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'God Writes Straight with Crooked Lines': Eros, agape and the witness of glory. An encounter between the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas and feminist liberation theology

Glenn J. Morrison

University of Notre Dame Australia, gmorrison@nd.edu.au

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**“GOD WRITES STRAIGHT WITH CROOKED
LINES”¹:
EROS, AGAPE AND THE WITNESS OF GLORY.
AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE
PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LÉVINAS
AND FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY**

*Glenn Morrison
Sessional Lecturer
Australian Catholic University
Melbourne*

In our daily lives, we are confronted by the desires, needs and temptations of love. Love takes various forms ranging from the disinterested love of agape to the self-interested love of eros. In the search for beauty, truth and goodness, love is deeply spiritual and attuned to the secret plans of the heart. Yet the heart – broken, scarred and called by God – journeys along an endless crooked road.

For Emmanuel Lévinas², to journey despite oneself is the witness of glory. The crooked road – upon which the journey is made – is the road proclaiming every person to be the soul of the universe, made in the likeness and image of God. Coming to terms with this awesome, kenotic and cosmic dignity is shocking for the human

¹ A Portuguese proverb found by Lévinas in an epigraph of Paul Claudel's work, *Satin Slipper*. Lévinas utilises this proverb to underline the presence of God in the other's face and as an inner voice in our hearts commanding us to be responsible. The Word and command of God is made straight (righteous) in the crooked roads of our lives. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo* translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999) 110.

² Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), born in Kaunas, Lithuania was a Jewish philosopher and Talmudic Scholar. He moved to Strasbourg, France in 1923 and began his career in philosophy. He studied under Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), who created the phenomenological method and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who sought to discover the meaning of Being. Lévinas became a French citizen and is credited by Sartre for introducing

spirit. To believe that the centre of love is the life of ethical disinterestedness is to have been haunted by the horror of evil. The memory and experience of the *Schoah* have profoundly influenced and pierced the writings of Lévinas. Our human condition remains guilty. Only when our guilty consciences are put into question especially in times of sacrifice, trauma and heartache, can the inner secret of love awake our ethical consciousness.

This article will first outline Lévinas' understanding of disinterested love, and secondly distinguish between eros and agape. It will then seek to engage Lévinas' uncompromising proclamation of disinterested love with a feminist liberation theological view of eros. Finally, the article will attempt a re-reading of Lévinas' ethical metaphysics in the light of the encounter with feminist liberation theology.

Lévinas, the Inner Secret and Love Without Eros

The writings of Lévinas' ethical metaphysics face us with the question, "Have you ever experienced an inner secret that is known only through being in a state of loving responsibility for a neighbour, stranger or a poor one?" Knowing this secret is the saying of "No, I will never abandon you at death" or "Do not kill!" in the face of seeking justice for others. It is this very saying of loving responsibility – that is without eros – that gives witness to the Glory of the Infinite, of God. Moreover, this glory manifests itself in this saying. When pronouncing, "Do not kill!" one experiences in one's heart and spirit a rupture (a "fission"³) of the inner secret of God's commanding presence. When the other erupts before us as the divine command to be responsible (to be "otherwise than being"⁴), God manifests God's self in our "crooked" lives when we pronounce to the stranger, "Here I am!"⁵

phenomenology to France. Lévinas gained international recognition with his first major work, "Totality and Infinity". Much of his work is against Heidegger as the title of his second major work, "Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence," implies. Crucial for Lévinas' thought is the experience and memory of the *Schoah*. 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 at the Sorbonne. Lévinas' philosophy is a prophetic stance against all violence, injustice and evil.

³ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 110.

⁴ To be "otherwise than being" is to be otherwise than being for oneself; it is to take on the quality of the glory of God that is revealed par excellence through kenotic love and responsibility for the other. Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 109.

⁵ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 109.

God is manifested in our lives through the face of the poor one. This stranger whom we have never known faces us with the reality of how we truly resemble God: the ability and grace to substitute our lives of pleasure seeking with responsibility and expiation. To be made in the likeness and image of God is to pronounce in a spirit of deaconship before the stranger, "Here I am!" This proclamation is a testimony to the glory of God's infinite kenotic goodness. The interior secret and sacred witness of God's glory is made straight and righteous in our exterior lives through taking on the role of a hostage for the other.

The reality of a hostage is pierced with suffering, nausea and fear. It is a burden that depresses the soul with anonymous and depersonalising evil. Emmanuel Lévinas gives an ethical twist to the painful burden of being a hostage with his ethical metaphysics:

The ethical event of "expiation for another" is the concrete situation which the verb *to not be* designates. It is by reason of the state of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity (even the little there is).⁶

A Stranger to itself, obsessed by the others, disquiet, the ego is a hostage, a hostage in its very recurrence as an ego ceaselessly missing itself. For it is thus always closer to the others, more obliged, aggravating its own insolvency. This debt is absorbed only by being increased; such is the pride of non-essence!⁷

The self, a hostage, is already substituted for the others. "I am an other."⁸

To be a hostage is to substitute and expiate for the other in a spirit of kenosis. The other's look of suffering communicates the inner secret of responsible human living to our lives. When was the last time someone appealed to you in distress? How did their eyes grip your presence and put your conscience into question? Lévinas is fond of quoting Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*: "Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others."⁹

The haunting fact is that we are never proximate enough to the poor one. We are guilty. Consequently, our lives are never finished until death. To possess the idea of the infinite in our hearts and minds before and for the poor one is to infinitely empty ourselves before this stranger. The pure experience of kenosis is that of infinite

⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998) 124.

⁷ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 149.

⁸ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1999) 118.

⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind* translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998) 72.

kenosis; this inner secret is glory manifested by the commanding face of our neighbour.¹⁰

In a world of oppression and violence, how can God write straight with crooked lines? It is a "crooked road"¹¹ from the face of the poor one to our own lives of comfort, pleasure and needs as well as indolence and fatigue. However, when the Word of God ruptures in our heart as desire for the other, a spirit of disinterestedness directs us straight to, face to face, with the poor one. Face to face with this stranger as a hostage, one enters the true time and experience of life. Entering the world of the poor one, giving the food out of your very own mouth and listening compassionately to his or her life story is the witness of glory. The inner secret erupts publicly voicing, "Here I am!" and proclaiming the glory of God.

Lévinas' Notions of Eros and Agape in the Light of Ethics, Holiness and Justice

An important question in the encounter between agape and eros is how far each one embraces ethics, holiness and justice? Lévinas is uncompromising in distinguishing between agape and eros. Eros remains the seeking of a solipsistic freedom. He writes:

I think in any case that Eros is definitely not Agape, that Agape is neither a derivative nor the extinction of love-eros. Before Eros there was the Face; Eros itself is possible only between Faces. The problem of Eros is philosophical and concerns otherness. ... In *Totalité et Infini* [*Totality and Infinity*], there is a chapter on Eros, which is described as love that becomes enjoyment, whereas I have a grave view of Agape in terms of responsibility for the other.¹²

Lévinas further understands eros as breaking through anonymous and depersonalising evil in the search for human enjoyment. Lévinas names evil as the "there is" (*il y a*). Eros is like the "no man's land"¹³ between evil and the life of disinterestedness:

From the 'there is,' the enveloping presence of anonymity, which weighs heavenly on the human being, subjectivity emerges, despite that which annuls it. This first

¹⁰ Lévinas, *Of God Who Comes To Mind* 73.

¹¹ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 110.

¹² Emmanuel Lévinas, *Entre Nous, Thinking-of-the-Other* translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 113.

¹³ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996) 259.

exiting from self, an eruption from being, begins with the recognition of things [*choses*], but it is also a stage of the enjoyment of life, of self-sufficiency. This love of self is an egotism that founds being and constitutes the first ontological experience. This experience foreshadows the opening and true exiting of the self.¹⁴

Eros concerns "otherness" because it is the first ontological experience. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas exemplifies the ontological and erotic experience of the caress that involves the other:

The caress aims at the tender which has no longer the status of an "existent," which having taken leave of "numbers and beings" is not even a quality of an existent. The tender designates a way, the way of remaining in the *no man's land* between being and not-yet-being. ... An amorphous non-I sweeps away the I into an absolute future where it escapes itself and loses its position as a subject.¹⁵

Lévinas views the experience of eros as not evil, but very close to it. Eros is the first step away from evil and the first step to evil. The life of eros is like an evil-doer, a life of existing without being an existent. Life is still anonymous and depersonalised. Eros does not fulfil the human life. It is agape that points to the witness of glory. The disinterested love of agape ruptures the human desires for enjoyment, and pierces the soul with the inner secret of divine, kenotic love. For Lévinas, eros represents a stage for the human person to transcend in order to seek a life of ethics, holiness and justice through agape. To transcend eros is to be faced by the other's look of destitution and poverty.

Lévinas writes that, "The face signifies the Infinite".¹⁶ The face is at the centre of Lévinas' ethical philosophy; it is a sacred icon. Contemplating the face is a purely passive experience that fills one up with sacred feelings for the other – feelings that transform into acts of righteousness and goodness. Holiness is founded upon the painful gift of the other's commanding and ordaining look that swells one with a truly merciful love. Holiness is inspired in the saying, "Here I am!" and transfigured in the glory of witnessing to the revelation of God. To give witness or testimony to the revelation of God is to be absorbed by the other's look of suffering, injustice and fear of death such that it "stands out gloriously and always accuses me more".¹⁷

Holiness is the state where the stranger has drawn one into his or her world of silence and destitution, and having experienced guilt (repentance) and the desire to

¹⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 99.

¹⁵ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 259.

¹⁶ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 105.

¹⁷ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 108.

be responsible, "the glory of the Infinite"¹⁸ challenges one to compassion and to a confession of one's ego-centred lives. It is the Infinite God who gives birth to the quality of holiness through the face of the other. Such a birth is glory.

The glory of the hostage is witnessing a loving, indifferent desire for the stranger. This desire is never close enough. There is no end to goodness. There is no end to "exhausting"¹⁹ oneself of goodness. The hyperbole of goodness transfigures our human nature; it puts the idea of the Infinite in us. This idea is disinterestedness – desire for the stranger. Lévinas extols:

The *glory of a long desire!* The subject as a hostage has been neither the experience nor the proof of the Infinite, but a witness borne of the Infinite, a modality of this glory, a testimony that no disclosure has preceded.²⁰

Upon the face of the other is the glory – "the hyperbolic demand"²¹ – that turns the ego inside out and reveals the "crooked lines" of our donation of responsibility. Owing everything and giving everything for the other, the beyond being of extreme passivity deconstructs one's personal freedom and reconstructs a life of kenosis – expiation and substitution. The mark of holiness is devotion for the other. There is a feeling of extreme commitment. In these sacred feelings, "God writes straight with crooked lines". Human existence becomes responsibly sincere and kenotic. The idea of God in oneself has ruptured the entrails producing mercy, compassion and goodness.

A Feminist Response to Lévinas

From the stance of feminist hermeneutics, Lévinas' writings would be viewed suspiciously as patriarchal and act-centred, denigrating and inspiring a fear of eros and extinguishing hope for liberation, justice and divine love. These are serious criticisms that are intuited from the following analysis of Anne Bathurst Gilson's feminist liberation theology.²²

According to Gilson, feminists have responded to the denigration of eros in a threefold manner. Gilson employs the work of other feminist liberation theological ethicists; she does little to develop a constructive proposal in response to or out of these thinkers. First, feminists have redefined eros over against patriarchal definition.

¹⁸ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 109.

¹⁹ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 169.

²⁰ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 169.

²¹ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 169.

²² See Anne Bathurst Gilson, *Eros Breaking Free: Interpersonal Sexual Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995).

Eros is a source of power, which is why it inspires fear in many. The patriarchal model of power and knowledge has devalued erotic forms of each. "[B]ecause women have been associated with eros, sexuality, and evil, reclaiming eros from patriarchal control has resulted in the affirmation of the power of women" (69). Gilson eventually defined eros as "a body-centred love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality, a movement toward embodied justice" (110). Second, feminists have noted many functions of eros – chiefly, that eros liberates oneself and others. Affirmation of eros is bound intimately with affirmation of self-love and provides a basis for justice. In contrast to the mainstream exaltation of disinterested agapic love, a "compassionate erotic love, which fuels our desire for justice, arises from particular (subjective) experiences and does not hesitate to make judgments about that which is not compassionate and does not promote justice" (73). Eros also functions as the medium of our experiences; erotic power mediates divine love in our human relationships. Indeed, in stark contrast to the Christian tradition's equation of eros and self-interest, eros seeks mutuality. Third, feminists have crafted an erotic vision that encourages us to take risks. "The vision that feminist liberation theologians hold for eros is the power to connect, to transform, to liberate. Eros presents the opportunity to connect with ourselves, one another, the wider world, and God" (83).²³

The first response of redefining eros pinpoints exactly the truth of Lévinas associating women with eros. Lévinas writes on the "Phenomenology of Eros":

The principle "you shall not commit murder," the very signifyingness of the face, seems contrary to the mystery which *Eros* profanes, and in which is announced the femininity of the tender. ... The feminine is the face in which trouble surrounds and already invades clarity.²⁴

However, Lévinas also associates women with agape in his understanding of maternity:

In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.²⁵

²³ Darlene Fozard Weaver, "Sexuality, Ethics, and Christian Communities," *Religious Studies Review* 26 (April, 2000) 165-170, here 167.

²⁴ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 262.

²⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1999) 75.

Feminist Liberation theologians such as Gilson would perhaps view such dualistic reasoning about women as an oppressive attempt to define and control women. Women are virtually seduction itself and the archetypes of an impossible and unreasonable responsibility. Lévinas' metaphysical ethics could be viewed as gnostic to the extent that it devalues the bodily experience of sexuality and the human need for erotic mutuality. Furthermore, although Lévinas emphasises holiness in proclaiming before the widow, "Here I am!" he fails to address the status, oppression and suffering of women. He focuses on "the other" who is not designated as male and/or female, but simply stereotyped as a neighbour, poor one, persecuted one, orphan, widow and stranger. Lévinas paradoxically transcends the sexual difference through correlating women (the feminine) with eros and agape.

The second feminist response prioritises "compassionate erotic love" and underlines its necessity for justice and God's love in our lives. Eros is a source of liberation for "oneself and others". The emphasis on "compassionate erotic love" emphasises the transcendental value of the beautiful. People need and search for beauty. They above all need to see and experience it in each other, mutually, inclusively and exclusively. To discover the beauty of another's smile is to enter into her or his world of life and spirit. For the heart to be touched by such beauty is to experience compassionate love and the desire for justice. Lévinas rejects beauty and focuses on the good and the true. For Lévinas, beauty cannot contain meaning by itself and is more "a borrowed light"²⁶ that gives form to things. Beauty rests in the ontological and is below the world of ethical metaphysics.

With such a negative appreciation of beauty, feminist liberation theologians may question whether Lévinas – having been disturbed and traumatised by the horror of evil in his life – is capable of understanding, appreciating and experiencing what is beautiful. Emphasising to the point of impossibility the good through a life of kenotic disinterestedness is absurd. Hasn't God – in all God's wisdom and love – prepared for humanity the beauty of creation? Do not we pray, "to behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4)? Lévinas appears to reduce beauty to eros and thereby cast it to the outer reaches of "no man's land".

The third response understands eros as creating and transforming human relationships "with ourselves, one another, the wider world, and God". Eros is thus not only self-interested, but also disinterested. It encourages one to be daring in all types of relationships. Eros is above all at the centre of witnessing to God's glory along the crooked roads of our lives.

Lévinas is silent about God's presence in our sexual experiences. However, his language at times is deeply erotic. The notions of desire for the other, the nakedness

²⁶ Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity* 74.

of the face, getting into one's skin and the hostage are but a beginning in Lévinas' erotic images. He speaks of fecundity, maternity, paternity, filiality, existing, fearing and dying for the neighbour and of passivity and mercy. All these concepts and notions in some fashion correlate to compassionate erotic love. Eros cannot be without Lévinas, although Lévinas can do without eros. Lévinas' proclamation of love without eros is an ontological impossibility and a metaphysical dream. It clouds a beautiful and just human witness of God's glory.

A Lévinasian Deconstruction of Feminist Liberation Theology

In the encounter between Lévinas ethical metaphysics and feminist liberation theology, there is a divide between eros and agape. Lévinas takes a "grave" view of agape in terms of one's human responsibility that must always come before one's freedom and pleasure-erotic seeking needs. In the context of how feminists have responded to the denigration of eros in a threefold manner and the consequent intimated criticisms upon Lévinas, how would Lévinas respond to these criticisms levelled against him by feminist liberation theologians?

Similar to the nature of feminist liberation theologians, Lévinas too is a master of suspicion and deconstruction. In Lévinas' writings is a hermeneutic that will seek to underline the aporias in feminist liberation theology. Firstly, in response to Gilson's definition of eros as "a body-centred love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality, a movement toward embodied justice," Lévinas would posit such a definition as essentially absurd, tragic and comic. Gilson's definition has its foundation in self-interested love and appears to follow in the spirit of Heideggerian *Sorge* (care for oneself).

For Lévinas, Gilson's definition of eros as "a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality," feeds the senses not with justice, but with lust, narcissism, hedonism and relativism. Justice founded on erotic self-interest is but another name for "totality" and the horror of irresponsibility and murder. Lévinas writes, "Nothing is more comical than the concern that a being destined to destruction takes for itself, as absurd as him who questions the stars, whose verdict is without appeal, in view of action. Nothing is more comical, or nothing more tragic."²⁷

Gilson's emphasis on "body-centred love" places the body and its senses above the spirit. The Jewish and Christian traditions have both emphasised both the integration of the body and spirit, as exemplified in Deut 6:5, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Perhaps,

²⁷ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 138.

Lévinas would envisage Gilson's definition of eros as the proclamation, "You shall love yourself, others, the world and God with all your bodily erotic senses". The spirit is absent because self-interest is but anxiety for one's death, and "is the root of all social miseries, all human dereliction: of humiliation, solitude, persecution."²⁸

In terms of the second response against male-dominated "disinterested agapic love", Gilson asserts a "compassionate erotic love, which fuels our desire for justice, arises from particular (subjective) experiences and does not hesitate to make judgments about that which is not compassionate and does not promote justice". Lévinas would wonder how eros might ever be compassionate since it is inherently self-centred? True, eros does desire the other, yet it is for one's enjoyment and pleasure. Does compassion come forth solely out of the sexual relations or out of a carress? Eros is certainly passion. Furthermore, eros will be behind the passion for jealousy, hatred, murder and war.

According to Gilson, the third response of feminist liberation theologians is that eros has the nature of risk taking that forges transforming and liberating relations between, "ourselves, one another, the wider world, and God". In Lévinas' philosophy, such an "erotic vision" is more an embodiment of Hamlet's question, "to be or not to be?" This is not the "most urgent question".²⁹ The true ethical vision transcends one's *conatus essendi* and asks, "Why is there evil rather than good?"³⁰ Lévinas gives priority to the ethical over the ontological, whilst the feminist liberation theologians remain pondering their vision in the ontological difference between Being and beings. In the ontological, the "I" is given pre-eminence, whilst for Lévinas' ethical metaphysics the personal other [*autrui*] is the focus. Lévinas writes:

It is on the basis of the existence of the other that my own existence is posited as human. I try to imagine an anthropology – a bit different from the one taking its cue from the *conatus essendi* – setting out from the relation to the death of the other. But I believe I said that we are answerable not only for the death of the other but for his life as well. And it is in being answerable for his life that we are already with him in his death. As for ontology, I have sometimes wondered whether, in order to reveal the human that strives to break free, it should be grounded or undermined.³¹

Ultimately for Lévinas, the feminist erotic vision is one that leads to destruction and totality rather than to peace and the infinity of agapic love. The witness of glory is a disinterested vision of infinite responsibility for the other's life and death rather

²⁸ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 179.

²⁹ Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* 160.

³⁰ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 182.

³¹ Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* 167–168.

than the totalising erotic vision of self-interested risk-taking for "oneself and others". Lévinas – following in the wake of Kant – seeks to find meaning in human experience "without measuring it by ontology"³². Any attempt to reduce ethics to ontology represents a form of "anti-humanism"³³.

Re-Reading Lévinas in the Light of an Encounter with Feminist Liberation Theology

Both the feminist liberation theology critique of Lévinas and the Lévinasian critique of feminist liberation theology are highly critical of each other. The two hermeneutical methods clash bitterly and passionately with stinging criticisms. The feminist liberation theology critique opens important considerations in Lévinas' philosophy even to the point of the need to demythologise Lévinas. Specifically Lévinas fails to appreciate beauty. He radicalises personhood. People are not truly themselves until they are no longer for themselves. In many ways it appears close to Zen Buddhism where the true self is the no self and fullness is emptiness.

Lévinas fails to clearly underline the need to love ourselves as part of our human growth and development. In our nature of personhood, there is a need for "agapic self-love" and "eros" as Vacek explains:

The very nature of personhood is such that our free cooperation is necessary for our development as persons. Therefore, our cooperation with God's love in building our own personal identity is essential and irreplaceable. One way we cooperate is to love ourselves. When we love ourselves, we strive to become who we are. "Who we are," however, is very complex. We are beings who enact ourselves by relating to ourselves, to others, to our world, and to God. Our relations to ourselves should at bottom be one of love. Through an agapic self-love, we affirm and delight in our power to enact and develop our many natural and learned inclinations and capacities. Through eros, we affirm and delight in all others insofar as they bring us growth.³⁴

Vacek's theology of self-love seems to be a meeting point wherein Lévinas' philosophy and feminist liberation theology might find some common ground. It is from this starting point and taking note of the polemical encounter between Lévinas and feminist liberation theology that a re-reading of Lévinas' philosophy will be attempted. The re-reading will focus on Lévinas' phenomenology of the face.

³² Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 138.

³³ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 139.

³⁴ Edward Collins Vacek, S. J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994) 259.

a. The Uniqueness of the Face

Lévinas' phenomenology of the face is set in a context of trauma, murder and incomprehensible violence. The memory of the *Shoah* disturbingly resounds in his thought as he tries to proclaim that suffering is not useless and for nothing. The archetypal other is for him each one of the six million Jews "tortured and massacred"³⁵. Lévinas laments:

The inhabitants of the Eastern European Jewish communities constituted the majority of the six million tortured and massacred; they represented the human beings least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world, and the million children killed had the innocence of children. There is the death of martyrs, a death inflicted in the torturers' unceasing destruction of the dignity that belongs to martyrs. The final act of this destruction is being accomplished today in the posthumous denial of the very fact of martyrdom by the would-be "revisionists of history."³⁶

Every face of these "martyrs" bears the divine commandment, "Do not kill!" The diabolical events of World War Two have shown how the face of everyone exterminated was a past that has never been present. The past of the Torah and Talmud, the New Testament and the writings of the Saints were overshadowed by a nationalist paganism that glorified murder, racial hatred and war. The paganism of National Socialism created its perpetrators faceless.

In the context of this annihilating horror, what value can be given to "agapic self-love" and to "eros"? Firstly, agapic self-love instils confidence and dignity. It gives hope that even God is present in one amidst the horror of evil and murder. It is to realise that not only others', but "my own face" proclaims the commandment, "Do Not Kill!" It is to realise in the suffering of persecution that I can be the witness of glory to the immemorial time of responsibility. Moreover, it is to realise that not only do I hear the cries of the poor and behold their face. It is to accept my own cries and that I have a face commanding and ordaining responsibility.

In Lévinas' phenomenology of the face, he seeks to abandon eros. Is this possible? According to Lévinas, to have a face is to offer testimony to the glory of God and to rupture Being in general (existence without existents)³⁷. The nakedness of the face "approaches and disturbs absolutely"³⁸. How does Lévinas describe the face? The

³⁵ Lévinas, *Entre Nous* 98.

³⁶ Lévinas, *Entre Nous* 98.

³⁷ See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* translated by A. Lingis (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995) 57-64 for a detailed exposition of the "there is", existence without existents.

³⁸ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 65.

face cannot be perceived; it is language itself bearing the commandment and Word of God.

There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defence. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also; there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.³⁹

The face is the most naked, most exposed part of the body, and the eyes are the most naked part of the face. In war, it is grossly more difficult to kill another when he or she looks directly at the combatant. The face is like the universe for it contains a vision of life that is sacred, true and good. The face is the beginning of a discourse that seeks justice and authentic relationships. It is here that eros takes its stand against injustice and violence. Eros cannot be isolated from justice. If love was without eros, how can there ever be passion and desire in one's heart for another? In the crooked road of our lives, can a fully disinterested gift of time and responsibility be truly given? Are we not attracted in some self-interested way to the good we do? We can never escape our feelings. One's compassion for others is erotic because not only do we love with our mind and spirit, but also with our heart and strength. The conscience rewards whilst the other's smile of thanksgiving evokes eros.

The very fact that Lévinas' philosophy is underpinned by his personal memory of the *Shoah* exemplifies agapic self-love. Writing is part of his experience of personhood and prophetically gives testimony to his witness of God's love and glory. Without eros, Lévinas could not be self-interested in his own experience of horror. It would be to deny that he has no feelings of self-love. The fact that Lévinas' writings are original is erotic. His writings proclaim his self-love for his own philosophical, ethical and theological beliefs over others such as Heidegger and Hegel. God writes straight with crooked lines because we are unique and bear unique responsibility to grow and mature in self-love and disinterestedness.

Conclusion: the witness of glory

In the context of Lévinas' ethical-religious philosophy of Jewish humanism, witnessing to the glory of God through the painful burden of kenotic responsibility for the other is to daily sacrifice our personal needs, pleasures and comfortable life. Our ordinary everyday experiences become moments to enter into the true time and

³⁹ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 86.

existence of desire for the other. Constantly we discover ourselves facing another – in the home, on the street, at the shopping centre, at work, school, at university and now even on the Internet (although rather impersonally).⁴⁰

It is a “crooked road”⁴¹ one follows along the journey of disinterestedness, of pure desire for the other. Yet perhaps in God, this journey that leads us “straight” to the witness of glory is overflowing with both the experiences of eros and agape. As hostages for the other and pronouncing the glory, “Here I am!” one bears also a “compassionate erotic love” in the name of God. This love is founded through the experience of cooperating with God’s love in building one’s identity. In the merging of eros and agape, one is blessed as the witness of the Infinite and the soul of the universe.

The notion of the hostage brings to light eros. For Lévinas, the hostage desires the other to the extent of being under his or her skin in all his or her suffering and pain. It is a purely passive experience where the other’s nakedness calls forth justice. Being a hostage is a heart-breaking and traumatic, humiliating experience. In Christian terms it is the way of the cross. Through Lévinas’ own experience of being a hostage during World War Two and noticing all the faces of his fellow hostages, the archetypal experience of being a hostage is transposed to his own original thinking. It is in this context that feminist liberation theology can awaken Lévinas’ original metaphysics to the reality that love can never be totally without eros. In the naked eyes of his fellow hostages, Lévinas perceived their destitution and fear of death. Such sacred feelings – containing both eros and agape – held him as a hostage to be responsible.

The witness of glory is responding to the other’s destitution and fear of death and to substitute one’s own concern with their cry for justice. However, paradoxically, it is the belief in one’s self (eros) and the love of others (agape) that enables the sacrifice. Re-reading Lévinas to the point of demythologising his understanding of “love without eros” is to assert that no philosopher is infallible. Like Heidegger, Lévinas implicitly proclaims a philosophy that more truly understands the relations between God, humanity and the world. Despite Lévinas’ rejection of beauty and eros, his writings are themselves a prophetic stance against all violence and evil giving witness to the glory of God’s salvific love.

“God writes straight with crooked lines”. This enigmatic Portuguese proverb gives insight to the crooked road we rest upon, fall, retreat and journey along in hope for discovering the straight path of righteousness. A life of deaconship is for Lévinas proclaiming, “Here I am!” before the stranger. Lévinas asserts, “philosophy is the

⁴⁰ Lévinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* 94-95.

⁴¹ Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity* 110.

wisdom of love at the service of love”.⁴² In our world of increasing technology and pace, one cannot do without philosophy. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas offers for the Christian theologian and believer the wisdom of a life of “non-indifference to the other”.⁴³ It is the vision of the “crooked road” in our journey of faith and love. Yet the question remains, “What is the true, good and beautiful nature of this love – eros, agape, infinite responsibility, compassionate erotic love or agapic self-love?” Love is a much-abused word. The encounter between Lévinas’ philosophy and feminist liberation theology emphasises the need for an ongoing ethical-theology of love.

⁴² Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being* 162.

⁴³ Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being* 162.