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Lévinas' Phenomenology of Evil

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**RE-THINKING COSMOLOGY ETHICALLY AND
THEOLOGICALLY IN THE LIGHT OF EMMANUEL
LÉVINAS' PHENOMENOLOGY OF EVIL**
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Abstract: This article uses the ethical metaphysics of the French-Jewish Philosopher and Talmudic Scholar, Emmanuel Lévinas, to advance a Judeo-Christian theological approach to Cosmology. Although Lévinas has been long noted by Christian theologians, his writings have not yet been considered by Science and, in particular, cosmology. It is argued that Lévinas' phenomenology of Evil provides an important foundation for creating an ethical Judeo-Christian approach to cosmology. Constituting three moments, namely, (i) Evil as Excess, (ii) Evil as an intention and (iii) Evil as hatred of Evil, his phenomenology of evil unveils two important cosmological findings: (i) the nature of the universe as God's disinterestedness and (ii) the origins of this nature as God's hatred of evil.

The mysteries of universe and evil remain enigmas that stretch our passions for justice, knowledge and faith. Everywhere, everyday there are traces of evil in our lives. It is so easy to forget that the earth of human dwelling forms a mere part of the cosmos. Moreover, how might one conceive of a Biblical God creatively present to our cries of suffering in such a minute part of an infinite cosmos? The mysteries of evil, the universe and God are intertwined, not only in philosophy and theology, but also in cosmology. Using the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas,¹ a cosmology that speaks of justice will be advanced.

The drama of evil is closely linked to the origins of the nature of the universe. The question then surfaces: how does God infinitely respond to the menace of evil in the cosmos? Further, the question also has an ecumenical twist whereby using Lévinas' philosophy to advance cosmological thinking provides a possible common ground for dialogue between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity.

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1906 to Jewish parents. In such an environment, he learned Russian and Hebrew, encountered the excesses of anti-Semitism and the deep spiritual life of the Lithuanian Jewry. In 1923, he journeyed to France to study at the University of Strassbourg where he quickly taught himself French and German. Later he studied under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiberg. Lévinas became a French citizen and is credited by Sartre for introducing phenomenology to France. Much of Lévinas' work is both influenced by and is a polemic against the work of Heidegger. It was the event of World War Two that fuelled Lévinas' metaphysics with his original phenomenology and understanding of existence as primarily ethical. After World War Two Lévinas published extensively. His two major works are "Totality and Infinity" and "Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence". In many ways, Lévinas' life and works embody a spirituality of teaching. He taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Universities of Poitiers and Paris-Nanterre and since 1973 from the Sorbonne. He died on Christmas Day, 1995. Lévinas' philosophy is a prophetic stance against all violence, injustice and evil.

1. LÉVINAS' PHENOMENOLOGY OF EVIL

In our daily lives, how often are we tempted to seek pleasures before being responsible for others? Before we realise, pleasure seeking has turned into habits until finally reaching the heights of narcissism and hedonism. Being irresponsible is a seductive attraction. Lévinas asserts, "... the erotic attraction of irresponsibility, which, in a responsibility limited by the freedom of him "who is not his brother's keeper," has a presentiment of the evil of the absolute freedom of play."² Evil is temptation, and for Lévinas it is an "erotic" temptation. To be tempted by evil is akin to being infatuated with another. Moreover, to fall into the temptation of evil is to erotically "fall in love with oneself". In our human experience, there always remains the temptation to rupture with the Good.

Lévinas describes three moments of evil³: "Evil as excess, evil as an intention; there is also a third moment in this phenomenology: evil as hatred of evil."⁴ The three moments reveal a drama that touches upon every human, cosmic and divine experience. In the drama, evil is a depersonalising reality that plagues the human spirit. However, despite the horror of evil, Lévinas proclaims, "At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible."⁵

2. RE-THINKING COSMOLOGY WITH LÉVINAS

To think about the nature of the origins of the universe is to seek to understand the nature of evil. Lévinas' phenomenology of evil - evil as excess, evil as an intention of seeking one out and evil as hatred of evil - insightfully describes the nature of evil. Moreover, the three moments of evil are piercing disturbances that disclose, behind their horror, the mysteries of the universe and of God.

(i) The First Moment of Evil. Evil as Excess: the face of anonymous existence.

Consider the first moment. In every trace of God's creation there is the tension between goodness and the excess of evil. This raises the question of whether the essence of the universe's soul is an infinite resistance to evil? Further, how does the universe face or resist evil? Does the universe suffer? Is the universe itself the soul of God - an epiphany of the Holy Spirit? Evil as excess manifests our own suffering condition. Could it be that to reflect about our cosmological origins is to imagine a God who suffers with the formless void of excess evil? Evil as excess portrays God creating a cosmos in the face of anonymous existence.

² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 137.

³ The inspiration for developing an understanding of the three moments of evil comes from his reflection on "Job and the Excess of Evil" by Philippe Nemo, whom he calls affectionately "another young thinker". See Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, with a postface by Emmanuel Lévinas and translated with a postscript by Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

⁴ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 183.

⁵ "Au moment même où tout est perdu, tout est possible". Emmanuel Lévinas, *De L'Existence à L'Existant*, Seconde édition augmentée (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 158.

In the universe, traces of evil, as excess, are present for human life. For example, if we were going to attempt to live on Venus, then the sheer pressure and heat would destroy us. Throughout the universe, evil is present by the very fact that human life is limited to Earth. From a human perspective, most of the universe exists anonymously. Besides the little knowledge we possess about it, the universe either stirs us in our dreams or haunts us in our nightmares. Consider the first two verses of Genesis:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Before the proliferation of earth's creatures, "the earth was a formless void". In "Lévinasian terms," this is the experience of the "there is" [*il y a*] representing an anonymous and depersonalised state of existence. There is simply existence without existents. Now to advance Lévinas' phenomenology of evil cosmologically and theologically, the earth as a "formless void" harboured the origins of pagan life, namely the "there is". The trace of such evil is experienced as a "a rumbling silence"⁶:

It is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that "there is" is undeniable. Not that there is this or that; but the very scene of being is open: there is. In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation – there is.⁷

Every time there is an act of injustice, there is a disturbing presence underlying one's consequent feeling of emptiness. Further, deep within the human psyche there is a disturbing fear of being reduced to nothingness, namely anxiety. Evil, as excess, haunts the human condition of "trying to be" something or someone. For the ego to search for its possibilities is "the very scene of being," which Lévinas names as "totality". To respond to such "totality" is to live "otherwise than being". Moreover, God is "otherwise than Being". Therefore, beyond our human projects lies a Biblical God waiting for us to be co-creators and co-actors in a Cosmos haunted by the disturbing menace of absolute emptiness.

Humanity's vocation is proclaimed par excellence in the Biblical drama of Creation. For example, in Gen 1:26-27, God's disinterestedness reaches a crucial turning point in the mystery of the universe - the creation of humanity:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

For Lévinas, humanity is crucial for the salvation of the world. Each of us is like God, "the soul of the universe". Here,

Biblical theology and the thought of Rabbi Haim of Volozhin⁸ have crucially influenced his ethical, almost cosmic thought. Lévinas writes:

God associates with or withdraws from the worlds, depending upon human behaviour. Man is answerable for the universe! Man is answerable for others. His faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Torah is not just a way of winning or losing his salvation: the being, elevation and light of the worlds are dependent upon it. Only indirectly, by virtue of the salvation or downfall of the worlds, does his own destiny depend on it. As if through that responsibility, which constitutes man's very identity, each one of us were similar to *Elohim*.

This is, for Haim of Volozhin, the source of the ultimate meaning of the famous "to be in the image of God" of *Genesis 1:26* or *5:1*, in which, for Judaism, the human being is defined, as distinct from the "rational animal," as the philosophical tradition would have it. Man is, like the Creator himself, at the apex of the hierarchy of the worlds, the soul of the universe.⁹

Not only is God's soul described as "the soul of the universe," but also humanity's. This anthropocentric view points to the horizon of an infinite communion between God, the universe and humanity. To be faithful to the Torah - to be responsible for the neighbour - is intimately interconnected to the whole cosmos. Every act of goodness and faith produces a consequent spiritual and life-giving reaction in the cosmos. Therefore, could a sustained act of goodness by humanity be the seeds for the creation of another world of intelligent life? Are there limits to the spirit of our imagination?

Every manifestation of goodness in the universe is an epiphany of the Holy Spirit overcoming the excess of evil. Refusing to be integrated, evil seeks to infinitely totalise everything into "absolute emptiness" as the universe expands. Resisting such unaccommodating excess of evil is the expanding goodness of God's creation. A tension ensues. In the universe there are black holes that trap all the mass of creation. Could such black holes symbolise the tension between good and evil? They are mysterious, and perhaps highlight our own human condition of experiencing the unaccommodating pull of evil in our own lives.

(ii) The Second Moment of Evil. Evil as an Intention: in search of the ethical.

The second moment of evil signifies in the human spirit the desire for ethical transcendence. Evil as an intention is like the horror of the night, awaking one half asleep to the spectre of evil. If by analogy, God was asleep before the creation of the universe and then suddenly awoken by evil, could it be that God's awakening is the universe itself? This question also intrinsically asks, what then is the origin of evil or what is the nature of evil? Evil is a player in the divine comedy. Its role is to disclose God as mysterious, suffering and as creating infinite goodness. Further, perhaps, evil is God's nightmare awaking

⁶ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The Lithuanian Rabbi, Haim of Volozhin (1759-1821), above all with his posthumously published work, "The Soul of Life" (*Nefesh Hahaim*), integrally influenced Lévinas' philosophy.

⁹ Lévinas, *In the Time of Nations*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125.

God to creation. If so, the trace of such a nightmare infinitely seeks out all creation.

In the horror of the night, one's fears are open to the consuming excess of evil. The nature of the excess is perceived as suffering the entropy of forsaking existence. When evil is aimed at one, the way out is firstly to question, "Why is there evil rather than good?"¹⁰ Such questioning leads beyond the being of anonymous existence. In discerning what is evil in the universe – natural disasters, murder and persecution – the divine comedy of the presence of evil is revealed as an awakening to the Good.¹¹

In the cosmos there are traces of evil. The human world is an example par excellence of the presence of evil. In the past century evil has sought humanity out as an annihilating spectre. Lévinas writes:

This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.¹²

Lévinas' words are indeed ominous for this new millennium. How far, in the history of humankind, have we been able to distinguish between good and evil and then understand why there is evil rather than the good? Humankind remains guilty and seduced by an evil resting in the ruins of the human spirit.

(iii) The Third Moment of Evil. Evil as Hatred of Evil: theophany of a Biblical God.

How does the universe experience evil? Further, how does the universe awake to its responsibility in the face of the horror of evil? The third moment, evil as hatred of evil, invites these questions. Every soul in hope for justice waits on the love of God, namely God's venturing into all forms of creation "beyond being and nothingness, beyond reality and illusion, into disinterestedness".¹³ In the midst of a suffering world plagued by evil, the elevation of the suffering neighbour breaks through in the form of the hatred of evil - "the horror over the evil in the other".¹⁴ It is this action of totality that awakes creation (above all human beings) to the hatred of evil and to the love of a Biblical God. In this context, the nature of the universe is God's "disinterestedness," and the origins of this nature are God's hatred of evil. This evinces that humankind is called to be like God, infinitely responsible before the horror of evil.

A Lévinasian cosmology suggests that the soul of the universe is the drama of God's infinite responsibility commanded in everyone whereby God's "primordial goodness or mercy"¹⁵ remains sovereign. The challenge is to see how this drama unfolds not only ethically in theology and philosophy, but also

in Science. This raises the questions, *How might science contribute to an ethical awakening of humanity? How might science seek ethical answers to the increasing problems of technology such as human isolation, greed, unemployment, the lack of love for one's neighbour and one's self?*

To attempt to understand cosmology outside of one's personal and social experiences of evil, outside the realms of theology and philosophy and outside the discoveries of science, is to abandon cosmology to the horror of the night and the ruins of the human spirit. Lévinas' thought brings ethics, philosophy and theology to reflect about the nascent discoveries of science. A crucial question is to imagine theologically about the presence of a Biblical God at play in the mysteries of evil, creation and the universe. Perhaps the secret is that every act of goodness plays a crucial part in creating a Universe of hope, life and infinity.

CONCLUSION: TO-GOD!

To reflect about the universe, from a Lévinasian perspective, begins with putting one's conscience into question. In essence it is a journey towards God. The turning point is disinterestedness. To be ordered to responsibility by the poor one before seeking one's own freedom is to discover the nature of the universe as God's kenotic love and its origins as God's horror of evil. Every act of love for the poor one testifies to the glory of God's universe.

Lévinas emphasises the principle of, "God-coming-to-mind as the life of God".¹⁶ In God – from a panentheistic view – there is the universe, and thus to participate in the "life of God" is to discover the mysteries of cosmology and evil. At the heart of these mysteries is kenotic responsibility. All earthly and cosmic life depends on ethics. Before asking questions about evil, the cosmos and God, one must become responsible for the other's sacred feelings.

Together, Lévinas' ethical metaphysics, Christian theology and Cosmology converge at many points. Lévinas is a prophet for the whole of humanity. His works are becoming more popular and increasingly are the subject of academic study.

¹⁰ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 182.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹² Lévinas, *Entre Nous, Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 97.

¹³ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 183.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185

¹⁵ Lévinas, *In the Time of Nations*, 90.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 138.