

Persecution and Expiation:

A Talmudic Amplification of the Enigma of Responsibility in Levinas.

“To tend the cheek to the smiter and be filled with shame.”

—Lamentations 3, 30

“It is difficult to forgive Heidegger.”

—Levinas

Who Persecutes Me?

Levinas' characterization of the subject in *Otherwise than Being*¹ as the very articulation of persecution is one of the most outrageous moments in this text's often outrageous assault upon the Enlightenment assumption that ethical responsibility can be confidently founded upon the autonomy of the rational individual. In his account, Levinas portrays my summons to responsibility as emerging not from out of my own capacity to reason coherently in a community of similarly-endowed beings but in the very incoherency of my suffering underneath the hand of the other who would rise up against me and strike me out from the human community altogether. An action that would seem to express the very failure of the ethical becomes in a most unsettling paradox its guarantor.

Before a chance to reason out my responsibility could have ever been given, Levinas argues, a blow has already been undergone and my autonomy already interrupted by the approach of another who persecutes me. To suffer responsibility before a reason can be given justifying this burden is to find I am responsible *beyond* my own means. In the approach of the persecutor, Levinas instructs me, I learn not only to be responsible for my own ethical practices but also, scandalously for those who would start with

autonomy, to be responsible even for the other's responsibility. In making this claim, Levinas allies himself with a position, long held in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as in many other religious traditions, that the call to responsibility does not so much elevate as leave oneself humbled by and attentive to others—service (*avodah*) rather than excellence (*arête*) being the ultimate measure by which the good might make itself known.

But who exactly delivers this blow and in what manner? In response to the first half of this questions, Oona Eisenstat has argued against jumping too quickly to the conclusion that identifies the other by whom I am persecuted as a particular sort of human who treats me unjustly, say, the Nazi guard at Auschwitz, or the terrorist murdering innocents on a city street.² Further, to identify the blow undergone with only the spectacular violence of the Shoah, or yet other acts of genocide and political mayhem, would also be a mistake. My persecution then does not necessarily imply either my innocence or guilt. The neighbor who is my friend, as much as the stranger without means, are my persecutors, as is, as well, the foe who would murder me.

To notice this “equivocation,” or better, “enigma,”³ in the philosophical meaning of persecution for Levinas is not to deny a specific linkage between the rhetoric of this passage and the Shoah, complete with its death camps, its annihilative cruelty and its multiple genocides.⁴ Yet Eisenstat worries, rightly so, about an onticizing or historicizing of the Levinasian scene of persecution to the point that its full force is lost and even perverted. After all, most of those who will have read Levinas never were and never could have been a death camp inmate, or even, G-d forbid, one of those who inflicted a blow upon a death camp inmate. To read Levinas' words as if they were simply about that particular historical situation would be to engage in a morally

devastating appropriation of the other's suffering that would belie the very point Levinas is trying to make. Further, identifying the blow in this manner would put most of Levinas' readers at a safe distance from it. Since I am neither the persecutor nor persecuted of the Shoah, I would be outside at least the direct purview of what is being invoked in the passage.

So, even if Levinas' language alludes to the violence of the death camp, as well as to other innumerable scenes of persecution, it is also necessary to keep in mind that *any* other who comes before me is my persecutor. Read in this way, Levinas' derivation of responsibility from the blow of the other against me is even more startling, scandalous and unnerving. For the very tenor of the human situation, of one person facing another, involves persecution, involves the undergoing of a blow, involves being obsessed by the grimace of pitilessness in the face of the one who faces me, *no matter who she or he might be*. The responsibility invoked in persecution is not reserved for those who are determined afterward to have been unjust to me. All who approach me persecute me. I am responsible regardless of who strikes the blow, or from where it might come. If we take this line of reasoning to its conclusion, 'persecution', as the term is used here by Levinas, does not indicate an historical event, or an empirical fact, or even a series of deictic moments in which particular and identifiable blows can be determined to have occurred. Rather persecution is the very precondition of my ethically responding to the other *as other*.

A Redoubled Blow

But the question is not only about who strikes a blow against me but also the manner of the blow itself. The blow, Levinas claims, strikes one's cheek. The blow is not indeterminate, landing here or there about the body, but precisely directed toward the

face, my face. In this manner the blow is doubled—not only my body is afflicted but also my face, which is to say, that aspect of my body turned to the other to be addressed by he or she who strikes me. To be persecuted, then, is not simply to suffer under the hand of the other, *as if* I were merely another hand, *as if* the matter of violence could be resolved in the thought of how the intentions of others intrude bodily upon myself, as my flesh is bruised by another's flesh, as my hand is crippled by another's hand.

Not only the flesh, not only the hand but also the face is under siege. In undergoing the blow of the other, the cheek is stunned. The blow's impact registers in the face as a stinging rebuke. What stings in that blow beyond its physical pain is how the cheek, overburdened with pain, is made wooden and so incapable of the expressive plasticity that precisely enables it to be the cheek, an aspect of the face. Here the expressiveness of the cheek is found to go beyond its plasticity—even in its woodenness, the cheek *in its shame* continues to address the other.

In my visage the blows of the other becomes my and her shame. In amplification of this conclusion, Levinas introduces a passage from Lamentations (3, 30). “To tend the cheek to the smiter and be filled with shame.”⁵ Underneath the blow's negation of my capability to defend myself by returning force with force, yet another negation occurs. The expressiveness of my living body, my incarnation, and so the expression it would offer in resistance to the negation inflicted by the other's blow is also negated. Not only the body but also the cheek, the face, is at issue. Yet under the very redoubling of this blow of the other, Levinas claims, in the very shamefulness of that blow burning in my cheeks, I am called to be responsible for her or him, to be of service, even to the point of substituting myself for the other. As Levinas phrases it, the responsibility that weighs

upon me at this moment is not only for myself but also for the other's responsibility as well.

Suffering the other's blow does not end in my undergoing an "outrage" but in my "expiation" for the other.⁶ My shame does not collapse into itself, leaving me isolated in grief that would be autochthonic, sealed up in its own suffering, but in an attentiveness beyond myself that witnesses the inevitability of sharing my undergoing of the blow with the one who strikes it. Even the collapse of the expressiveness of my face, or even of my ability to be aware of my shame, continues to express my shame. I cannot be alone in my suffering the blow of the other. It redoubles upon me and she or he who strikes it. For this reason, Levinas argues, I am responsible not only for myself but also for the other who persecutes me. Further my suffering for the other is not a task I willfully take on, *as if* it somehow arose extraneously to the condition of my being a subject, but is that very condition.

Here the logic of autonomy, in which my involvement in the other is given a limit set by what I am capable of and what I consciously intend to do finds itself beset by a ludicrous situation. For how can one's responsibility extend even to that of the other's responsibility, if the other is to be autonomous too? What could possibly be the meaning of a responsibility that is assumed not only as one's own but also as that of the other? Much of Levinas' work has been focused on articulating the singularity of my responsibility, of how the other claims my attentiveness to her or him before I could ever have avoided it, of how my responsibility for the other can be no one else's but mine. Yet I now find myself in a situation where my responsibility is so singular that it leaves no room for any other responsibility whatsoever, seemingly, even for the singularity of another's responsibility. This claim teeters dangerously in the direction of the sort of

arrogance one finds in fanaticism, whose notion of the good is so demanding, so infinitely resistant to any qualification, that not only must I act upon what is required but I must require all others do so, exactly in the same manner, as well. Ethics in such a register would seemingly be inflamed with outrage, with inflicting the blow rather than being smitten by it

But precisely outrage is undermined at the very moment the blow is struck. Not outrage, Levinas argues, but expiation is the outcome of persecution. To be responsible, then, is to be the victim of outrage, of an attack revealed in the pitilessness of the other's grimace. But the very contact of that blow, of hand against face, reveals in an "enigma" not only the "pitilessness" but also the "pitifulness"⁷ of the face of the persecutor. The hand striking a blow is, after all, also a face. And this face, which would seemingly deny pity, inspires it instead. Even as the blow of the hand arrives, the face of my persecutor strikes me with pity.

What is to be made then of this pity?

Touching Flesh

One answer to this question could be framed within the mode of flesh—pity has to do with that attitude before another that seeks contact, touch, proximity, intimacy. Paradoxically, I am moved in my own plight by the other's plight because that very plight strikes me—not only as a hand strikes a face in stinging rebuke or in crushing annihilation, but also as the face of the other moves me to witness its very appearance as a face. No matter how deeply the grimace of violence contorts the face of my persecutor into pitilessness, I am still touched/struck by her or him as pitiful. Flesh, for Levinas, involves incarnation thought as subjectivity, which is to say, as a sensitivity undergoing the approach of the other to the point of trauma, of wounding. Yet this wounding is

unavoidably a witnessing as well, precisely because it undergoes without reserve, in vulnerability and nakedness, the blow of the other. I can never not have been attentive to the other who approaches me, even if, in that approach, the other would undo that attentiveness. Attentiveness to the other survives even my being rendered without consciousness, and so without the intent to be attentive, by the other.⁸

As the passage from Lamentations puts it: “let him offer his cheek to the smiter.” A prohibition is given: I am *not* to avoid being touched in the moment of my persecution.⁹ Rather I am to offer my cheek—not because I wish to suffer, as if suffering were the privileged province of the masochist and sadist, those who cultivate pain as a form of debilitation and obsession, but because suffering the blow of the other already has left me inextricably involved in her or him. My very being touched, in which my face stings with the blow of the other, cannot do anything other than touch again the other who touches me and to witness in that touch how the other’s touching can do no other than be touched by what it touches. This intensification or magnification of being touched, which does not in any sense undo or diminish my suffering of the other’s blow, reveals in the very flesh of that suffering an inescapable contact with the other, a touching that cannot remain untouched in its touching.

Yet what is a blow that strikes out at me, if not the attempt by the other to touch me in a manner that the one delivering the blow remains untouched by it? It would be *as if* the other had never been vulnerable to being touched, *as if* the pitiless grimace were sovereign, disposing of its own means with no interference from another. The logic of the persecutor’s blow is to strike *out* in rage, which is to say, to strike in a manner that no spark of being-touched remains in the other’s annihilative touching of my touching and being touched. As discussed above, the blow of the other freezes my skin, leaves it

stunned, and so, numb to further touching. It would be, *as if* the other had touched me without touching me, and I were touched without being touched. Being touched departed from his or her fingers, even as the hand impacted upon my cheek. In violence, touching is burnt out from within, as in the face of Cain, which in his wrath—so reports Genesis Rabbah¹⁰—becomes as a torch burning so actively, so confidently, so untouched by its own touching, that it renders as ash the very flesh that carries his expression, that speaks his intent.¹¹ And yet, that face rendered as ash continues to be called upon to witness its assault upon the other, despite all its denials to the contrary, even to the interrogation of the Most High.

The Persecutor who Teaches Me

If we follow Levinas' analysis to its most radical implication, then one is called upon to consider how Cain, even at the very moment of his attack upon Abel, remains his teacher and my teacher too. For to become a witness to the other's face, even in its pitilessness as in its pitifulness, is to learn from that face the ethical significance of touching and being touched. As Robert Gibbs' interpretation of Levinas continually reminds the reader of *Why Ethics?*,¹² my responsibility to the other is in the first instance one of listening and so of witnessing the other's approach. The other, particularly the other who persecutes me, is no less than the one who teaches me the significance of my responsibility. This claim does not mean that I must be first submitted to persecution in an ontic sense—physically stunned by the fist of another—in order for me to be persecuted and to learn through that persecution. Rather, Levinas' argument should be read as claiming that even in the case when the persecution becomes ontic, when the other strikes me first and draws blood, still I am called to witness that persecution as a teaching.

But what then could be the significance of a persecution that is not in the first instance ontic but always already ethical, which is to say, what is the significance of a persecution that is always already taking place simply because I am before the other? To answer this question, it might be helpful to return for a moment to the words Levinas cites from Lamentations in order to consider more fully the sense they might lend to what is being argued for here. In order to fill out the Biblical context for his remarks, the lines surrounding that reported by Levinas are included:

Let him sit alone and be patient,
 When He has laid [a yoke] upon him.
 Let him put his mouth to the dust—
 There may yet be hope.
 Let him offer his cheek to the smiter;
 Let him be surfeited with mockery.
 For the Lord does not
 Reject forever,
 But first afflicts, then pardons. (Lamentations, 28-31).¹³

Several points are registered in these words. First, one is afflicted and then pardoned. Israel's willingly suffering persecution, "alone and patient," leads to expiation for Israel's wrong, or, as Rav Berekia puts it in Lamentations Rabbah (III, 31-34, 9),¹⁴ Israel's "double dealing." Second, the nature of this wrong, for which one is afflicted, involves how one's heart is betrayed by one's lips, how one poses in one's public words before others, *as if* one were invulnerable to being touched by what one feels interiorly. Third, the affliction in question not only is imposed upon one by human others—in this particular case, the invading armies of Babylon—but more importantly by the Most High.

Fourth, the very doubling of persecution—that it comes from two directions simultaneously—leaves one in ambivalence. Persecution is both an attack upon oneself, beating oneself down, and an address to oneself, raising oneself up.

This underlying tone of ambivalence is particularly important. In a Midrashic Proem to Lamentations, Rav Johanan describes the situation of G-d before Israel in this particular moment as that of a King who becomes enraged in turn with two sons, each of whom he then batters and drives into banishment. In this figure, G-d is understood by the Rav as approaching the second son, namely, the remaining tribes of Israel, precisely in the guise of the invading armies now laying waste to the countryside and inflicting a near genocide upon its people. Rav Johanan goes on to report how upon the banishment of the second son, the King exclaims: “The fault is with me, since I must have brought them up badly” (Lamentations Rabbah, Proems II).

As in the story of Cain, the Most High is characterized in this remarkable passage as taking up responsibility for the human other, precisely at the moment that this human other suffers a crushing punishment for her double-dealing. To punish Israel is not enough to express G-d’s responsibility. G-d also insists on taking responsibility for Israel’s having been punished! G-d approaches Israel in sackcloth and ashes, and blames Himself for what has occurred. The reader encounters G-d in mourning for G-d’s own scandalous failure to be responsible enough. As in Levinas’ philosophical dictum, we encounter here G-d being responsible even to the point of G-d’s being responsible for the other’s, in this case, Israel’s responsibility.

While this passage may seem scandalous to those who would insist upon G-d as a singular being perfected in his or her comportment and demeanor, perhaps its point is not to undermine the Kingship of G-d so much as to seek a manner of expressing the peculiar

manner in which G-d's Kingship is one of service rather than of imposition. G-d's address is not so much anxious to rule as to teach, for only in teaching Israel can repentance be found.¹⁵

And what might G-d have Israel learn? Rav Johanan's answer is again scandalously radical: Israel should learn to repent, *even as it is struck down by its persecutors*, just as G-d remembers to repent in the wake of His own being struck down by His own punishment of Israel. By framing the discussion of persecution within the context of Lamentations, Levinas subtly, carefully, attentively, enigmatically warns his reader from becoming too confident about the meaning or even the direction of her or his persecution. For perhaps, when one inquires of the other concerning the blow that has been struck, when one begins to listen with all of one's heart and mind, when one no longer says one thing as one feels another in one's double-dealing, perhaps what one will hear is how one's own face is the one that has been pitiless and yet rendered pitiful by the unjustifiable suffering of others. Eisenstadt puts the point provocatively: "in the moment of ethical decision...one does not...distinguish between a good persecution and a violent persecution, or between the command of the orphan and the command of the Nazi" (DBT, 320).

The Enigma of Expiation

Eisenstadt's claim is not descriptive but pre-normative. Because my human incarnation is always already under persecution, the responsibility to respond for the other's responsibility weighs upon me. But because that weight is so enigmatic, because it can turn out that either the orphan or the murderer is the other who stands before me, I cannot be too careful in attending to the blow of this other. Which is to say, I can never be finished with posing the question of how I myself *will have* contributed to the blow I

or the other *has* received. In the enigma of the pitiless and the pitiful, I can never be finished untangling one from the other, never certain from where the pitilessness I mark in the face of the other actually stems. This is not to say that I do not, perhaps, in particular situations, suffer outrageous wrong. But even in those situations, Levinas is as anxious as Lamentations is insistent that I not think of this wrong in the first instance as my having been wronged but as the other's having wronged. Precisely this movement from self-preoccupation to preoccupation for the responsibility of the other is the significance of Levinas' term "expiation." As Sandor Goodhart has so eloquently argued, the logic of persecution for Levinas always leads away from any celebration, any idolatry of my victimization to an undergoing of suffering as a vocation, a call to unending responsibility.¹⁶

The individuation that matters to me, which is to say, which inspires me in my matter, which animates me as an incarnated subject, is one that magnifies my responsibility for the other, rather than diminishes it. The tendency, within a discourse emphasizing autonomy, is to understand my individuation in such a manner that responsibility is delimited to those acts for which I am identifiably the origin. Responsibility becomes obligation rather than investment and obedience. Taken to its ultimate conclusion, responsibility thought in this manner is the endeavor to live with an untroubled conscience, or, just as shabbily, without reference to the others with whom I share a world.¹⁷ In this stance, to feel guilty for the wrongs others have done me or have done to others would be unreasonable. Indeed, in a sense this claim is absolutely correct, when it concerns my juridical guilt. To claim before others that I am the identifiable origin of an attack upon another, when I am not, would be a travesty of justice. If

nothing else, my confusion of responsibility with guilt in this instance would keep those who are truly guilty from being brought to justice.

But to confuse the meaning of ethical responsibility with the state of being or not being guilty before a court of law diminishes the ethical life. Ethical responsibility is enigmatic—it takes me beyond my guilt to the guilt of others. Further, it poses the issue of how the full dimensions of my guilt only appear after I have been called upon by the other’s approach to take on responsibility for all that is entailed in his or her responsibility. If the other strikes yet another and I do not intervene, the guilt of the other redoubles upon me.¹⁸ The issue here is not only whether I have chosen to act wrongfully but also whether I have chosen to ignore how others act—or others suffer. My responsibility for the other multiplies, or magnifies my involvement in the activities of the world until there is no quarter of the world to and for which I am not responsible to some degree.¹⁹ Only to the degree to which my responsibility spreads itself out, can I be said to be a living entity, a soul, a singular animation for the sake of others.

But the registering of this responsibility does not alienate me from myself. I do not come into the world only to find the possibilities for innocence and an untroubled mind have been stolen away, as I am coerced to assume the weight of not only my but also the other’s many sins in a world beset by mayhem and genocide. To see the issue in this manner is precisely to ignore the priority, if not the preeminence, of responsibility over guilt and of creation over autonomy. To argue that anarchical responsibility diminishes my good is to succumb to the “pride and dominating imperialism” (*OB*, 110) of a self-authorizing ego that Levinas, along with the entire Judaic tradition, would put into question. To be created animate is, to use a term from Eisenstadt, “devastating.”

Yet devastation is not an undoing of my animation but its inescapable preface, its heartbeat.

In the paragraph leading up to his discussion of persecution, Levinas admonishes philosophy to consider how it has been captivated by a notion of matter and so of incarnation, of embodiment, that assumes reification rather than anarchy as its first principle. In coming to itself with a notion of a “preexisting and indestructible matter” (*OB*, 110), philosophy has from its beginning sustained a reification of the world that hides the underlying anarchical character of my incarnation and only seemingly allows me to think that the devastation of being a subject is an eliminable condition.

But “*In the beginning*” is no beginning that can be justified as such. The most creative, as opposed to foundational character of matter, is not passivity receptive to activity but passivity before, or without any foundation. Goodness, which is to say, responsibility that offers expiation for the other, is gratuitous, without precedence. And that the urgency of the good registers in me is nothing less for Levinas than the original condition of my incarnation and the revelation of matter’s true significance. My passivity before the good does not express a principle inherent in a world of becoming, in which Being and beings are in the process of its/their self-perfection. My passivity before the good is obedience that cannot be and could never have been undone. My responsibility is a skin, sensitivity to others who encumber me, involve me, inspire me, beyond any recall. To be created is to find the ethical is always already an exposure to others that cannot be contained, that cannot be cut short, no matter how justifiable a logical principle for doing so might seem.

Ethics does not end in a justification of one’s innocence, or even in a raising up of one’s good deeds so that they might be acknowledged and praised. Ethics ends, as it

begins, in expiation, in a movement toward the other so encumbering that it not only could never have occurred otherwise, but also it cannot even be said to have occurred in the first place. It is undergone without occurring. Expiation, then, is not a moment posterior to the good, in which the failure of human beings to live up to a principle is interrupted by a transcendent intervention that will make right from above what humans failed to achieve from below. Expiation is *not* “some, magical, saving virtue”²⁰ but the very significance of the ethical as such. For this reason, the inception *and* the outcome of ethics is found not in outrage, which seeks a restoration of just principles to their prior authority, but in expiation, which always already is for another regardless of any possible consequence coming out of this original position of loyalty. No matter how much the other’s blow against me dismisses the relevance of my suffering for her or him, my suffering will always already have been for her or him. And so the face that is pitiless is rendered its expiation, is revealed as pitiful too.

An Ethics of Expiation?

Just as responsibility is enigmatic before the other who persecutes me, so too is the expiation that emerges in my witnessing of that persecution. At least one of the ethical tasks to be confronted in Eisenstadt’s “moment of ethical decision” is the manner in which I should approach the *particular* other who has, at least seemingly, wronged me. How am I to address that blow—described above—that struck my cheek, even as she who struck it proclaimed with her lips but not her heart that she remained untouched within her touching of me? How might I help he who strikes this blow to become aware of his own impotence to forestall the torsion of his touching, a touching that cannot remain untouched in its touching? How might I address that hardness of heart, that “double dealing,” to use the words of Rab Johanan, in which heart and lips conspire

against one another, in which the heart of she who has already undergone the blow she has inflicted seeks the delusion of lips that proclaim their invulnerability, their innocence, their indifference?²¹ It is extremely important that I consider the uncanny power of this secondary blow, of that touching that rebounds upon a touching that would forget itself.

How am I to approach the other who has persecuted me? The thorny issues arising in the wake of this question are given careful treatment in the Midrashic essay “Toward the Other,”²² in which Levinas considers a series of case-studies, taken from Rabbinical discussions concerning the significance of the Day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*. The essay was first presented in October, 1963 at a meeting of The French Colloquium of Jewish Intellectuals. What makes Levinas’ remarks here stand out in his writings is how they not only bring Talmudic sources to a consideration of the meaning of expiation but also to Levinas’ own real-life struggle concerning his responsibility for the responsibility of the other, in this case a particular philosopher engaged in the philosophical vocation, namely, Martin Heidegger.²³

Levinas places his consideration of Heidegger, who was Levinas’ teacher, within the context of a struggle between two Rabbis, student and teacher: Rab and Rab Hanina bar Hama.²⁴ An insult, in which the student Rab dishonors his teacher Rab Hanina before an assembly of scholars, leads to the offending party’s asking for forgiveness 13 times. And 13 times Rab Hanina refuses. Rab Hanina persists in being unforgiving, in spite of his knowing that his student is no longer hallachically required to ask for forgiveness after his third approach. If forgiveness is not offered after three attempts to elicit forgiveness, then it is as if the wrong had been forgiven (TO, 23-24). In this manner a hallachic duty, although one subtly conceived, falls upon the offended party to forgive those who approach him.

What then is to be made of Rab Hanina's refusal to forgive not three times but thirteen? Levinas observes:

How is one to forgive if the offender, unaware of his deeper thoughts, cannot ask for forgiveness? ... The aggressiveness of the offender is perhaps his very unconsciousness. Aggression is the lack of attention *par excellence*. (TO, 25)

To be responsible for the other's responsibility, to offer expiation in the place of outrage, does not mean to relieve the offender of responsibility but to magnify it. To ask for forgiveness, if this is to be anything at all, is to become attentive to the wrong one has committed. To give forgiveness is to inspire, if not to affirm this attentiveness, so that the past one has shared with one's persecutor might be repaired. Repentance and forgiveness go hand in hand.²⁵

Gibbs argues that for Levinas forgiveness denotes a change in the past engendered by the one who has been wronged for the sake of the one who has wronged. But, Gibbs adds, this change is not one of forgetfulness but of elevation: "The past is to happen again but differently."²⁶ In altering my time, forgiveness does not change a present interpretation of what has occurred, my or my victim's representation of the past, but the occurrence itself as it occurred. What was a betrayal of the other that left the persecutor condemned now elevates her. And in the light of what Levinas argues above, that elevation involves my coming to terms with an aggression implicit in my actions that heretofore I had remained untouched by. Now, in a renewal of my responsibility, I confront how the other who stands before me constitutes my time as one of forgiveness, as one in which the very sense of what I have incurred can only find its significance in the one toward whom I have acted wrongly. I am awoken from my outrageous moral slumber, from my neglect of the humanity of the other and the irreplaceable role this

human other carries in the constitution of my time and so of my life. In my forgiveness, the fact that my being unfaithful to her was the manner in which I discovered my neglect of her no longer condemns me but becomes the joyous confirmation, the “*felix culpa*”²⁷ that I have always already been called upon to be attentive to the other.

If Gibbs is right in his understanding of Levinas on this issue, responsibility is not suspended by forgiveness but actually increased beyond the measure that outrage could ever achieve or endure. For outrage would simply require that a punishment be imposed, that a wrong, however imperfectly, be righted as much as possible. Outrage does not involve, as forgiveness would, that the one who has wronged be touched in his having touched the other. Or to put it in other terms, outrage asks for a recompense from the viewpoint of the one wronged, whereas expiation—which involves the simultaneous drama of both repentance *and* forgiveness—would inspire, or, at the very least, supplement, a change of heart in the other who has wronged one. As a result, the double-dealing of the persecutor, the manner in which his heart is denied by his lips, must be carefully attended to.

Near the end of his essay, Levinas brings home his discussion of the issue of teacher and student, when he asks whether there are, indeed, Germans after the time of the Shoah who are difficult to forgive.²⁸ He responds bluntly to his own query with the claim that Heidegger, Levinas’ own teacher, is one of these. At work in this question and its answer is the realization that forgiveness must be peculiarly addressed to the particular human in her or his plight. No matter how compelling Levinas’ discussion of persecution as a meta-ethical phenomenon might be, the practice of responding to one’s persecution under the hands or by the words of particular humans must also be attended to. To raise the possibility of repentance and so forgiveness, I must, in Eisenstadt’s

“moment of ethical decision,” address this person, here and now before me, in precisely a manner that studiously avoids diminishing her or his responsibility. Yet, the very practice of approaching *this* other who persecutes me, Levinas would remind his reader, is full of pitfalls and can actually provoke rather than quell the other’s violence: “The game of offense and forgiveness is a dangerous one.”²⁹ One can hope that the persecutor who is full of rationalizations is only a step away from a capitulation to his being touched by my approach of him; but I must also confront that this persecutor is also only a step away from renewing his blows upon me.

In this vein of thought, Levinas fears a climate of philosophical discussion at play in the case of Heidegger, in which, at least in Levinas’ judgment, there have been “unceasing attempts” to reason away rather than magnify (in the important sense of this term developed above) his teacher’s responsibility.³⁰ Perhaps one example of this phenomenon occurred, uncomfortably for all involved, in William Richardson’s address of the 1993 International Levinas Conference³¹, in which he admonishes Levinas—in absentia—for an incident more than 30 years earlier, in which Levinas admonished Richardson, unfairly in Richardson’s mind, for stating in his book, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought*, that 1943 was a “very prolific year” for Heidegger. After having been administered “a very vigorous poke [by Levinas] on my [Richardson’s] shoulder from behind,” Richardson hears the following statement from Levinas: “In 1943, my parents were in one concentration camp and I was in another. It was a very prolific year, indeed.” Taken back by Levinas’ comportment, as much as his words, Richardson complains about the sting of ridicule [my word, but a fair one, I hope], his persecution [to use a word from Levinas], which still unsettles Richardson these many decades later.³²

Surprisingly, troublingly, Richardson's remarks provide no explicit discussion about Heidegger's very difficult position in all of this fuss. What is one to make of Richardson's outrage at Levinas, a response Adam Zachary Newton later terms "uncanny,"³³ even as Richardson, seemingly, remains deaf to the full dimensions of Levinas' devastation, of the suffering being expressed in his pitiless (at least to Richardson) grimace, his impolite poke in the ribs? By raising the issue of Levinas' comportment at a moment of ethical decision, Richardson reminds all who engage in philosophy that its practice is not only a science but also an ethics. A philosophical claim always already involves persecution, always already brings near the other's visage in a manner that makes me responsible for his or her responsibility too. Not only bullets are murderous—ideas, even true and good ideas, can be spoken in a tone that is murderous. From Heidegger to Levinas to Richardson to myself to those who now read this article, across generations and traditions, we are beset by the singular voices of others, no matter how universal and telling the ideas they affirm might seem to be.

Even to the moment of the writing of my words here, an angry, enigmatic buzz continues to go back and forth in the scholarly community on the issue of Heidegger and the Shoah. Curiously, just about everyone seems to be outraged at one statement or another concerning Heidegger's relations with the Nazis or with the Jews. But how might our words to one another about Heidegger's legacy, of which Levinas' own work is a telling part, become more than further inciting to misunderstanding and renewed violence? One thinks of Paul Celan's poem "Todtnauberg," in which the poet searches anxiously, hopefully and ultimately fruitlessly for a responsive word from Heidegger on the occasion of their meeting at his Schwarzwald retreat.³⁴

What might the “saving word” now be? How might Heidegger’s responsibility before the Shoah, not to mention that of his students, including Levinas, Celan and Richardson, be magnified rather than diminished? Before answering this impossible question (which nonetheless must be answered), it would be wise, perhaps, to remember again the words of Cain, as he turns to the Most High at the moment his pitilessness is exposed and he is punished. One can read Cain’s response to G-d—“This is too much for me to bear”—as a question about the very meaning of outrage, and of whether it leads anywhere else than to yet another outrage, to an inflicting of blow for blow and so to a time weighed down by endless cycles of violence. Like Cain wonders of G-d, who serves as his teacher, Levinas too must wonder of Heidegger and so of philosophy itself, where each of us might find the insight, if not the heart, to speak of and practice a responsibility that does not succumb to either evasion or outright despair in the face of cruelty and pitilessness, does not itself descend into the madness of a punishment that can never be achieved and so repeats itself mechanically throughout time, until time is nothing more than the weight of punishment itself. To ask this question is not merely to ask about the truth of a particular theory, or about the brilliance or even adequacy of a flaring insight but also to ask about the responsibility of philosophy as an ethical practice, as a bearing witness to others who are my teachers. Even if its theories and concepts prove compelling, the ones who say them still face us with a pitiless grimace that persecutes us to the point of expiation, of responsibility for the other’s responsibility. This may be what Levinas and we too might have learned from being the students of Heidegger.

James Hatley, Salisbury University

ENDNOTES

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp. 110-11.

² Oona Eisenstadt, *Driven back to the Text*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001) p. 315. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas does not specify the one who persecutes me as a Nazi guard, or, even more generally, as one who willfully attacks me but as the face of the neighbor “prior to every positing” on my part as to the meaning of her or his approach (*Otherwise than Being*, p. 111).

³ *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.

⁴ The act of genocide in the Shoah is in actuality plural—not only Jews, but also Romana and Sinta, as well as other races and ethnicities, were to be targeted for destruction.

⁵ The passage is not only introduced by Levinas into the text of *Otherwise than Being* but also footnoted with a citation. The analysis developed here turns to the rabbinical tradition, as well as Levinas’ own comments in one of his “confessional” essays, in order to understand how Levinas’ biblical reference both guides and fills out his philosophical intent in his analysis of persecution.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.

⁷ *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.

⁸ This is admittedly a controversial claim. For a better understanding of how it might be made reasonably, see my discussion of ‘non-intentional resistance’ in James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), pp. 79-82.

⁹ This is not to argue that one should masochistically seek out one’s persecutors but rather that in the blow that becomes unavoidable, there is goodness in suffering the blow forthrightly, before the face of the other. Further, Levinas contrasts forthrightly undergoing the first blow of the oppressor to that Christian version, in which the blow finds its meaning, when one turns one’s other cheek to receive a second blow. Not in the turning of the cheek to receive a blow again, but in the very first blow, according to Levinas, is where expiation is to be given. In the blow itself is expiation, rather than in a pause or hesitation that occurs, which then leads to a renewed assent to witness the other’s inhumanity. The other’s inhumanity is always already being witnessed in the very order of subjectivity!

¹⁰ Midrash Rabah is a collection of aggadic commentary on various books of the Hebrew Bible. The Midrash Rabah was compiled roughly from 400 to 1500 C.E.. Genesis Rabah and Lamentations Rabah are among the first works issued. (See Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud*, Llewellyn Brown, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 40; Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, “Forward,” in *The Midrash Rabbah* (Volume I: Genesis I), trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman. (London: The Soncino Press, 1983)).

¹¹ See my discussion of this point in “Beyond Outrage: The Delirium of Responsibility in Levinas’ Scene of Persecution,” in *Addressing Levinas*, Eric Nelson and Kent Still, eds. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005).

¹² Robert Gibbs, *Why Ethics?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), ch. 1 (pp. 27-46).

¹³ The English text, which differs from that in *Otherwise than Being*, comes from the new Jewish Publication Society translation: *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999/5759 (2nd Edition)).

¹⁴ Alan Mintz, in his *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) recounts how the rabbinical rereading of Lamentations, particularly as it is found in Lamentations Rabah (found in Volume III of the Soncino Press’ Midrash Rabah) was “one of its greatest tasks,” figuring into a “defusing” of the subversive implications of the destruction of the Second Temple (p.

49). Levinas' citation of Lamentations as his proof text invites, at least within a Jewish context, the amplification of his meaning from within the rabbinic tradition.

¹⁵ Mintz points out that a central part of the rabbinical strategy in this rereading is its picturing of G-d as "entirely untutored in mourning" and in need of "instruction." In this manner G-d is "brought down to a new and human realm of experience" (Mintz, *Hurban*, p. 60).

¹⁶ Sandor Goodhart, *Sacrificing Commentary: Reading the End of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. xiii-xiv, 182-83.

¹⁷ The characterization here of autonomous responsibility speaks only of a tendency in its discourse. This tendency is admirably resisted by Kant. After all, autonomy should not be confused with selfishness. But the argument can still be made that by founding ethics in autonomous obligation, Kant fails to account for the manner in which suffering interrupts my autonomy and suggests that ethical responsibility exceeds the scope of reason, which is to say, the capacity of an autonomous being to legislate the good, *as if* it were a law of nature. The very senselessness of my suffering, that I am submitted to it in spite of good reasons I may have for withholding myself from it, makes a mockery of any attempt to understand it as the self-legislation of a natural law.

Kant does argue [*Lectures on Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1979), pp. 59-60] that our responsibilities exceed, by their very nature, our moral obligations. We cannot be praised, Kant argues, for being moral, for doing our duty, but only for being responsible, which is to say, for engaging in acts that are not required of us by duty but nevertheless cause an effect for good or ill. For instance, I cannot be held responsible, Kant argues, for the suffering the other undergoes, should I refuse to lend him money (given that the loan is not morally incumbent upon me). But I can be held responsible, and so be praised, for the good that befalls the other, should the money be lent. The confidence implicit in Kant's argument that the other's suffering need not trouble me, as long as I have done my duty, is the sort of conclusion Levinas would find troubling.

Yet in Kant's manner of posing the distinction between obligation and responsibility, one can sense a concern for that aspect of the good, in which my involvement in others is magnified rather than delimited. But Kant can only imagine this magnification in terms of the rational subject's freedom. By introducing persecution as the very articulation of the subject, Levinas is able to show how the subject's freedom is always already an investment in others that cannot be delimited and so undermines every attempt at making a clear distinction in the human heart between what I will give to the other and what I will withhold.

¹⁸ To a certain degree, the law can recognize my responsibility (in Levinas' rather than Kant's sense of the term), if not directly for the other's irresponsibility, at least for the most direct effects of her or his irresponsibility on other others. For this reason, at least five states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Vermont, Minnesota and Hawaii) have enacted so-called Good Samaritan laws. But what these laws could never legislate is my responsibility to approach the other who persecutes me for his or her own sake. Or for the sake of that larger circle of responsibility that escapes any particular, identifiable act of a single human will.

¹⁹ Determining the *degree* to which I am responsible, however, is not simply up to me—it can only be adjudicated through political discourse with all the other others. What limits my particular responsibility to a particular corner of the world does not involve my autonomous decision to ignore that responsibility but the additional claims of yet other responsibilities which must also be taken into account.

²⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.

²¹ Eisenstadt points out that Jeffery Kosky ["After the Death of God: Emmanuel Levinas and the Ethical Possibility of God," in *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24 no. 2 (1996): pp. 235-59], among others, has argued that persecution is a purely formal term in Levinas that cannot be meaningfully applied at the level of particular ethical relationships. Following Eisenstadt's lead, the argument developed here resists that conclusion, although a disjunction between the formal and the particular significance of the term must be acknowledged. This disjunction is precisely what makes persecution and the responsibility for the other it signifies enigmatic. On the one hand, persecution involves the other *qua* other; on the other hand, this other can be found to be a Nazi, a death camp inmate, a bystander, or someone else quite removed from a direct involvement in the Shoah. See *Driven Back to the Text*, fn. 27, pp. 367-68.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, "To the Other," in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 12-29.

²³ Considerable discussion has occurred on how exactly to read Levinas' "confessional" essays in regard to his philosophical writings. Without rehearsing that controversy here, the reader is advised that the

reference to “To the Other” is to one of these so-called confessional pieces. In my opinion, Levinas’ confessional essays provide in many instances detailed accounts of the practice of responsibility that shed considerable light on theoretical claims made at the meta- or proto-ethical level in his philosophical writings. Rather than either conflating Levinas’ confessional with his philosophical writings, or isolating them from one another, a sensitive ongoing interrogation of one by the other might be the best approach to reading either side of this divide in Levinas’ corpus. For a more detailed working out of my argument in this matter see: James Hatley, “Generations: Levinas in the Jewish Context,” *Levinas and Rhetoric*, Claire Katz, editor, a special edition of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* Vol. 39, no. 2 (2005). See also Claire Katz, “Emmanuel Levinas and the Jewish Question,” *Religious Studies Review*, 30:1, Winter 2004, pp. 3-11.

²⁴ According to Ouaknin, the life span of Rav (Rab), who is the initiating figure of the Babylonian *Amoraim* (the authors of the *Gemara*, the “interpreters”), runs from 174-247 C.E. That of Rabi Hanina bar Hama, who is listed as the initiating figure of Israel’s *Amoraim*, spans from 180-260 C.E. (Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book*, p. 43). The *Amoraim* come after successive generations of biblical scholars who are respectively named the *Soferim*, the “scribes” (pre-Maccabbean), the *Zugot*, the “pairs” (from the time of the Maccabees through that of Herod), and the *Tannaim*, the “repeaters” (from 10-220 C.E.), (*The Burnt Book*, pp. 41-43).

²⁵ Gibbs sums up his discussion of these two phenomena in the following way: “We have explored the power to repair the past, and found that the past can be held open by repentance, and by historiography, but that only the other person can repair my past, can forgive me and transform my sins into merits” (*Why Ethics?*, p. 352).

²⁶ For a magisterial development of the themes of repentance and forgiveness in a Jewish, as well as Levinasian context, see his *Why Ethics?*, Part IV (pp. 305-379).

²⁷ Gibbs points out that Levinas’ employment of this term invests his argument with a distinctly Christian tone (*Why Ethics?*, p. 352). Whether this means Levinas is ultimately taking a Christian viewpoint, or bringing a Judaic sense to what is a Christian concept (as Levinas does, for instance in his treatment of the term *kenosis*), or attempting something yet even more complex and enigmatic deserves further discussion. In this regard, Eisenstadt’s suggestion that the messianism implicit in Levinas’ account of ethics arises not in the intervention of a single saving figure but in the approach of every human being whom I might encounter is crucial. For Levinas, Eisenstadt argues: “the other is my route to the father [G-d] not by virtue of some special quality, but by virtue of being whoever he [the other] is” (*Driven Back to the Text*, fn. 36, p. 369).

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, “Toward the Other,” p. 25.

²⁹ “Toward the Other,” p. 23.

³⁰ “Toward the Other,” p. 23.

³¹ The conference, organized by Adiraan Peperzak under the aegis of Loyola University of Chicago, was titled “Ethics as First Philosophy? The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion.”

³² The text of Richardson’s remarks was later published in *Ethics as First Philosophy*, Adiraan Peperzak, ed., “The Irresponsible Subject” (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 123-131. See, in particular, pp. 123-24, for an account of the conversation.

³³ See Newton’s discussion of the Richardson incident in his *The Fence and the Neighborhood: Emmanuel Levinas, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and Israel among the Nations* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 3-6.

³⁴ In the poem, Celan speaks of “a hope, today/of a thinking man’s/coming/word/in the heart” [Paul Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: Persea Books, 1989) pp. 292-93]. See in particular Otto Poeggler’s discussion of this poem and the meeting with Heidegger it addresses in *Spur des Wortes* (Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber 1986), pp. 259-268, as well as John Felstiner’s account in *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 245-47.