Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry

John Wrighton

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

First published 2010
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Sabon by IBT Global.
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wrighton, John, 1981–
Ethics and politics in modern American poetry / by John Wrighton.
p. cm.—(Literary criticism and cultural theory)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. American poetry—20th century—History and criticism. 2. Ethics in literature.
3. Politics in literature. I. Title.
PS323.5.W73 2009
811'.509—dc22
2009015686

ISBN10: 0-415-80122-2 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-80122-5 (hbk)

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Acknowledgments

The research for this book was undertaken as part of my doctoral studies at Aberystwyth University from 2003 to 2007. I would like to thank my PhD supervisor, Professor Tim Woods, for his guidance and intellectual direction throughout this period. Further thanks must go to Professor Peter Barry for his wise counsel and continued encouragement, and to my second supervisor, Dr Will Slocombe, under whose cognitive apprenticeship I have been both intellectually and professionally inspired.

As recipient of the Rose and Sigmund Strochlitz Travel Grant, I was able to undertake archive research at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut. I would like to thank Melissa Watterworth, Curator of Literary Collections at the Dodd Center for her assistance during my visit. For continued inspiration and the warm welcome on my occasional return to the University of Southampton (where I studied as an undergraduate student), especially at events organised by the Centre for Contemporary Writing, I would like to thank Dr Nicky Marsh and Professor Peter Middleton. I am also indebted to Bruce Andrews and Gary Snyder for their interest in my work.

My final thanks go to my family and friends for their unwavering support and encouragement.

Contents

List of Figures ix
Permissions xi
Acknowledgments xiii

1 Introduction: The Poethical Trajectory 1

2. Charles Olson's Ethics of Form in *The Maximus Poems* 23

3. Environmental Ethics in the Poetry of Gary Snyder 50

4. Sub-cultural Self-othering and the Beat Poetics of Allen Ginsberg 77

5. The Welcome of the Other: Jerome Rothenberg's Ethnopoetics 112

6. Traumatised Semiotics: The Turn to Language and Bruce Andrews' Poethical Praxis 147

7. Conclusion: The Performative Dialogics of Poethical Praxis 180

Notes 205
Bibliography 209
Index 219

Figures

2.1 Charles Olson, "Letter 10". 39

2.2 Charles Olson, "Note on type-setting". 40

2.3 & 2.4 Charles Olson, "I was bold, I had courage . . ." 40

2.5 Charles Olson, "My shore, my sounds, my earth . . ." 41

2.6 Charles Olson, "My shore, my sounds, my earth . . ." 42

2.7 Charles Olson, "Migration in fact . . ." 43

2.8 Charles Olson, "I looked up and saw its form through everything". 45

2.9 Charles Olson, "I have been an ability—a machine . . ." 47

3.1 Asher B. Durand, *View toward the Hudson Valley.* 51

4.1 Allen Ginsberg, Extract from 'AETHER'. 98

5.1 Toltec: *From* The Blue House of Tlaloc. 120

5.2 Jackson Mac Low, '5th Gatha'. 122

5.3 Mayan Glyphs: 'A Frame from the Dresden Codex'. 123

6.1 Bruce Andrews, 'Getting Ready To Have Been Frightened'. 161

6.2 Robert Longo, *Arena Brains II* (1985). 166

6.3 Extract from Bruce Andrews, *The Millennium Project* (screenshot). 175

1 Introduction

The Poethical Trajectory

The question of ethics, of what constitutes "good" behaviour and on what philosophical grounds we justify such predications, has always troubled human thought. Since the publication of *New Literary History*'s pioneering special issue "Literature and/as Moral Philosophy" (1983), however, there has been an increased engagement with this debate across the academic disciplines. Whilst a range of motivating factors has been suggested, this "turn to ethics," most evident in philosophy, political science and literary studies marks, according to Lawrence Buell, 'a groundswell of still uncertain magnitude' (Buell 2000, 1). Indeed, Michael Eskin has proposed that these renewed engagements have 'unquestionably consolidated into a burgeoning subdiscipline' (Eskin 2004, 557).

Responding initially to Martha Nussbaum's article entitled "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy" (1983), contributions from J. Hillis Miller (1987), Wayne C. Booth (1988) and Tobin Siebers (1988) have mapped out an alternative ethics of reading for literary studies. More recent contributions from Richard Rorty (1989), Simon Critchley (1992), Robert Eaglestone (1997), Jill Robbins (1999) and Derek Attridge (2004), to name but a few, have built on these academic ventures. However, it is in the field of modern American poetry where this turn has been both most acutely felt and actively directed. Tim Woods' seminal work *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (2002) has demonstrated how the Objectivist poets and in particular, Louis Zukofsky, developed 'an ethics of form in representation [that] has acted as a benchmark of a radical poetics for a whole group of writers in the current generation' (Woods 2002, 14). Similarly, Robert Sheppard's *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents, 1950–2000* (2005) traces the development of an ethical politics in modern British poetry.

This book explores the intersection between poetics and ethics in certain strands of twentieth-century American poetry which I will call henceforth, the "poethical trajectory". Whilst Woods' book focuses primarily on a first phase poethical praxis, I examine a constellation of poets across the twentieth century, whose experimental work, I propose, has been motivated by an ethical concern for others as a social responsibility. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas illuminates this impulse and enables my reading of these poetries as fundamentally preoccupied with an emancipatory social activism: a welcoming of the other by way of a participatory and non-totalising poethics. Extending Woods' thesis, my focus is primarily on a second and third phase of poethical praxis. I deduce from this "poethical trajectory" a performative dialogics in order to stake out an ethical practice for reading and writing, thus contributing to the most recent development, and critical debates, in literary studies.

Each of the poets I read offer a significant contribution to the development of this poethical praxis as well as engaging in a specific politics. My trajectory is thus presented by way of a thematic as well as chronological chapter structure, demarcating the various political concerns: capitalist de-humanisation, environmental consciousness, ethnic minorities and language. The political agenda does not take the form of a didactic presentation of an alternative social order or modality of being, but the democratising self-reflexivity of an ethical saying. Indeed, the kind of poetry I examine is not, as Michael Palmer suggests, a 'consumer item'; rather, it requires 'an effort of attention that is as active as that which goes into the writing' (Bartlett 1987, 126–127).

My reading of modern American poetry also proposes a critique of language in contemporary society, for poethical praxis is fundamentally a struggle over language itself. I take 'the total system that is developing in world history' (Levinas 1994, 15), intimated by John Wild in his introduction to Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, to be founded on a language driven against its ethical grain. To understand this "traumatised semiotics" is to recognise the phenomenological implications of Levinas' thesis. As will become clear, our being is not a construct of self-identity, but is realised as we welcome the presence of another. Thus, if language, whether written or spoken, is employed as constructive of a self-identity, it in fact violates our being. The result of this irresponsibility, an ontological self-orientation, is both traumatising and traumatic; it is a violation both of the self and the other, in language. 'The development of this system,' Wild writes, 'will coincide with the interests of the self. All otherness will be absorbed in this total system of harmony and order' (15). For Levinas, such language used in the strained maintenance of a "free" ego and its socio-political totalitarian state (that is, language as a totalising stasis) is a language, 'whose harshness and universal power is revealed in war' (24). The poetry readings of this book are at once from within and a response to this "traumatised semiotics": the prognosis for semiotics given a self-oriented use of language; and the diagnosis of a social condition, where individuals are bereft of a language sufficiently responsive in the face of suffering.

In proposing that an ethical orientation secures our social responsibilities, this book is not, however, prescribing the doctrines of an absolutist morality. Whilst, as Peter Singer has observed, the etymology of the terms "ethics" and "morality" lead us to the word "customs", their respective usage is often distinct (Singer 1994, 5). Morality is commonly understood as referring to a set of rules that determine how we ought to behave, whilst ethics has been taken by philosophers to describe the systematic study of the reasoning framework informing morality. Exceptions to this rule, that see ethics and morality as synonymous, will refer to the following terms: normative ethics (the prescription or origin of a set of moral laws); applied ethics (an examination of their application, of morality); and meta-ethics (the philosophy, or reasoning framework informing morality).

Irrespective of our understanding of these terms, any notion that we determine within this field of inquiry will necessarily invoke the question of Truth, of what is "good" behaviour, of whether such an absolute Truth or collective truth can be justified. As we shall see, "truth" and "goodness" are intimately related, for as Levinas suggests, 'isn't what we really call the truth determined by the "for-the-other", which means goodness? And not in the first place by the "in-itself" and "for-itself" of the truth' (Robbins 2001, 263). Indeed, for our notion of truth to change, this has to take place linguistically, that is, it has to be expressed in language. Such an argument raises important questions concerning the nature of reality and its relationship with language. Is language the origin of our consciousness and thus constitutive of our reality? Or is language merely a veneer over the reality that we know in some psycho-sensory process? Does our existence in fact precede the mediation of language and the system of representation codified in the signifier and the signified? Answering such questions will be formative in my thesis that collapses the division between ethics and language.

In the twentieth century there has been a shift in the origin of ethics in Western civilisations, as acted out in the behavioural tendencies, or morality, of the majority. Before the industrial revolution and the advent of modernity, western societies were predominantly organised according to religious laws, a series of moral doctrines, or customs, built into the fabric of society through a self-regulation of socially acceptable behaviour. For most Western civilisations, it was the religious laws of an institutionalised Christian church that provided the dominant discourses of such morality. These discourses, rather than revealing the ethic of service in the relationship at the heart of the Bible, instead detailed the doctrines and dogma that developed through the history of the church and its interdependence with the political establishment and monarchical rule.

The evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, however, offered a scientific explanation for the origin of ethics, enabling a break from the moral doctrines of an institutionalised religion. As Peter Singer explains:

> The attempt to draw ethical implications from evolution led to "Social Darwinism," which in turn was seen as justifying the free-market competition of nineteenth-century capitalism, and was used as an ideological weapon against government regulation of the market. (Singer 1994, 5)

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With this shift from a religious to an evolutionary origin for ethics, combined with the progress of capitalism, there emerged our modern notion of "autonomy", or post-modern relativism: a free choice of moral behaviour within the economic power relations of late capitalism and, interdependent with this, the law and order of the democratic majority.

Whilst a religious society seeks to maintain the behavioural customs that provide a meaningful framework, or *telos* for the individual, neither the doctrines of an institutionalised Christianity, nor the evolutionary theory of social Darwinism, can give any convincing answer to the question of truth, of what constitutes "good" behaviour. Correspondingly, the history of ethics, as a philosophical pursuit, is both long and complex. In his study of moral theory entitled *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that 'we are not simply in a state of moral plurality but the language of morality is in a state of grave disorder' (MacIntyre 1985, 2). His explanation for this rests specifically on an historical and anthropological analysis of moral philosophy. For MacIntyre, the contemporary language of morality constitutes 'fragments of old moral philosophies used outside of the "larger totalities", simulacra of morality' (2). MacIntyre's account does indeed explain why specific terms, such as "ought", are ultimately unanchored, that is, they have followed a tortuous etymology, having been uprooted from the *telos* within which they were once situated and found their meaning. However, MacIntyre's account fails to explain why these words should remain so prolific.

A primary challenge in the development of a poethical praxis is the fact that our contemporary shared language is not simply "disordered" but traumatised. The discourse of the capitalist and political entrepreneur is loaded with moral rhetoric as the most effective and coercive medium of advertisement; in a society where morality is predicated on the self, these discourses operate on the same level, and they are driven by self-orientation and appeal to this self-orientation. They market a product or a political project that is presented as necessary for the support of the infrastructure of the self. Yet these discourses are so loaded, not simply because the entrepreneurs have observed the power of such rhetoric, but rather because there is no apparent alternative. Furthermore, within the post-modern relativism of a late capitalist society, the individual secures an identity, or ethos, by gaining purchase on a range of commodified positions within the socio-political totality. Our purchase on these clothes of signification, enables us to construct our identity within the relations of exchange that they signify. Language has thus become the medium of a market-oriented self-identification, and it is in this ontological abuse that we can identify the transmogrification of language as a "traumatised semiotics".

Despite this self-orientation of our postmodern condition, in entering into language one is inescapably assigned moral responsibility, even if one fails to assume this responsibility and is unaware of the ethical imperative of one's position. Language is dependent upon relationships and as such, immediately inscribes ethical terms. As we shall see, the purpose of language is as an act of love, a medium of expiation for the other, a questioning of the self. Its central terms, the verb "to be" and the pronoun "I", for example, are thus revealed as in fact moral terms. It is by way of revelation of this truth as to the purpose of language that one is able to perceive its current condition. Discourse motivated by a self-orientated morality, abuses the very nature of language, driving it, by a force of self-will, against its ethical grain. We do not need to "repair" language by learning the etymology of its terms within various stages of historical contextualisation, nor reconstruct society with the classical *telos* restored so as to anchor the terms of moral rhetoric; rather it is by way of a reorientation, from ontology to ethics, that language may be the means of our responsibility for each other.

Nevertheless, MacIntyre's emphasis on history and sociology is not entirely unwarranted, for it is only by way of this methodology that he comes to warn us against a presumption that one can study '*the* concepts of morality merely by reflecting, Oxford armchair style' (MacIntyre 1985, vii). Indeed when we come later to consider the application of the ethical orientation that this book presents, to the various concerns of our poets, whether in the realm of ecology or ethnology, it will be important to consider the historical and sociological contexts. It is a lesson that MacIntyre suggests we must learn from an analysis of the heroic societies and the moral philosophies of classical theism. He concludes that moral philosophies are always contextual and hence, that 'the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all particularity, is an illusion' (119). It is MacIntyre's contention that within the disorder of the contemporary language of morality, 'we are unable to perceive the fact that the very language we use to assert our morality deceives us' (4). This sociological observation delimits the evidence for our contention that the "traumatised semiotics" of our shared language constitutes a central problematic for the ethical orientation of this thesis, or rather for the very articulation of the thesis.

For MacIntyre, when it comes to a specific issue 'there seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture' (MacIntyre 1985, 6). Yet despite this post-modern relativism, morality nevertheless remains a central concern in society. Bernard Williams' *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (1976) justifies the study of moral philosophy whilst outlining some of the reasons why morality remains a key concern in contemporary society. The relativity attending to post-modernism is often posited as a justification for devoting oneself to science as opposed to moral philosophy. Yet, as Williams argues, 'science is as much a practical activity as any other, and there is no more reason why that one should be objectively justified rather than any other. Justifications for doing objective subjects are not objective justifications for doing those subjects' (Williams 1976, 43). Furthermore, Williams writes, 'if we grant a man with even a minimal concern for others, then we do not have to ascribe to him any fundamentally new kind of thought or experience to include him in the world of morality, but only what is recognisably an extension of what he already has' (26). In other words, if a man shows some concern for others, then by extending his sympathies to the needs of people beyond his immediate involvement, he may enter the world of morality. However, Williams' lengthy justification for ethics is in fact redundant; as Woods has explained, 'like ideology, one cannot "step outside" ethics' (Woods 2002, 6).

As an introduction to ethics, Williams readily admits in his preface that the narrative and logical argument of his essay 'follows a torturous path' (Williams 1976, 13). Indeed he unwittingly encircles himself on all sides as he struggles to articulate with a fraught and over-loaded language, with moral terms fragmented and disordered, the various positions of the key moral philosophies. If one is left somewhat dissatisfied by the end of his essay, this is precisely because all we have learned is the impossible and complex nature of morality. There remains a vague utopian hope; one detects Williams gesturing towards a morality from within, as he writes of 'the notion that there *is* something that is one's deepest impulse, that there is a discovery to be made here, rather than a decision; and the notion that one trusts what is so discovered, although unclear where it will lead' (93). Yet he is the first to admit that this could not possibly be sufficient to constitute, a 'complete morality, because it has nothing, or not enough, to say about society, and hence not enough to say about even one man's life as a whole' (93).

Williams does, however, come surprisingly close to,identifying the key problem with conventional moral philosophy. He observes how 'a philosophy of morality has been built upon the concept of the standards of assessment of "man"' and these he explains can generally be divided into two sorts—those that do and those that do not make a transcendental appeal (Williams 1976, 68). Crucially, Williams is later led to question this 'reference to human well-being as a mark of a moral position' (88). Yet finding no alternative to this conventional moral philosophy predicated on the self, Williams resorts to his vague utopian hope.

Faced with the contemporary predicament in their sphere of study, that is, the fraught state of language and a history of moral philosophy predicated on the self, both MacIntyre and Williams fail to offer any convincing resolution. MacIntyre mourns the loss of a classical *telos* as the structuring of society and its concordant virtues, whilst Williams posits some vague hope of a morality from within.

It has been the contribution of the philosophical writings of Emmanuel Levinas, to unearth the specific fallacy of ontology as a basis for morality. Whilst MacIntyre and Williams, amongst a plethora of other writers, have effectively outlined the inherent flaws of the key moral philosophies—Williams' debunking of utilitarianism and its Greatest Happiness Principle, or MacIntyre's account of the failure of the Enlightenment project, for example—none of these writers have identified the dominant ontological premise throughout Western culture. Indeed, the self-orientation of society and its belief in the rights of the individual, the freedom of the individual as the most fundamental ethic, is essentially the totalising agency of an ontological presupposition. It is the phenomenological prioritisation of the self as the basis for morality that, in fact, forms one of the greatest restraints on civilisation.

Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* (1961) outlines this dominating ontological perspective primarily as it features in the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and goes further to radically present an alternative thesis that reorientates this perspective towards ethics. Indeed, Levinas' philosophy redefines ethics as constitutive of our being, and thus prior to ontology. Ethics is not a set of rules by which we govern our behaviour, nor a branch of philosophy in which we investigate the premises on which such rules are based, but the necessary condition of our existence. As Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods have suggested, 'For Levinas, ethics is the sphere of transactions between the "self" and the "Other", and is not to be construed as a naming of conduct within a branch of philosophy' (Rainsford and Woods 1999, 3).

Totality and Infinity may be usefully conceived of as the presentation of moral philosophy according to two conflicting axes. The first axis, that is a totalising philosophy, is predicated on the self, on the ontic. This forms the dominating phenomenological presupposition that has founded moral philosophy for the most part, thus far. Levinas' alternative axis beckons the Infinite. As his thesis unfolds, a series of dichotomies between these two axes is revealed. It is the opposition between revelation and disclosure, transcendence and objectivity, discourse and comprehension, temporalisation and intentionality, that reveals how these conflicting axes become respectively totalising and infinitising philosophies.

Morality, predicated on ontology, a prioritisation of the self as an independent being, is revealed by Levinas to be the totalitarian thinking of traditional philosophy. It asserts a fundamentally humanist approach, justifying its morality from the centrality and hegemony of the Neuter, the Hegelian *Geist* or Heideggerian *Dasein*. As a totalising schema, such philosophies dictate the disclosure of a panoramic existence, utilising language as a power to effect the collocation and configuration of entities that are refractory to this panorama, somewhat like a hegemonising machine. They may be seen in this light, to use Levinas' terminology, as the 'constitutive, egological nature of the transcendental thought of idealism' (Levinas 1994, 204).

It is by way of representation, thematisation or categorisation and conceptualisation that this totalitarian philosophy operates in a violent act of emprise; through cognition and synoptic thought it becomes (often commodifying) appropriation and exploitation, imperialism and war. In a determinate objectivity, it synchronises the objects of its perception to a numerical multiplicity within the State, asserting an impersonal universality, an act that Levinas deems to be yet another inhumanity.

The totalitarian axis of moral philosophy may be seen then as a desperate egoism; predicated on the ontological, it is a philosophy that manifests society as separated egos, individuals in competition asserting their own power, by an act of self-will, in an attempt to secure "the fundamental ethic", their "right" to "freedom". Hence, it is that Levinas writes, 'from Spinoza to Hegel, the will is identified with reason, in an attempt to justify freedom' (Levinas 1994, 87).

The totalitarian being prioritises objectivity; even those moral philosophers who have accounted for subjectivity, such as Søren Kierkegaard, for example, tend to isolate it and so negate its true purpose. The prioritisation of objectivity and its reductive, totalising exploitation may be seen in Husserl's formulation of the "noetic-noematic". In *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (1931), Husserl suggests that within consciousness a subject is always aware of something (the "noematic") and he or she is aware of this something in some way (that is, the "noetic"). Husserl designates the term "noema" to indicate the meaning of an object that is formed in this domain of consciousness. He writes, 'perception, for instance, has its noema, and at the base of this is its perceptual meaning, that is, the *perceived as such*' (Husserl 1931, 258).

Husserl's theory posits two forms of reduction that the conceiving subject has to perform. Eidetic reduction constitutes the erasure of the contingent characters of outer objects, whilst the subsequent transcendental reduction constitutes the study of an object without it being present. Here 'the conceiving subject, which is ego, becomes a transcendental ego' (Lang n.d.). These reductions, Husserl suggests, enable the 'conceiving subject to form an ideal (or pure) object of his study within the domain of consciousness'. The "noesis", then, is the meaning-giving act, whereby the transcendental ego 'directs his consciousness onto this pure and ideal object rather than what is really out there'. In this way the meaning of the object, the "noema", is obtained. This meaning is 'the eidetic fact in the *modified* sense of that which it is merely *presumed to be*; in the sense of the judged content as such; and this may or may not prove reliable' (Husserl 1931, 60). The "noetic-noematic" formulation may be seen as the very mechanics of the homogenising machine driving the totalitarian philosophy. It is a formulation that supports objective disclosure and abrogates the role of subjectivity, an ideological erasure of the sensory perceptions that might interrupt the "noetic-noematic" narrative construction of a panoramic existence. As Alphonso Lingis has suggested, Levinas interpreted 'the apparently empiricist residue of sensation in the Husserlian theory of consciousness to in fact reflect the ontological process' (Lingis 1999, xxx).

With his most mature philosophical work, first published in 1974 and entitled *Otherwise than Being: or beyond essence*, Levinas observes in this "noetic-noematic" formulation 'the consequently ontological structure of signification' across the totalitarian axis (Levinas 1999, 64). We resist suggesting a synonymy between the ontological and the *solus ipse*, however, because this term denoting "only Selfhood", from which we derive solipsism, the exclusivity of the self, allows for a modality of self and the centricity of collective subjects as that which structures consciousness. The totalitarian axis, however, is always demarcated by the limits of the self, as a being *causa sui* (self-caused). Ontology is not annihilated by the Levinisian axis; rather the solipsist being stripped of any centric relations is paradoxically confirmed in the exteriority of being. This exteriority of being is crucial to a Levinasian ethics. It marks a revision of ontology (of the self as independent being) in a phenomenology where the self finds its being in relation with the other. Levinas writes: 'the exteriority of being does not, in fact, mean that multiplicity is without relation. However, the relation that binds this multiplicity does not fill the abyss of separation; it confirms it' (Levinas 1994, 295).

Nevertheless, Levinas is clear in his condemnation of ontology as a first philosophy. For Levinas, ethics precedes ontology. He writes:

> Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but constituting it, these contents make up the worth of my life. When reduced to pure and naked existence [. . .] life dissolves into a shadow. Life is an existence that does not precede its essence. Its essence makes up its worth; and her value constitutes being. The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology. (Levinas 1994, 112)

The totalitarian, on the contrary, remains at the limits of the self and hence works to assert being over existents, in this way subordinating justice to "freedom". The civilisation of the western world, where power and injustice are so often co-joined, has been oriented according to this totalitarian axis and is suffering the consequences. It is, as Levinas suggests, an orientation that provides the basis for war, but what Levinas fails to note is that the issuing violence is not directed only towards the other; in fact the perpetrator is also a victim. The perpetrator is a victim of self-harm, for he or she goes against the very grain of their being—the exteriority of being.

The Infinite axis marks Levinas' reconfiguration of conventional moral philosophy; the ethical subject demanded by this axis is other-orientated. As Simon Critchley has argued in *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Levinas' is a philosophy of non-violent transitivity, whereby a self-abnegation is evoked by assignation rather than volition (Critchley 1999, 1–4). The ethical subject has a social responsibility (that inaugurates its being otherwise) in the face of alterity, the radical heterogeneity, of the other. It is from this non-humanist position that the ethical subject, by way of a transcendent intentionality—a desire or goodness Levinas derived from the philosophies of Aristotle and Plato—welcomes the other

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