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Research Article

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God Who Comes to Mind: Emmanuel Levinas as Inspiration and Challenge for Theological Thinking

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0189 received October 30, 2021; accepted November 29, 2021

Abstract: From the beginning, Levinas' thought was received not only by philosophers but also by theologians. But his thought is very radical and represents both a challenge and an inspiration for theology. The article aims to see where the challenge and inspiration might lie. Levinas's basic question is how finite thought can think an infinite and transcendent God. Levinas develops the phenomenology of the Idea of the Infinite and interprets Descartes' idea of God as a practical desire. For Levinas, the relation to God is intrinsically linked to the relation to the Other. It is an attempt to characterize an autonomous ethical subjectivity whose autonomy, however, does not begin with the subject but in the Other, in whom the presence of God is always already manifest. This description of the subject corresponds to the human being as understood in Christian theology.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, phenomenology of the idea of God, infinity, metaphysical ethics, ethical metaphysics, religion for adults, autonomy, heteronomy

Introduction

Theology means, in the broadest sense, to speak about God. God can be spoken of in different ways and there are therefore different kinds of theology. However, it is not all that simple for Theology today. The present age is also called the post-metaphysical age, as the possibility of metaphysical thinking is debated in general. Yet, the question for a meaningful discourse about God remains. Even a religiously "non-musical" thinker such as Jürgen Habermas has recently published a book with the Herderian title "Also One History of Philosophy," in which he attempts to reconstruct or genealogize metaphysics from the perspective of the post-metaphysical age. This genealogy also attempts to capture what the loss of metaphysics means for philosophical thought, and whether reason, in and of itself, is capable of performing a similar function to metaphysics. As is well known, Emmanuel Levinas is one of the thinkers who contributed to the revival of metaphysical thinking in the twentieth century. However, Levinas's philosophy is a

¹ Habermas, Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie.

² Levinas is one of the protagonists of the so-called theological turn in French phenomenology. Cf. Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and "The Theological Turn."* On the relationship between Levinas and theology from different perspectives cf. for example: Wohlmuth, *Emmanuel Levinas*; Purcell, *Levinas and Theology*; Zimmermann, *Levinas and Theology*; Fischer, *Die Gottesfrage*; Dausner, *Christologie in messianischer Perspektive* or the thematic issue of the journal Zeitschrift für christlichjüdische Begegnung.

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challenge to Christian theology. Why is that so? At first glance, Levinas seems to negate the possibility of theology as such when he emphasizes that God cannot be a topic of discussion: "our relation with the Metaphysical is ... not theology, not thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God." The testimony of God, according to Levinas, cannot even be seen in the sentence: "I believe in God.' To bear witness is precisely not to state this extraordinary word, as though glory would be lodged in a theme and be posited as a thesis, or become being's essence." At the same time, Levinas does not mean to say that speaking about God is impossible. On the contrary! He himself uses many religious or theological terms within his philosophy. As Valevicius rightly notes: "Levinas borrows many motifs from religious language. He writes about absolution, liturgy, diaconate, visitation, epiphany, kerygma, eschatology, prophecy, advent, incarnation, and others. These words are not meant to be taken in a theological sense but nevertheless, it is impossible not to make theological connections or to see their theological connotations despite their usage in a philosophical context."

Levinas speaks of God, but he does so in a specific way. Levinas's particular approach to theology or metaphysics is that he interprets religious concepts in an ethical way. Marcel Poorthuis points this out emphatically: Levinas does not understand religious or theological concepts as statements about the relationship between God and man or woman. Religious concepts are always understood in terms of an asymmetrical relationship between oneself and another human being, which is an ethical relationship.⁶ This view of Poorthuis must be taken as a basic *hermeneutical rule* for interpreting Levinas' statements about religion. This "ethical hermeneutic" can also be found in the Christian tradition in Augustine. In his work *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine makes it clear that the twofold command to love God and one's neighbour constitutes the goal of all interpretation and the standard for one's own understanding of Scripture (cf. doct. chr. 1:27; 1:40 or 1:44).⁷ Levinas's critique of Christianity is partially incomprehensible without this hermeneutical key and may lead to incorrect expectations or conclusions. Christian theology cannot expect Levinas's Judaism to formulate independent beliefs and fundamental theses.

At first glance, Levinas seems to strongly problematize the possibility of any theological statements about God. On the one hand, he blanketly criticizes the metaphysical tradition of Western European philosophy as an ontology that is an "egology," an "egoism," a "philosophy of injustice," because it relates everything in a totalitarian way to itself and is therefore incapable of living up to the Otherness of Transcendence and the other person. And despite the fact that Levinas reproaches the Western philosophical tradition with the "destruction of transcendence," he does not reject metaphysics as such. Levinas seeks to develop a new form that is able to adequately present a relation to the Infinite that is not usurping on the part of the subject. A metaphysics that preserves the Otherness of the Infinite and yet remains a possible relation, namely, according to Levinas, as a "non-allergic relation" of desire. And this desire for the Infinite opens up in the phenomenon of the Face, which invites me to take responsibility for the other person. Levinas emphasizes that God is present only in ethical proximity to the other, in mercy. Levinas writes:

The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. ... Hence metaphysics is enacted – in our relations with men. There can be no "knowledge" of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed. ... Metaphysics is inacted in ethical relations. Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks.⁸

Levinas' philosophy is both an inspiration and a challenge to Christian thought. This can be understood by the fact that theologians and philosophers of religion, among others, formed the beginning of the reception

³ Levinas, Totality, 78.

⁴ Levinas, Otherwise, 149.

⁵ Valevicius, "Emmanuel Levinas," 462.

⁶ Cf. Poorthuis, "Asymmetrie," 203-5.

⁷ On the primacy of the moral interpretation of Scripture cf. Sirovátka, "Der Primat," 141-53.

⁸ Levinas, Totality, 78-9.

of Levinas' thought. Levinas understands Judaism and Christianity as two fraternal paths that operate in parallels. "Our feeling for Christianity is wholehearted, but it remains one of friendship and fraternity. It cannot become paternal. We cannot recognize a child that is not ours. We protest against its claim on the inheritance and its impatience to take over, since we are still alive and kicking." In the context of the question regarding the relation of Levinas' thought to theology, it is not, of course, and cannot be, a matter of integrating Levinas' Jewish thought into the context of Christian theology. Just as Paul Ricoeur did not want to be seen as a "Christian philosopher," Levinas also rejected the label "Jewish philosopher." Philosophy for Levinas is not a means of defending or justifying his Jewish faith. Judaism, in the form of the rationalistic rabbinic tradition, is primarily based on the study of the Torah and Talmud, and was the inspiration and source for his independent and autonomous philosophical thought(s).

The intention in this article is to reflect on the contribution of Levinas' thought to the actual substantive issues of Christian theology. As a first step, I will focus on the fundamental question of how to speak of an infinite God. In the second step, the inextricable union of metaphysics and ethics in Emmanuel Levinas's thought will be described. For Levinas, a relationship to God is not possible without a relationship to another human being. In the third step, I will ask in which ways Levinas' philosophy might challenge and inspire Christian theology. The final step will show that Levinas' characterization of ethical subjectivity is very close to the Christian view of being human.

1 How to think infinity in the finite?

How do we speak about God so that our speech can adequately reflect God's transcendence and infinity? This is the fundamental question that Levinas, very radically, asks.

One wonders whether it is possible to speak legitimately of God without striking a blow against the absoluteness that his word seems to signify. ... What is the other thought that – as neither assimilation nor integration – would neither bring the absolute the novelty back to the "already know," nor compromise the novelty of the new by deflating it in the correlation between thinking and being which thinking itself finds.¹⁰

Levinas poses this question on two levels – on the theoretical level in the form of the idea of the Infinite and on the practical level in the form of the ethical relation to the Other. On the theoretical level, he picks up on René Descartes' notion of the innate idea of the Infinite in the third meditation of *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, although he reinterprets it in his own way. Levinas develops a phenomenology of the presence of the idea of the Infinite in man. God is characterized by Levinas exclusively in his "infinite Infinity," which is linked to absolute Otherness. The relationship between God and man is therefore an asymmetrical relationship due to God's radical transcendence. Levinas expresses this asymmetry, among other things, in his neologism "Illéité," which he uses as a designation for God. The term "Illéité" is derived from the French third-person personal pronoun "il," "he." Referring to Jewish tradition, Levinas writes:

I am going to tell you a peculiar feature of Jewish mysticism. In certain very old prayers, fixed by ancient authorities, the faithful one begins by saying "He," as if, in the course of this approach of the "Thou" ist transcendence into "He" supervened. It is what in my descriptions I have called the "illeity" of the Infinite.¹¹

Legitimate or adequate speech about God is according to Levinas only possible when God-related questions are not silenced in the answers. "Questions relative to God are not resolved by answers in which the interrogation ceases to resonate or is wholly pacified." God's absoluteness cannot be affected by an

⁹ Levinas, Difficult, 109.

¹⁰ Levinas, Of God, XII.

¹¹ Levinas, Ethics, 106.

¹² Levinas, Of God, XI.

answer that answers everything once and for all. At the same time, Levinas' emphasis on interpreting the relationship to God as one of desire shows that such a relationship is continually deepened without reaching satisfaction. In a sense, the experience of God is always an unsettling experience, for it disrupts the framework of our thinking as such. It must be remembered that theological speech about God is always already a responsive speech that responds to the primordial claim of the divine. Although Levinas uses the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl, while also seeking to go beyond it. Any thought of Transcendence must abandon the intentional focus, however impossible this may seem. For the content of thought (*cogitatum*) infinitely transcends the act of thinking (*cogito*). The idea of the Infinite ultimately blinds the human intellect, because within it reason thinks more than what it is able to think. Levinas says:

In thinking infinity the I from the first thinks more than it thinks. Infinity does not enter into the idea of infinity, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. 13

This theoretical relation, however, does not actually remain on the theoretical plane, but is interpreted by Levinas as desire and as an ethical–social relation. Living for the other person also means living towards God (à-Dieu). The specificity of Levinas' interpretation of the idea of the Infinite, then, is that he interprets this theoretical idea as a practical desire for the Infinite: "In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire." ¹⁴

Desire (*désir*), which Levinas distinguishes as known from need (*besoin*) seeking fulfillment of one's deficiencies, is not a deficiency but an overflow. And the more it approaches the Infinite, the more it deepens. And it does so by taking responsibility for the other person, whose presence in face is always already linked to the presence of the Infinite. The absolute otherness of the other refers to the infinite otherness of God. Levinas points out that

God is not simply the "first other," or the "other par excellence,", or the "absolutely other," but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other.\(^{15}

The radical alterity of God does not mean that God is the "great other" as opposed to the human subject. His infinite otherness does not derive from the same-other opposition, but stands above that opposition. He is absolutely other than the other that is opposed to the same. The theologically informed reader will recognize that here Levinas is very close to the spirit of negative theology or philosophical mysticism as represented, for example, by Dionysios the Areopagite or Nicholas of Cusa.¹⁶

Levinas' attempt to express the infinite God in a new and different way is in between two poles. On the one hand, it proceeds from the utter unintegrability of God in our thought due to his radical transcendence. But on the other hand it rejects, as a possible alternative, the silence of God. As a philosopher and Jewish thinker, Levinas wants to talk and write about God, so it is a question of how to talk rather than whether to talk at all. Both the theoretical and practical search for God turns out to be "inspired": in the intentionality of aiming at God as its goal, its immeasurability is revealed. God shows himself to be the one who has always already instigated our movement towards him. This content corresponds to a special philosophical method, which Levinas develops especially in his later philosophy and which can also be applied to theological thought. Theology is certainly a thematization (*dire*), but at the same time it should "refute" itself, "take back" (*dédire*) its affirmative claims in order to live up to the "greatness" of what it expresses. Of course, theology refers to the content of the message (*dit*), but at the same time it says this content to someone (*dire*). This creates a tension between the ethical language and the ontological language of

¹³ Levinas, "Philosophy," 54.

¹⁴ Levinas, Ethics, 92.

¹⁵ Levinas, Of God, 69.

¹⁶ I tried to show the similarity of Levinas and negative theology in relation to the quest for God in my article Sirovátka, "Die Unendlichkeit," 352–70.

thematization. The gradual radicalization of language in Levinas's thought can be described as his "linguistic or deconstructive turn." ¹⁷

2 Metaphysical ethics and ethical metaphysics

Levinas develops his metaphysical thinking in an inextricable connection with ethics, and he understands ethics as being intrinsically linked to God. As with Plato or Kant, I think we can speak of the primacy of the practical in Levinas. This primacy of the practical is fully developed in the characterization of the relation to the neighbour. The primary "theological" word for Levinas is not the theoretical "I believe in God" but the "here I am," which I utter in the relation of responsibility for the other person. The distant transcendent God is near in the closeness we manifest in our ethical relationship to the Other. To Christian ears, Levinas holds the radical and provocative thesis that there is no true "direct" relationship to God. If theology describes the relationship between man and God in the sense that it is a question of the salvation of my soul, then this is the egoism of salvation. Even if we do not share Levinas' position, we can still ask: Does not Christianity also proceed from the indissoluble union of the command to love one's neighbour and God? Does not Levinas remind us of our own roots? For Levinas, there cannot be a relationship to God that forgets the Other. The relation to God leads ipso facto to the neighbour, and the relation to the neighbour is always at the same time a metaphysical relation. The relation to the Infinite happens exclusively in an asymmetrical relation to the Other. Levinas reminds and emphasizes, almost obsessively, that the dimension of the Divine does not open to me except in the face of the other. By this, of course, Levinas does not claim that the Other is God. But the Other is nevertheless "closer to God than I am" because he is on a different, higher plane than I am.

The other must be closer to God than I. This is certainly not a philosopher's invention, but the first given of moral consciousness, which could be defined as the consciousness of the privilege the other has relative to me. 18

Levinas speaks of the highness of the other because their presence makes an ethical claim on me that calls me to an ethical response. But this height is always connected to the Infinite. The other is higher than me, but also lower, for he appears to me as "stranger, widow, and orphan." The other appears to me as a neighbour who is in need, the ultimate need being his mortality. Levinas' characterization of the asymmetrical relation to the other person should be read as an attempt to describe the source of morality itself. Man's moral consciousness arises in relation "face to face" with the Other, whose otherness refers to the otherness of God. Man, according to Levinas, represents "the irruption of God into being," "man is the place through which transcendence passes." For Levinas religion is inconceivable without an ethical attitude, and ethics is – *vice versa* – always already connected with the presence of God. Jewish monotheism is interpreted in terms of ethical universalism. Levinas refuses to identify the religious attitude with mystical or bloodless spiritualism. Religion means giving, and giving concretely and with full hands. Spirituality can only be lived in the material "economy" of responsibility for the other person, in the concrete giving of time and resources. Levinas emphasizes:

"Spiritual life is essentially a moral life and likes to operate in the economic sphere." ²⁰ In this sense, "there is no bad materialism other than our own." ²¹

¹⁷ Critchley, The Ethics, 8.

¹⁸ Levinas, "Philosophy," 56.

¹⁹ Levinas, Beyond, 142 and 145.

²⁰ Levinas, Difficult, 62.

²¹ Ibid., XIV.

Levinas reminds us that a gift becomes a real gift when the giver is drawn into it as a person: when he tears from his mouth the bread he himself needs to live.

3 Levinas as a challenge and inspiration for theology

As suggested above, Levinas' thought provides both provocation and inspiration for theological reflection. While Levinas' critique of the metaphysical tradition is blanket and partially unfair, it should not be too quickly smoothed over, but should be left as a proverbial thorn in the flesh of all theological thought.

What matters above all is what the critique is aimed at and what direction Levinas takes in his own thought. Levinas' critique is aimed at the exclusive union of metaphysics with ontology. He himself develops an alternative metaphysics of radical ethical transcendence, based on the view that an adequate mode of expression must resort to non-ontological concepts. If we look at Levinas's thinking about transcendence from the point of view of traditional metaphysics, we can conclude that Levinas neither wants to know God rationally or objectively nor merge with him as much as possible. He does not ask "what God is," and which qualities might be attributed to him. Levinas develops a "phenomenology of the Infinite," an account of how God is present in human thought and in human desire. God is the goal of both theoretical thought and practical desire, and the theoretical relation to God is interpreted by Levinas ultimately as a desire for the Infinite again. If we were to characterize as succinctly as possible how Levinas describes the relation to God, we ought to say that for him it is primarily something that *happens* in an ethical relationship to another human being.

Levinas criticizes Christian theological thought for the fact that when it speaks of God's relationship to human beings, it usually refers to the exclusive relationship between God and the individual. In this exclusivity, according to Levinas, there is no room for the other, for the neighbour. However, for Levinas, responsibility and care for the other is more fundamental than care for one's own existence, even if it is care for the salvation of one's own soul. The way to God is always through others. In this context, Levinas rejects the Christian notion of the kenosis of Christ if this kenosis means that my responsibility for the other person is weakened by it. If the Christian message understands the kenosis of the Son of God as a paradigm of "self-emptying" coupled with the challenge to take on the mindset of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5-8), then Levinas would agree with this notion. And he does so precisely because he emphasizes the "extension" of kenosis into one's own human life. The example of Jesus Christ leads inevitably to imitation in the life of every Christian.²² Levinas interprets the incarnation of God in the figure of "Man-God" positively as the coming of transcendence into the world in humility and proximity: "The force of transcendent truth is in its humility."²³ It is this humility that makes it possible to think the relationship between transcendence and human beings in a new way. At the same time, this incarnation in the figure of Jesus reveals the essence of human subjectivity. Levinas expresses this in the following words: "But, in this transubstantiation of the Creator into the creature, the notion of Man-God affirms the idea of substitution."²⁴ For the secret of subjectivity lies in substitution, in "expiation for others,"²⁵ in proximity to others.

In the sense described above, Levinas rejects the idea of incarnation, grace, forgiveness, or redemption through God. The rejection of these central concepts of the Christian message is motivated by a concern for the loss of human responsibility. If man is deprived of his responsibility, he becomes "infantilized" in his relationship to God. Levinas calls for a "religion for adults," or for a "religion of adults." But this implies that God and man are radically separated and mutually recognized as equal partners in the relationship. God can forgive according to Levinas the offense that man has done to him. But God cannot forgive an

²² Cf. Poorthuis, "Gott," 196–212. An interesting parallel with the kenosis motif is also found in Jan Patočka. Cf. Koci, *Thinking*, 199–225.

²³ Levinas, "A Man-God?," 56.

²⁴ Ibid., 58.

²⁵ Cf. Ibid., 54.

offense that man has done to another man. That must be atoned for by man himself. Levinas appeals to man's strict and unrelenting responsibility for man. It is the responsibility of the "adult" human being who cannot make excuses for God to act in his place:

What I am in relation to God, God is in relation to me. It is in the name of such freedom that man's salvation must have its origins in man.²⁶

Levinas refuses to lighten man's burden of responsibility. He speaks of the "extreme humanism of God" which demands much of man.

This is the extreme humanism of a God who demands much of man – some would say He demands too much!²⁷

Levinas' notion of responsibility is synonymous with "love of neighbour" in the sense of Christian agape. Levinas prefers a "strict" notion of responsibility to express the seriousness of ethical commitment. Through it the Infinite takes place; in this ethical relationship to the Other, God is present and glorified. Levinas makes a similar point, for example, about the theological notion of grace. Of course, the Jewish tradition also knows the idea of grace. But the rabbinic tradition, according to Levinas, adds that in order to maintain grace, the first step must be taken by man himself.²⁸ Here again the motif of the separateness of the two freedoms – human and divine – is emphasized, but their separation is seen by Levinas as constitutive of the establishment and maintenance of the relationship itself.

So, is there common ground for thinking through Levinas' ideas in a theological context in his radical critique of the ontological tradition that has largely shaped Christian theological thought? I think there is, and we can take the figure of the Messiah as an example. While Levinas, as a Jewish thinker, obviously has reservations about the idea of Jesus Christ as Messiah, he also points out that even in Christianity the coming of the Messiah is not "complete." Christianity awaits in eschatological hope the second coming of Christ at the end of time, and this expectation is not unlike the Jewish expectation. Levinas interprets the figure of the Messiah in a way that even a Christian can relate to, on two levels. On the one hand, I am supposed to recognize the Messiah in each of my neighbours. Every service I have rendered to a particular sufferer I have rendered to him at the same time. On the other hand, through such an action, the role of the Messiah I take upon myself as the one who is called upon to take responsibility for others – and ultimately for all.

And in concrete terms this means that each person acts as though he were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all.²⁹

It is certainly true that if Christianity were to give up its idea of salvation and redemption through Jesus Christ, it would be giving up itself. Yet Levinas' Judaism can serve as an "inspiring thorn." Is Levinas not putting his finger on the sensitive spots of Christianity with his views? Doesn't the theological elaboration of central Christian concepts partially lead to a certain comfortability on the part of Christians who like to separate the abstract relationship to God and the concrete relationship to the other person?

4 Autonomy or heteronomy?

As we have seen, Levinas demands that everyone ought to act as the Messiah, hence that I take responsibility more than anyone else. This demand then raises the question of human autonomy. Levinas' "religion for adults" requires a person who acts ethically and who does not resort to childish excuses or bloodless spiritualism. Yet, can this autonomy be reconciled with so much emphasis on the ethical claim

²⁶ Levinas, Difficult, 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 26.

²⁸ Cf. Levinas, Of God, 93-5.

²⁹ Levinas, Difficult, 90.

of the Other, under whose "summons" I always already stand? In "Otherwise than Being," Levinas describes ethical subjectivity in terms that suggest that the subject is exclusively determined heteronomously through the Other. Subjectivity is characterized as "the other in the same," as "hostage" or "one-penetrated-by-the-other." In one of the central passages in this context, Levinas formulates as follows:

The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself, under the traumatic effect of persecution, of my freedom as a constituted, willful, imperialist subject, the more I discover myself to be responsible; the more just I am, the more guilty I am. I am "in myself" through the others. ... This impossibility of taking any distance and of slipping away from the Good is a firmness more firm and more profound than that of the will, which is still a tergiversation.³¹

If Levinas describes ethical subjectivity in terms of "hostage" or "expulsion from the self," is it not rather a determination of the subject through others, i.e. heteronomy? Is there not a tension present here that cannot be resolved? – The situation can be made even more acute if we take into account the fact that, according to Levinas, God himself speaks to me from the face of the Other. Levinas tirelessly emphasizes the Other's essential interconnection with the Infinite, so that we could call his ethics metaphysical and his metaphysics ethical. Is it not more accurate, then, to speak of the subject, as Levinas characterizes it above all in "Otherwise than Being," as heteronomous, and with this heteronomy not only arising from the Other, but always at the same time from God?

However intertwined the two movements – both autonomy and heteronomy – are, it can be argued that Levinas is primarily concerned with determining the subject in its autonomy. Autonomy so characterized, however, is of a different kind than autonomy as sovereign self-determination, which has its origin in the self. It is a genuine autonomy, but it does not begin with me, but outside of me.³² In many ways my freedom, which I claim and enjoy, turns out to be conditional. Bernhard Waldenfels uses the notion of responsiveness to refer to this special connection between autonomy and heteronomy.³³ The autonomy of the subject, then, in the context of Levinas's thought, appears as a responsive autonomy that always already responds to the claim of the situation, to the ethical claim of the Other, to the claim of Transcendence. It is not alienation, but the liberation of the identical self from its egoism that shows itself in the face of the Other.

Levinas tries to show that freedom in the highest sense consists in the freedom to take responsibility for another person. However, to "awaken," freedom needs an encounter with the otherness of the Other and with the radical otherness of the Infinite. The autonomy of the identical subject, which emerges in the transformation of alterity into the same, is replaced in Levinas by the autonomy of an ethical subjectivity that arises from the desire for the Other and the Infinite. Only freedom conceived in this way endows the subject with a uniqueness that consists in pure goodness. For Levinas, it is essentially a "reconciliation of autonomy and heteronomy":

The possibility of finding, anachronously, the order in the obedience itself, and of receiving the order out of oneself, this reverting of heteronomy into autonomy, is the very way the Infinite passes itself. The metaphor of the inscription of the law in consciousness expresses this in a remarkable way, reconciling autonomy and heteronomy.²⁴

In his ethics, Levinas is interested in the ethical consequences that arise for the subject from the concrete presence of the Other. It is consistent, then, when Levinas emphasizes in both of his major works that he is concerned with the defence of subjectivity, with the characteristics of the ethical basis of subjectivity. Levinas points out that "Totality and Infinity" is written "as a defence of subjectivity" and in "Otherwise than Being" he says:

³⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise*, 111, 112 and 49.

³¹ Ibid., 112.

³² I leave aside here the autonomy of the emerging subject on the basis of corporeality, which happens through enjoyment. This emergence of the subject is described exemplarily by Levinas in his work *Totality and Infinity*.

³³ Cf. Waldenfels, *Schattenrisse*, 106: "Vielmehr zeigt sich, daß Formen eines *Heteron* in unserem eigenen Tun, Reden und Leben am Werk sind und eine Gegenkraft bilden zur allzu selbstverständlichen Attraktion des *Auto*. In diesem Zusammenhang gebrauche ich den Begriff der Responsivität. *Responsivität* bedeutet: *Ich selbst beginne, aber nicht bei mir, sondern anderswo*, oder anders gesagt: *Ich gehe auf das ein, von dem ich ausgehe.*"

³⁴ Levinas, Otherwise, 148.

³⁵ Levinas, Totality, 26.

This book has exposed the signification of subjectivity in the extraordinary everydayness of my responsibility for other men, the extraordinary forgetting of death or the being without regard for death.³⁶

5 Concluding remarks

Levinas ranks among the phenomenological philosophers who extended the field of phenomenology to include the phenomenon of religion. In examining the relationship of Levinas' work to Christian theology, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the author's personal tragic experience of the Holocaust determines this relationship. In this context, Levinas speaks of a tumour in his memory. His parents, siblings, and other family members were murdered by the Nazis in Lithuania. Levinas himself never set foot on German soil again after 1945. In the face of the Holocaust, Levinas asks how it is possible that after two millennia of Christian tradition such a catastrophe could have taken place in Europe. Yet Levinas' work represents an attempt at a dialogue between Jerusalem and Athens, an attempt to articulate the Bible's non-Hellenism in Hellenistic terms after the terrible experience of the Holocaust, which for Levinas and some Jewish thinkers discredited the Western "Athenian" tradition. In the context of the relationship between philosophy and Jewish thought, the question is asked after the relationship of Levinas's thought to Christian theology. There are clear differences between the two that must be acknowledged and accepted. However, the importance of Levinas' thought for theology does not lie in them.

Levinas' contribution to theology could lie in two insights that belong to the pillars of his thought. On the theoretical level, what is inspiring in Levinas's thought is his radical "ecology" of speech about God. On the practical level, one can be inspired by his emphasis on the essential and indissoluble interconnection of the relationship to God and the neighbour. In the field of theoretical philosophy, Levinas is not concerned to give a new "proof" of God's existence, even in the sense of a moral proof as, for example, in Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgment (§ 86–88). Levinas' thought develops phenomenologically the concrete circumstances of the presence of the word "God" coming into thought. Here theology might take inspiration from Levinas' constant emphasis on the "inversion of activity." It is not theology that "owns" God as the object of its inquiry; it is God who comes to mind. The ordo cognoscendi and the ordo essendi differ – only in retrospect do we recognize that God precedes our search, that it was he who aroused in us the desire to seek him. This is the meaning of Levinas's notion of "trace." God can only be perceived in the negative mode of presence as someone who is present, but only in his absence. Theology as a response must be continually "disquiet" with the claim it is responding to. God should be present in theology as that which is "extraordinary" - outside our order of thought and being. Levinas's thought reminds theology that it is responding to an "external claim" of God. But the theological response always lives out of the claim to which it responds. To be unsettled or awakened by Transcendence and to try to respond to this (persistent) unsettling - is there not perhaps a basic inspiration for theology? This answering applies to both the theoretical and the practical plane. God, as infinite, is radically Other and absolutely transcendent, but at the same time is immediately close in ethical proximity to the Other. Levinas shows that the deus absconditus is always near in the mercy we show to our neighbour. Theology is thus reminded of the fact that there is no relationship to God that is separate from the relationship to the neighbour. Faith, according to Levinas, is primarily a practical attitude. We might say that theology should be measured by its ability to make present the fact that the relationship to God leads eo ipso to the neighbour. Is Levinas coming up with something new? It seems that much of Levinas' thought can be found in the authentic theological tradition, and that even though Levinas comes from his own Jewish tradition, it is possible to be inspired by his thought to reflect on the basic meaning of Christian theology. The situation of the believer is similar to that identified by Levinas. Theology finds in Levinas's philosophy a model of how the uneasy relation of autonomy and heteronomy can be thought of as present in the subject. Described in this way, the subject can reconcile both dimensions within itself. The task of theology is to show that our position as creatures, starting from and depending on God, does not cancel our autonomy. On the contrary, it is God who will and establishes our autonomy. Levinas understands the creation of an autonomous being, which can even reject its creator – due to God's incredible generosity.

Funding information: This article is part of the grant project GAČR 19-17708S "Autonomy and Alterity. Kant in Dialogue."

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

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