸⁷ Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 76.

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 37.

⁸⁹ Levinas, *Au-delà du verset*, 195–200.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 196–197.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 200. See also Chalier, “L’âme de la vie”.

⁹³ Cohen, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 248.

sense would be the movement toward moral perfection. Religious life, for Levinas, is a constant striving for ethical self-overcoming, to make better the imperfect creation, to care for and give myself to the service of the other person, and struggle for social justice for all. Levinas calls the completion the moral intention that informs religious life a “‘modality’ of the divine”. This modality is the notion of “God on his own side” which in Levinas’s ethical reading signifies the infinite responsibility and continuous fight for social justice.⁹⁴ Religious life is simultaneously characterized by both notions which, in my view, are to be understood as two perspectives of religious life: religious life is “informed by the moral intention *as it is lived* from the everyday world and its differences [...] from the pure and the impure.”

I maintain that the conjunction of this human world and another (the divine) which characterizes religious life parallels the ambivalence ethics and ontology which, as noted above, characterizes our everyday life. But, as it should be clear by now, as both are grounded in and must be eventually justified by ethics and ethical recognition of the other person, to live a truly religious and human life is to live an ethical life. Perhaps we can put this way. From the point of view of religious life our acts and deeds in this world must reflect and have as a guiding principle divine perfection and the Law, that is, the commandment to love all of your neighbours more than oneself and to strive for perfecting, purifying, the impure creation. From the point of view of our everyday life our acts and deeds must be guided by the ethical recognition, goodness, and the “understanding” of the necessary failure of every ontological recognition and representation of each and every other human being, and strive for making this world of ours better for all of us. Saintliness begins not with the contemplation of the divine, but with responding to material needs of other person which are my spiritual needs. This the closest we can get to anything “worthy” of the name “God”. To know God, as Levinas argues, is not to know something *about* God, but to know what to do.⁹⁵ Cohen is right in stating that for Levinas the path to God is through morality and justice.⁹⁶ However, one must careful not take Levinas’ statements too literally. Of course, there is nothing, no thing, to know, nor does the path which goes through ethics and justice lead to a transcendent realm outside this world. The meaning of the words “God” and absolute transcendence can only be approached indirectly, through the description of the ethical relation in which I am called to respond for and to the other person – by following a difficult itinerary. Levinas states: “*the recognition of the other*, the neighbour, the stranger and the acts that express it or lead toward it are already saintliness and hence the full approach of the Lord, *his coming to mind*.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

What I have called in this article *ontological recognition* is indeed important, and even a necessary way of approaching the other person. However, it is determined by and must be measured by the ethical recognition of the other person’s uniqueness and singularity and of her need and vulnerability. We should always keep in mind the ambivalent character of human life. This means to acknowledge the priority of the ethical recognition over ontology, but not in order to reject ontology altogether, but in order to examine and rework it through the ethical and thus make it relevant to human life and the everyday. Levinas does not suggest that recognizing and identifying the other as this or that necessarily entails a violent relation towards of the other person. Levinas does not promote a rejection of representation of identity and of claims for recognition of difference altogether, and thus, ontological recognition. Not every kind of totality is necessarily bad. What Levinas is really fighting against is ontology’s “claim” to sufficiency. Levinas points out that ontology left to itself leads to “domination” and “imperialism”. It is only when we lose sight of the fundamental ethical perspective that ontology and ontological recognition are in danger of becoming oppressive and repressive. By keeping the ethical perspective in sight, human and religious life informed by ethics can truly emerge. A perspective is opened by which the intersubjective relation is not approached as a constant struggle of opposites, but rather as a positive exchange through which the idea of God comes to

⁹⁴ Levinas, *Au-delà du verset*, 199.

⁹⁵ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 37.

⁹⁶ Cohen, “Emmanuel Levinas”, 246.

⁹⁷ Levinas, *A l’heure*, 15. (emphasis added)

mind. In this positive exchange the other is acknowledged as a singular and unique person, and his views and attitudes are welcomed as valuable and perhaps even as genuine alternatives to our own. As Levinas writes: “Certainly, to communicate is to open oneself. But the openness is not complete if it is watching out for [ontological] recognition. *It is complete not in opening to ‘the spectacle’ of or the [ontological] recognition of the other, but in becoming responsibility for [the other person].*”⁹⁸

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⁹⁸ Levinas, *Autrement qu’être*, 189 (emphasis added).

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