



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction

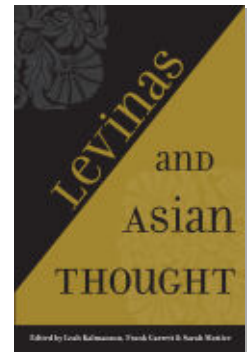
Published by

Kalmanson, Leah, et al.

Levinas and Asian Thought.

Duquesne University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/28155.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/28155>

Leah Kalmanson and Sarah Mattice

An important question of any comparative project concerns motivation and incentive. Why compare “philosophies” across cultures and, in our case, why choose Emmanuel Levinas as the central figure of the collection? Comparative philosophy, although typically associated with cross-cultural work, shares the same set of philosophical tasks as traditional philosophical discourse. In fact, traditional philosophical discourse already involves a great deal of comparison—anyone engaging multiple thinkers, terms, texts, historical periods, or philosophical movements is already doing comparative work. Such philosophical projects need to be sensitive to linguistic, cultural, and socio-historical contexts. This is as true of a scholar working across the continental-analytic divide as it is of a scholar working across Chinese and French philosophical traditions. At its best, comparative research opens up a space for creative contributions to larger philosophical conversations.

This essay collection—which is located at the intersection of Asian philosophies and the contemporary continental tradition—is indebted to the seminal work of Graham Parkes in volumes such as *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (1987) and *Nietzsche and Asian Thought* (1991). In the years following these publications, the popularity of comparative continental thought has continued to grow, as evidenced by recent publications such as *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School* (2011), *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought* (2007), at least three collections devoted to Buddhism and postmodernism, as well as the new *Journal of Comparative and Continental Philosophy*.

In addition to Levinas's increasing popularity within comparative continental circles, his work has become a standard subject of study in philosophy departments across Asia. For example, the 2008 special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, "Levinas: Chinese and Western Perspectives," draws together essays from a conference in China marking the centenary of Levinas's birth and highlights his prominent place in contemporary Chinese scholarship.

As with any philosopher who is critically situated with respect to the modernist European tradition, Levinas seems well suited to engage philosophical worldviews that have developed outside of the Western orbit. For example, the intrigue of comparing the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and postmodern critiques of subjectivity is not only due to the obvious conceptual parallels. Rather, what many scholars find compelling is that Buddhism, having never been "modern," cannot properly be called "postmodern," nor can its theory of the subject be in any way reduced to a reaction against modernism. As such, Buddhism offers a fresh perspective on the postmodern critique stemming from an alternative conceptual framework. Thus it seems quite tempting to draw on Asian sources to explore or even expand on the Levinasian ethical project. Although we as editors are excited by the prospect of such research, we remain mindful of potential problems.

First, Levinas himself not only showed no interest in non-Western philosophical traditions, but he actively resisted challenges to his European-centered model. In an oft-quoted, if regrettable, passage he declares: "The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past" (*UH* 108 / *IH* 172). Considering the philosophical importance attributed to the weight of the past in shaping Levinas's notion of alterity in *Otherwise than Being*, one wonders if a people without a past, as Levinas describes here, could even claim the status of ethical others. We find it difficult to read Levinas's comments as anything other than Eurocentric, if not simply racist. However, his shortsightedness with respect to non-European philosophical—and cultural—models need not hinder other scholars' creative appropriation of and engagement with his work in a multicultural context, as is evidenced by the many fruitful applications of the concept of alterity in postcolonial studies.¹

Second, beyond the issue of Levinas's own engagement with non-Western philosophies, however, there are deep conceptual divides that separate the cosmological, ontological, and metaphysical underpinnings of his work from much of Asian philosophy. For example, it is difficult to understand Levinas's ethics independently from his rejection of Heidegger's notion of being, for alterity makes an intervention in Heideggerian ontology, which itself interrupts other Western philosophical discourses. Would Levinas's intervention, then, be relevant to a tradition that shares neither the standard Western concept of existence nor Heidegger's particular take on *Sein*? On the one hand, if answered in the positive, we seem to imply that his philosophy is universally applicable, as if any culture anywhere could benefit from a Levinasian philosophical intervention. On the other hand, if answered in the negative, we appear to make Levinas a thinker of only local interest, as if his relevance were limited to his critical position in relation to one branch of European thought.

Third, we must consider Levinas's deep indebtedness to Jewish theology, both in his conventional and unconventional interpretations of it. What, then, does Levinas have to say to a non-Abrahamic or nontheistic philosophical tradition? The Confucian tradition is situated in a radically processual, correlative cosmology where there is no need for or interest in a transcendent creator. Roger Ames has argued, albeit controversially, that the concept of transcendence is irrelevant to the "mainstream Chinese tradition."² Levinas's claim to locate transcendence in the face of the other resonates with Westerners precisely because it upsets well-known categories. Would such a claim even make sense in a culture that operates by different categories altogether?

Fourth and finally, conceptions of subjectivity also reveal a divide between Levinas's philosophical premises and mainstream Asian worldviews. For example, the Buddhist doctrine of no-self seems, at first glance, conceptually at odds with a robust understanding of alterity. In other words, does not "no self" imply "no other"?³

As these questions demonstrate, this comparative project faces certain uphill battles. That said, to deny the viability of the project altogether would likely reveal other assumptions at play regarding the question, "What is philosophy?" and its related component, "Who has philosophy?" We are sensitive to what has been described as "the philosophical double bind," which often frustrates attempts to define

“philosophy” or decide who is doing it.⁴ When viewed from the perspective of Western philosophy’s Greek origins, the work of another tradition is either so similar as to be uninteresting, or so different as to not count as philosophy at all. The double bind is a way of devaluing the philosophy of others by using some constructed notion of Greece or the West as the presumed gold standard. In our context, in bringing together Levinas and Asian philosophies, we want to avoid the twin evils of orientalism and obscurantism. The essays in this volume refuse the terms of the philosophical double bind and insist that a comparative approach to Levinas opens up space for new philosophical dialogue and makes meaningful contributions to the traditions discussed. Thus, this comparative approach is a recommendation that scholars proceed against or beyond Levinas’s own presumptions regarding the superiority of Greek and Western ideals (see *IR* 149).

The essays that comprise this volume do not simply initiate cross-cultural comparisons merely to tally up esoteric differences and similarities to pedantic effect; rather, they speak to larger human concerns, with relevance that readers may appreciate across a variety of ethical, political, and religious contexts. Our contributors address questions such as the following: What possible limits are there on my responsibilities to other people? How far might my responsibilities to nonhumans extend? And how can I put into practice the seemingly unfulfillable demands of an other-oriented ethics? The authors bring Levinas into an engaging dialogue with a number of traditions, including Mahāyāna Buddhism, Vedic religions, Confucianism, Daoism, and Islam. They draw on resources as diverse as the self-sacrificial ethic of bushidō, Islamic jurisprudence, and current research in cognitive science. As a result, they consider texts and thinkers from both ancient and contemporary perspectives.

I. SELVES AND OTHERS

The collection begins with essays exploring issues that link Levinas to (and distinguish him from) non-Western traditions with regard to the question: Who is the “self,” who is the “other,” and what is the relation between them? In “Facing (‘and Yet Not Facing’) East:

Reorienting Levinas toward the Buddhist No-Self,” Frank Garrett explores the influence of the decentered subject on Levinas’s writings, bringing what Garrett calls the “eccentric subject” into dialogue with the Buddhist no-self. Relying on Buddhism’s *kōan* literature, Garrett traces the deconstructive disorientation of self these Buddhist writings aim to produce in the reader—a disorientation that also effectively opens up the self to the other, in a sense amenable to Levinasian language. Garrett concludes by turning to Nishida Kitarō’s Buddhist-influenced analysis of the self-other relation to effect a reorientation of the Levinasian subject in terms of self-emptiness.

In “Desire and the Possibility of Escape: Levinas and the Buddha on the Nature and Value of Desire,” Drew M. Dalton directs his inquiry at that most intimate and urgent of human experiences: desire. Whereas the overcoming of desire occupies a canonical position in Buddhist philosophy and practice, the insatiable craving of metaphysical desire, for Levinas, is the only antidote to the neediness that seeks to totalize the other. Although Dalton presents a fascinating analysis of the desire for enlightenment in Buddhism as a form of metaphysical desire, he ultimately leaves the two positions in tension, asking the reader to reflect on the nature and value of desire in his or her own experience. Along the way, he raises many questions relevant to the entire volume, regarding the viability of comparative work on Levinas in the first place.

Steven Shankman’s “The Legalist Portrayal of the Confucian Other: Sima Qian’s Portrait of the First Qin Emperor” persists in Dalton’s line of questioning. For example, if Levinas’s ethics responds to historically and culturally contextualized philosophical developments (e.g., Kant’s universality, Heidegger’s ontology), then should we expect a highly specialized notion like “alterity” to have relevance outside the Western context? What do we make of Levinas’s own resistance to recognizing non-Westerners as players on the stage of history? How should we respond to his resistance to recognizing, that is, other histories? Reflecting on these questions, Shankman goes in search of “other others”—expressions of alterity arising outside the orbit of the Western tradition. He locates one such example in the life and work of Sima Qian, who sought to protect a concern for

the other person against the totalizing encroachment of Qin imperial bureaucracy.

Finally, in “The Space between Us: Embodiment and Inter-subjectivity in Watsuji and Levinas,” Joel Krueger explores the relevance of the work of Levinas and Watsuji Tetsurō to contemporary research on social cognition in both philosophy and cognitive science. Through Levinas’s and Watsuji’s phenomenologically-based accounts of intersubjectivity, Krueger challenges the internalist presuppositions informing the dominant “Theory of Mind” model underlying much social cognition research. In doing so, he provides an informative overview of current empirical research that lends intriguing support for a Levinasian sense of alterity in the development of self-awareness in infants.

II. RESPONSIBILITY AND ITS LIMITS

Part 2 asks how we are to understand Levinas’s extreme portrayal of the responsibility that the self bears for the other, with reference to a variety of non-Western traditions. In “On Debts, Duties, and Dialogue: The Vedas and Levinas on the Ethical Metaphysics of Hospitality,” Arindam Chakrabarti draws comparisons between the notion of hospitality in Levinas’s work and in Vedic ethics, both of which view hospitality to the other as the partial repayment of an infinite debt. Relying on classical Vedic resources as well as contemporary analytic philosophy, Chakrabarti aims to situate Levinas’s insights in terms of a sustained analytical argument against the moral egoist. Along the way, he introduces the dualist school of Vedic thought, as opposed to the more commonly discussed nondualist schools, as a suitable framework for assessing Levinas’s project in a comparative context.

In “The Complicity of the Ethical: Causality, Karma, and Violence in Buddhism and Levinas,” Eric S. Nelson asks difficult questions regarding our complicity in unethical states of affairs in light of the overwhelming sense of responsibility found in the work of Levinas. Is it the case, as Levinas famously quotes from Dostoevsky, that all of us are responsible for each other, but that I am more responsible than everyone else? Nelson uses the rich history of Buddhist debates

over the nature and force of karma to intervene in the Levinasian trope of absolute responsibility. Nelson concludes that the amplification of the self's responsibility to others is found not so much in the number of people for whom one is responsible but in the undoing of the economics of exchange that mistakenly portrays responsibility as measurable in the first place.

In "Acting Toward the Other with/out Violence," Dan Lusthaus considers the topic of the responsibility of the self by asking the question: What are we to make of attempts, on the part of the self, to fulfill unrepayable debts? Lusthaus surveys the rich range of Buddhist tales of self-sacrifice, from early Indian sources to later Tibetan, Chinese, and Japanese contributions. He concludes that the true enormity of an act of self-sacrifice exceeds calculative reasoning, for even the ultimate sacrifice repays no debts and alleviates no guilt. In an interpretation compatible with Nelson's above, Lusthaus's reading of Levinas in light of Buddhism suggests that the self's infinite indebtedness to the other calls not for infinite repayment but for the tireless enactment of small acts of kindness that remain exterior to the calculations of reward and reciprocity.

Andy Amato continues the question of self-sacrifice in "The Hidden Hour: Thinking Levinas through *Bushidō*." Following on the theme of Levinas's account of the self's responsibility to the other, Amato argues that Levinas scholars ought to consider seriously the extreme ethics of self-sacrifice found in medieval Japanese warrior codes. Would it not be consistent with Levinas's own philosophy to advocate the total sacrifice of the self for the other, including dying for the other? Offering no simple solution to this provocative question, Amato surveys in depth the complex landscape at the border between responsibility and self-sacrifice.

III. PRACTICES, NORMS, AND INSTITUTIONS

Following these questions of the logical extremes to which Levinasian responsibility can be taken, part 3 inquires into the possibility of putting an ethics of alterity into practice and the difficulty of applying Levinas's ethics within the sphere of justice. Addressing questions of measurable and immeasurable suffering, of debts repaid

and outstanding, Alphonso Lingis shares his reflections on war crime trials in “Cambodia, 2009.” Thinking on the Buddha’s inability to turn away from the suffering of another — of any other — Lingis questions the possibility of ordering the social and the political according to an ethic of alterity. Did not Levinas himself seem capable of turning away from the alterity of the non-Western other? At the war crime tribunals in Cambodia, the court room drama reveals the absurdity of legal recompense, while speaking still to the deep human longing for a punishment or a compensation that might set aright the wounds of the past.

M. Ashraf Adeel continues the theme of legality and jurisprudence in “Levinas and an Islamic Ethics of the Other.” He explores the Qur’an’s teachings on the relation of faith to the unseen or invisible by analyzing this preoccupation with invisibility as expressing the nontotalizability of both God and fellow humans. Building on a comparison of totalization in Levinas’s work and in Islam, Adeel turns to the rich tradition of Islamic jurisprudence to intervene in discussions regarding the difficult relationship between ethics and justice in Levinas.

In “Absolute Otherness and the Taste of Powdered Green Tea,” Matthew Coate considers the practicability or institutability of alterity from a different angle — the philosophy of art. Noting Levinas’s well-known criticism of art as relativizing the other, Coate explores the Japanese tea ceremony as a formalized expression of obsessive attention to another person. As such, the tea ceremony offers not only an aesthetic sense fully open to the absoluteness of alterity but also a set of embodied ritual practices aimed at sustaining this ethically informed aesthetic attitude.

In “Vitality as Responsivity: Levinas and Lao-Zhuang Daoism,” Bradley Douglas Park also addresses the question of embodied practices through an analysis of Levinas’s thoughts on bodily comportment as constituting the subjectivity of the subject. Based on a comparison of embodiment in Levinas and Lao-Zhuang Daoism, Park suggests that early Daoists make an important distinction not made by Levinas: some *styles* of bodily comportment are more conducive to ethical responsiveness than others. Through the connections Daoism makes between styles of bodily comportment and styles of knowing

others and the surrounding world, Park argues that a skill for ethically informed, nonthematizing knowledge of the other is necessary for the embodied enactment of Levinasian responsiveness to alterity.

In the last chapter, “The Flow of Breath: Levinas Mouth-to-Mouth with Buddhism,” Mitchell Verter explores the most basic of embodied experiences, the act of breathing. He begins with the theme of respiration in both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. He then turns to early Pāli writings on mindful breathing practices for insights into the complicated relation between the self, no-self, and the rhythm of breath in Buddhism. In his closing analysis, he considers these Buddhist mindfulness rituals as tools for practicing an ethics of alterity in every moment of daily life. As such, these practices urge us to remain mindful of our ethical relation to the air itself, and to view the protection of this common resource as an unmediated act of care for the other and for all others who breathe.

