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Levinasian and Derridean Hospitality

Ethics beyond Ontology?

In seeking to offer a theological account of the ethical practice of hospitality we have begun our journey by reflecting on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and his friend and compatriot, Jacques Derrida. The choice of Levinas and Derrida as interlocutors is not arbitrary. As well as the far-reaching influence of Levinasian and Derridean thought, not unimportant is the extent to which their respective philosophies have been shaped by their own life experiences of inhospitality, exclusion and violence. Such experiences have led them to the conclusion that not only is Western thought ill-equipped to respond to the inhospitable and unethical events of the late twentieth—and we could now posit, early twenty-first—century, but further, they assert that it is Western philosophical thought itself that is to blame for the quandary we find ourselves in.

According to Levinas and Derrida, the problem, is twofold. Firstly, they contend that Western thought with its obsession with ontological concerns is a philosophy of totalization and sameness. Secondly, within such a structure, ethics is seen as a subset or derivative of philosophy. Their response is to call for something of a Copernican revolution in Western thought. Rather than ethics being of a secondary, subsidiary nature, they seek to replace a metaphysic of transcendental ontology with a metaphysic of ethical response. In response to what they regard as philosophies of inhospitality and sameness, Levinas and Derrida offer philosophies of hospitality, in which heterogeneity is emphasized and the "Other," rather than being excluded, is "welcomed." Such philosophies, stemming from the ontic reality of inter-subjectivity, overcome, they claim, the "totalizing" and idolatrous nature of ontological philosophy and lead to ethical obedience.

To what extent can the philosophical insights of Levinas and Derrida be incorporated into a more explicitly theological account of hospitality? In what follows we will briefly reiterate Levinas' and Derrida's key emphases, noting particular areas of resonance and then turn our attention to areas where there appears to be clear disjuncture between Levinasian-Derridean and Christian theological thought. We will reflect further upon areas we have already expressed concern—in particular their notions of identity, inter-subjective relations and eschatology. As will become clear, our concerns stem from a deeper disquiet regarding the implicit ontology which underlies their respective works.

Revisiting Our "Jewish-French" Hosts

The Otherness of the Other and Ethics as a Leap of Faith

In our contemporary world the very concept and practice of hospitality is one that faces significant challenges. How does hospitality proceed in an "age of terror," where the stranger on one's threshold may be either the refugee seeking sanctuary or the suicide-bomber bringing unwanted gifts of death? Is it possible to practice a radical "unconditional" hospitality in a world where the ability to discern between the malevolent and benevolent Other is so difficult? What happens to the concept of hospitality in a "marketized" world of consumption where inter-human relations are reduced to monetary transactions between "consumers" and "clients"—where hospitality consists of the fulfillment of contractual obligations?

Both Levinas and Derrida in their respective works are sensitive to these concerns. For both writers, in the process of seeking to discern and recognize, the Other is brought within the totalizing gaze of the self. The otherness of the Other is no longer affirmed but rather captured and subsumed within the consciousness of the self and its desire to "know," "comprehend" and "categorize." It is this very violation of the transcendence of the Other, the placing of rationality and ontology before subjectivity and ethics, that our interlocutors seek to overcome. Thus, for Derrida, in genuine ethical hospitality:

> It is necessary to welcome the other and his alterity, without waiting, and thus not to pause to recognize his real predicates. It is thus necessary, beyond all perception, to receive the other while running the risk, a risk that is always troubling, strangely troubling, like the stranger (*unheimlich*), of a hospitality offered

> to the *guest* as *ghost* or *Geist* or *Gast*. There would be no hospitality without the chance of spectrality.[1]

The belief in the absolute otherness of the Other—that the Other is beyond comprehension—is applied not merely to the human Other, but to God. Derrida continues:

> But spectrality is not nothing, it exceeds, and thus deconstructs, all ontological oppositions, being and nothingness, life and death—and it also gives. It can give [*donner*], give order(s) [*ordonner*] and give pardon [*pardonner*], and it can also not do so, like God beyond essence. God without being, God uncontaminated by being—is this not the most rigorous definition of the Face of the Wholly other? But is this not then an apprehension that is as spectral as it is spiritual?[2]

It is Levinas' and Derrida's shared belief that human rationality, in attempting to comprehend, represent and categorize the Other, dehumanizes the human Other and turns God into an idol, which leads them to stress the radical exteriority of the Other. Accordingly, Levinas and Derrida posit human relationships as being of an asymmetrical and unilateral nature, and secondly, they advocate a form of "metaphysical atheism," a "religion without religion."[3]

While Levinas' work stresses the radical exteriority and separation of the Other, Derrida's thought moves between this Levinasian notion of alterity—which stresses distance and separation—and a more traditional phenomenological conception of alterity, in which alterity is, at least to some extent, dependent on and relative to the self.[4] For Derrida, "there is an irreducible otherness that divides the self-identity of the living present."[5] Thus Derrida writes: "The other is in me before me: the ego . . . implies alterity as its own condition. There is no 'I' that ethically makes room for the other, but rather an 'I' that is structured by the alterity within it, an 'I' that is itself in a state of self-deconstruction, of dislocation. . . . the other is there before me, that it comes before me [*previent*], precedes and

1. Derrida, *Adieu*, 111–12.

2. Ibid.

3. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

4. For a discussion of these changing conceptions of alterity within the work of Derrida see Reynolds, "Other of Derridean Deconstruction."

5. Derrida, "Time of a Thesis," 40.

anticipates me. . . . Which means that I am not proprietor of my 'I,' I am not a proprietor of the place open to hospitality."[6]

Levinas and Derrida are to be commended for their affirmation that the Other—regardless of their identity or history—is one to be welcomed. While not basing their assertions upon theological grounds, their emphasis on the *unconditional* welcoming of the Other, is one that accords with the Christian understanding of the universality of God's grace. The Triune God does not distinguish between "deserving" and "undeserving" Others, but rather we are all "strangers" who through the "gift" of Christ are forgiven and summoned to participate in God's ultimate action of hospitality. Similarly, the Levinasian and Derridean understanding that ethical action is not dependent on the development of a comprehensive theory of ethics, but rather precedes such theory as a *response* to the "call of the Other," is likewise, to be endorsed. Resonating with the Christian tradition, both Levinas and Derrida see this response to the prior call of the Other, as therefore being by its very nature, excessive and risky. To practice radical *unconditional* hospitality requires a leap of faith, perhaps even a touch of madness.

However, whether stressing the radical exteriority of the Other, or positing a conception of alterity in which "the other is somehow always already within the self . . . always, already encroaching upon the self"[7] there is a disturbing aspect to the asymmetrical and unilateral relational structure offered by Derrida and Levinas. Our unease revolves around two different but inter-related matters that we have already traced briefly. Firstly, the extent to which Levinasian-Derridean conceptions of alterity potentially lead to a dissolution/dissolving of both an understanding of self-identity and of otherness; and secondly, the fact that in Levinasian and Derridean thought, inter-subjective relationality tends to be understood in adversarial terms.

Responsibility to Any or All?

In *The Gift of Death* Derrida contends that an act of responsibility to the one means a sacrificing and betraying of our responsibility to all the Others, and that such a choice, of one over another, can never be justified. Reflecting on this, David Wood wonders whether such thinking contains

6. Derrida and Ferraris, *Taste for the Secret*, 84–85.
7. Reynolds, "Other of Derridean Deconstruction," 1.

an element of "hubris."[8] What worries Wood is that Derrida's thinking "seems to deny my situatedness, it seems to return us to occupying a universal space in which we could be anywhere."[9] Wood argues that Derrida's "infinite obligation" is actually "deactualizing obligation" in that it fails to give "privilege to those obligations, precisely that we have not willed, but that we find ourselves in, to those we have voluntarily acquired, to those expectations we have allowed others to have of us."[10] Derrida's move in absolutizing "absolute duty" and calling the Abrahamic sacrifice "the most common and everyday experience of responsibility," of arguing that every duty is an absolute duty and every choice is a sacrifice, rather than affirming the singularity and particularity of the Other, reduces all Others to the same level. Mary-Jane Rubenstein, commenting on the same passage, writes:

> It is astounding that a thinker so concerned with difference could efface it so completely. If every other is just as other as every other, then God is different from Fred in the same way that Fred is different from his cat in the same way that the cat's ball of yarn is different from God. And if all otherness is identical to all other otherness, then every otherness is the same, the singular is no longer singular, the finite no longer finite, and all difference is identity. Without different kinds of difference, there *is* no difference.[11]

A further concern raised by Wood is the extent to which Derrida's "infinite obligation" seems to slide from a responsibility for *any* to a responsibility to *all*. *But, who is capable of having "infinite responsibility for all"? Who is able, as host, to offer unconditional hospitality to all?* To understand "infinite responsibility" as a responsibility for *all* is, as Wood suggests, "surely a huge exaggeration of one's own importance."[12] Indeed, such an understanding, arguably, requires one to have something of a "messianic complex."[13] And, how would one actually stay sane if one were

8. Wood, "Much Obliged," 136. For Derrida's discussion on the sacrifice involved in our infinite obligation and the inability to justify our ethical choices, see Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 53–81.

9. Wood, "Much Obliged," 136.

10. Ibid.

11. Rubenstein, "Relationality," 78.

12. Wood, "Much Obliged," 137.

13. This, overemphasis, arguably, on one's own importance is evident too in Levinas' thought when he writes, "From a responsibility even more ancient than that *conatus* of substance, more ancient than the beginning and the principle, from the anarchic, the

to hold to a Derridean understanding that in each ethical choice one was sacrificing and betraying all other obligations?[14] Wood wonders whether he is alone in hearing in these words the "voice of guilt"?[15] Indeed, does the Derridean "infinite responsibility" run the risk of becoming a "bondage to an insatiable monster,"[16] which, rather than leading to ethical openness and care of the Other results in a sense of being overwhelmed, and thus to ethical paralysis?

A similar critique is offered by James Olthuis, who expresses concern that Levinas' emphasis on the priority of the other may "give birth—albeit contrary to intention—to a guilting moralism."[17] While the Levinasian emphasis on an asymmetrical relationship with its ethic of self-sacrifice has some resonance with specific Biblical themes, Olthuis wonders whether Levinas' position has the affect of bringing "into ethical disrepute all concern for self-interest."[18] If this is the case, then does not Levinas, in his concern to challenge "narcissistic self-interest" threaten the very concept of an identity and therefore the very basis for his inter-subjective ethics?[19] The problematic nature of Levinas' unilateral relationship, in which the self's only interest is that of the Other, is noted too by Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur asks: "Is not a moment of self-dispossession essential to authentic selfhood? And must one not, in order to make oneself open, available, belong to oneself in a certain sense?" He concludes: "If my identity were

ego returned to self, responsible for Others, hostage of everyone, that is, substituted for everyone by its very non-interchangeability, hostage of all the others who, precisely *others*, do not belong to the same genus as the ego because I am responsible for them without concerning myself about their responsibility for me because I am, in the last analysis and from the start, even responsible for that, the ego, I; I am man holding up the universe 'full of all things.' Responsibility or saying prior to Being and beings, not saying itself in ontological categories." Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 57.

14. Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 69.

15. Wood, "Much Obliged," 137.

16. Ibid.

17. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 143. David F. Ford seeks to overcome the potential burdensome sense of "obligation" in Levinas' "infinite responsibility" by synthesizing it with Eberhard Jüngel's notion of "joy." Ford, *Self and Salvation*.

18. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 136. Levinas writes: "It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'. So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says; 'He who loses his soul gains it.' The ethical I is a being who asks if he has a right to be, who excuses himself to the other for his own existence." Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 62–63.

19. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 136.

to lose all importance in every respect, would not the question of others also cease to matter?"[20]

Adversarial Relationality and the Charge of Ontological Violence

Not only does such an advocating of a unilateral, asymmetrical relationality, an emphasis on an ethic of self-sacrifice, seem to rob the self of any essential, inherent moral right, but similarly disturbing is the extent to which Levinasian and Derridean conceptions of alterity tend to view interpersonal relationships in adversarial terms. James K. A. Smith observes that "because hospitality *is* ethics for Derrida, what is at stake in considering hospitality *as such* is not just international law or immigration but also the nature of intersubjective relationships. It is in the consideration of hospitality, we might suggest, that we get something like Derrida's philosophical anthropology."[21] And what is the nature of this anthropology and the understanding of inter-subjective relationships offered to us by Levinas and Derrida? Derrida's understanding of the essential adversarial nature of inter-subjective relationships is encapsulated well in an interview with Richard Kearney where Derrida states: "the rapport of self-identity is itself always a rapport of violence with the other; so that the notions of property, appropriation and self-presence, so central to logocentric metaphysics, are essentially dependent on an *oppositional relation* with otherness. In this sense, identity *presupposes* alterity."[22] Derrida's attempt to overcome the potential violence of the Kantian autonomous individual seems itself therefore to be embedded in a violent relationality.[23]

Likewise, as noted earlier, Levinas' conception of inter-human relationality also appears to be construed in adversarial terms. Levinas' understanding that *being* itself is constitutively violent, a struggle for existence, is expressed concisely in an interview, where Levinas states: "This is my principal thesis. A being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin's idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics. It is a question of might. . . . the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself. . . . The law of evil is the

20. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 138–39. For a similar critique see also Ogletree, *Hospitality to the Stranger*, 53–54.

21. Smith, *Derrida: Live Theory*, 69.

22. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," 117.

23. Smith, *Derrida: Live Theory*, 41.

law of being."[24] For Levinas, the Face of the Other does not appear in this world of *being*, characterized by struggle. "Being persisting in being, that is nature" but the face is a "rupture with nature," an in-breaking of "generosity," "charity," "grace," "love" into being. Levinas contends that "in the conatus essendi, which is the effort to exist, existence is the supreme law. However, with the appearance of the Face on the inter-personal level, the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' emerges as a limitation of the *conatus essendi*."[25]

While at one level his ethical account of subjectivity clearly asserts for the pre-priority of the Good—contra the Hobbesian characterization of nature as war—Levinas' concept of the Face irrupting into the struggle of being seems to presuppose a primordial, original state of hostility. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas suggests that the temptation to kill the Other—"The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill"—is one which is resisted by the "epiphany of the face."[26] Levinas writes:

> This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, in his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word; "you shall not commit murder." . . . The epiphany of the face brings forth the possibility of gauging the infinity of the temptation to murder, not only as a temptation to total destruction, but also as the purely ethical impossibility of this temptation and attempt.[27]

Thus, Levinas' contention that "war presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter" appears to be belied.[28] His logic, in stating that the primordial *expression*, the first word is "you shall not commit murder," suggests rather, the primacy of violence. Judith Butler makes the same point when she observes that while "Levinas cannot accommodate the notion of a primary set of needs or drives he gestures towards an elementary

24. Wright et al., "Paradox of Morality," 172, 175. Levinas' assumption here—that "life" consists of an inherent conflictual struggle for survival—is itself one that is now being overtaken. There is increasing recognition that while predation and death (conflictual relationality) play a role in the functioning of healthy ecosystems, complimentary, cooperative, collaborative relations are just as significant to the existence and continuation of the bio-diversity of life.

25. Ibid., 175–76.

26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197–98.

27. Ibid., 198. See also Levinas' essay "Ethics and Spirit," in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 8.

28. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198.

notion of aggression or murderous impulse when he grants that killing the Other is the temptation against which ethics must work."[29]

Others, attentive to the way in which alterity within Levinasian-Derridean thought is conceived of in "oppositional" or non-relational terms, argue that such an understanding of inter-human relations is representative of an undergirding "ontology of violence."[30] The belief that human inter-subjective relationships contain violence, that inherent within hospitality is a little hostility—vividly expressed in Derrida's neologism, "Hostipitality"—is, such writers aver, symptomatic of a less than peaceful ontology. James K. A. Smith believes that despite all its richness, Levinas' assertion that "infinity is 'as primordial as totality,' (*TI*, 23) . . . seems to still entail that totality is primordial. *Hence, there is a way in which relationality is always already inscribed with war*."[31]

So too, Olthuis suggests that Levinas' philosophy "seems to valorize the often adversarial quality of interpersonal relations as the inexorable human condition (which we then need to transcend to be ethical), rather than to envisage such opposition itself as the breakdown of relations of mutuality in which my self-interest and the self-interest of the other may interface with each other to the harmonious enjoyment and enrichment of both parties."[32]

But is the self totally incapable of being in relation with the Other without violating them? Is ontological self-interest and egoism the sum total of the human self? Does the relationship with the Other, to protect the Other from totalizing violence, have to be one of asymmetry, distance, separation? And, if the relationship between the self and the Other does contain an element of tension, then what of the future? Do Levinas or Derrida envisage an end to inter-subjective conflict? That is, to what extent do their respective philosophies offer a hope of redemption, a move beyond tension and oppositional conflict, to a bright messianic future? Such questions inevitably lead us to a brief but necessary foray into a consideration of Levinas' and Derrida's understandings of eschatology and teleology.

29. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 98.

30. Smith argues that the fact Levinasian thought "operates on the basis of an oppositional notion of difference (or 'differential ontology') . . . means that an 'ontology of violence' continues to undergird his project, even if it is offered in the name of peace." Smith, "Call as Gift," 219. Others who accuse Levinas and Derrida of offering philosophies of "ontological violence" include Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 278–325, and Pickstock, *After Writing*.

31. Smith, "Call as Gift," 223. Emphasis added.

32. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 136.

Eschatology and Teleology

Eschatological and teleological ideas are constantly at play, either implicitly or explicitly, within Levinas' and Derrida's thinking, leading commentators such as Richard Kearney to propose that their philosophies are a "sort of Messianic eschatology."[33] However, as one would expect, the Levinasian and Derridean understanding of such ideas is complex. Derrida states that while interrogating "the idea of an *eschaton* or *telos* in the absolute formulations of classical philosophy . . . that does not mean I dismiss all forms of Messianic or prophetic eschatology. I think that all genuine questioning is summoned by a certain type of eschatology, though it is impossible to define this eschatology in philosophical terms."[34] Similarly, Levinas states,

> I must express my reservations about the term eschatology. The term *eschaton* implies that there might exist a finality, an end (*fin*) to the historical relation of difference between man and the absolutely Other, a reduction of the gap which safeguards the alterity of the transcendent, to a totality of sameness. To realize the *eschaton* would therefore mean that we could seize or appropriate God as a *telos* and degrade the infinite relation with the other to a finite fusion. This is what Hegelian dialectics amounts to, a radical denial of the rupture between the ontological and the ethical.[35]

For Levinas, "the danger of eschatology is the temptation to consider the man-God relation as a state, as a fixed and permanent state of affairs." In contrast to his theme of ethical responsibility, described "as *insomnia* or *wakefulness* precisely because it is a perpetual duty of vigilance and effort which can never slumber," Levinas argues that "ontology as a state of affairs can afford sleep."[36]

Once again, both Levinas and Derrida express the concern that eschatology and teleology, as traditionally understood, stem from an ontology of totality, one which closes down and fixes the future, thereby offering the foundation for ethical irresponsibility and inaction.[37] *But do*

33. Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 66.

34. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," 119.

35. Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 66.

36. Ibid.

37. In his essay "Ends of Man," Derrida asserts that "the Greek thinking of *telos* . . . such a discourse, in Hegel as in the entirety of metaphysics, indissociably coordinates teleology, with an eschatology, a theology, and an ontology. *The thinking of the end of man, therefore, is always already inscribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man*." Derrida, "Ends of Man," 121.

eschatology and teleology have to be construed in such ways? Are eschatology and teleology of necessity totalizing and therefore exclusive of the Other, the Infinite? To what extent does a theological account of eschatology and teleology overcome this Levinasian-Derridean critique? We will return to these questions later, but for now, having noted the Levinasian-Derridean concerns, we return to our major consideration—that of Levinas' and Derrida's understanding of inter-subjective relationships and the ontology that underpins such thinking. Our anxiety over particular features of their philosophy—the seeming loss of self-identity, the non-reciprocal and adversarial understanding of inter-subjective relationships, and the lack of hope for redemption from such hostility—ultimately appear symptomatic of what some term, an "ontology of violence." To understand this nuanced critique it is necessary to pause momentarily and clearly define what is understood by the terms "metaphysics" and "ontology" in their respective philosophies.

Ontology and Metaphysics

For Levinas, ontology is the totalizing discourse that legitimates and reifies the sphere of the Same. Whether it be Heidegger's discourse of Being, or Hegel's philosophy of Spirit, Levinas rails against an ontology in which the Being of our subjective *cogito* or the Being of the immanent and finite cosmos is given an all-encompassing universality. Robyn Horner observes: "Instead of following the ontological path, Levinas suggests that we pursue a genuine metaphysics, one that has an eye, or perhaps an ear for transcendence and the ethical. . . . Levinas characterizes metaphysics as a radical aiming at exteriority (transascendence), an exteriority that is beyond our theoretical comprehension, beyond the realm of being and of knowledge, beyond what can be reduced to the Same."[38]

Adhering to his contention that ontological thought totalizes and causes violence, Levinas offers a metaphysic that gives preeminence to the lived experience, to the ethical encounter with the Other. While initially Levinas embraced the thinking of his earlier teacher Heidegger in seeking a philosophy that gave priority to questions of embodied lived experience and existence, he soon turned away from and became critical of Heideggerian thought due to the way in which Heidegger's thought became an "all encompassing strategy for grasping life in understanding."[39] As John

38. Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*, 60.

39. Ibid., 55.

Llewelyn notes: "Levinas's ontology calls into question the fundamentality of the 'ontological difference,' the distinction between being and beings, between the ontological and the ontic upon which [Heidegger's] *Being and Time* takes its stand. . . . Levinas's ontology stands for the ontological significance of concrete empirical, hence ontic experience."[40] While for Heidegger the horizon by which all things are judged is *being*, for Levinas the horizon is the *Other*.

Important to note here is that Levinas uses the term "metaphysics" in a positive sense. For Levinas, "metaphysics" is the relationship with the Infinite Other that overcomes the totalizing violence of ontology. In place of an ontology of *sameness*—a totality—Levinas offers a metaphysic of *otherness* and *difference*—an alternative ontology of infinity. This Levinasian project of developing a philosophy of ethical metaphysics is fundamentally different from Derrida's project of deconstructing the "metaphysics of presence." While in Levinas' writing the term "metaphysic" is used positively—in opposition to ontology—in Derrida's writing, the term "metaphysics" has negative connotations, with Derrida's "metaphysics of presence" being akin to Levinas' ontology of *sameness*.

Derrida's and Levinas' critique of the totalizing nature of Western ontological philosophy leads them to attempt to overcome the capacity for violence that both philosophers see in transcendental, universal accounts reliant on ontological claims. "Metaphysics begins," Derrida argues, "when theory criticizes itself as ontology, as the dogmatism and spontaneity of the same, and when metaphysics, in departing from itself, lets itself be put into question by the other in the movement of ethics. Although in fact it is secondary, metaphysics as the critique of ontology is rightfully and philosophically primary."[41] In this sense, therefore, both Levinas' and Derrida's philosophy can be seen as continuing in the stream of the larger philosophical attempts to overcome metaphysics.

But is such a philosophy—a post-metaphysical philosophy—really possible, or for that matter ultimately necessary? And, what are the implications of such a quest for theology?

David Wood points to the fact that Derrida's philosophy, while seeking "not to retread too many of the paths of metaphysics . . ." is ultimately itself inescapably metaphysical by nature, contending that "Derrida's deconstructive strategy . . . [is] wedded to transcendental modes of thought. . . ."[42]

40. Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 108.

41. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 96.

42. Wood, *Deconstruction of Time*, 297, 311. While observant of the distinction

Indeed, even while seeking to overcome metaphysics of presence, Derrida himself acknowledges the impossibility of escaping from metaphysics. In his essay, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," reflecting on Nietzsche's, Freud's and Heidegger's critique of metaphysical concepts such as truth, consciousness and being as presence, Derrida concludes that all such "destructive discourses are trapped in a kind of circle." He continues:

> This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.[43]

Derrida concedes that "we cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity."[44] Elsewhere, he admits that "*différance* remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names, metaphysical."[45] In an interview, he candidly states: "the idea that we might be able to get outside of metaphysics has always struck me as naïve."[46]

This impossibility of escaping from the discourse of metaphysics, the impossibility of escaping ontological concepts, is likewise one acknowledged by Levinas. For Levinas, the emergence of the Third person necessitates a shift from a "pure" ethical relationship into the realm of the "political" and therefore of ontology. Levinas states:

> The temporality of the interhuman opens up the meaning of otherness and the otherness of meaning. But because there are more than two people in the world, we invariably pass from the ethical perspective of alterity to the ontological perspective of

between Derridean and Kantian understandings of the transcendental, Horner also notes the way in which Derrida's thought slips into a transcendental mode in his reflections on the gift. Horner asks why in referring to the gift as the "first mover of the circle" (*Given Time*, 30) Derrida uses language "that has resonated so forcefully in the context of 'onto-theology?'" Horner, *Rethinking God*, 189.

43. Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," 280–81.

44. Ibid., 281.

45. Derrida, "Différance," 26.

46. Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," 111.

> totality. There are always at least three persons. This means that we are obliged to ask who is the other, to try to objectively define the undefinable, to compare the incomparable in an effort to juridically hold different positions together. So that the first type of simultaneity is a simultaneity of equality, the attempt to reconcile and balance the conflicting claims of each person. If there were only two people in the world there would be no need for law courts because I would always be responsible for, and before, the other. As soon as there are three, the ethical relationship with the other becomes political and enters into the totalising discourse of ontology. *We can never completely escape from the language of ontology and politics. Even when we deconstruct ontology we are obliged to use its language.*[47]

Important to note therefore, is that while highly critical of the totalizing nature of ontological philosophies, and seeking to continue the Heideggerian task of overcoming metaphysics, both Levinas' and Derrida's philosophies of hospitality, like all philosophical discourses, are themselves, trapped in the "circle" of metaphysics. Even their attempts to articulate ethical-hospitable philosophies, in which primacy is given to the ontic ethical encounter with the Other and inter-human subjectivity, while subordinating ontology are still dependent on an ontology. Wood concludes:

> Derrida has transformed the way we think about, and read (or perhaps write), philosophy, he has transformed our understanding of the relationship between the inside and the outside of philosophy, but his strategic dependence on such metaphysical values as "authorial intention" and on formally transcendental arguments essentially limit his achievement. . . . his lesson, or the lesson to be drawn from him, is *not merely* that as he says, there is no sense in doing without metaphysical concepts in trying to overcome metaphysics, but there is no prospect whatever of *eliminating* metaphysical concepts and strategies. Rather the project of overcoming metaphysics (Merlau-Ponty said of the phenomenological reduction) must be repeated indefinitely.[48]

47. Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," 57. Emphasis added. This understanding that it is the emergence of the Third that leads us into the necessity of the "political" is likewise, expressed in Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 68.

48. Wood, *Deconstruction of Time*, 317. In this sense, the philosophical work of Levinas and Derrida can be interpreted in two ways. While some read Levinas' and Derrida's attempt to escape metaphysics as an enterprise inevitably doomed to failure—i.e., Milbank—others take a more sympathetic view and argue that the work of Levinas, Derrida and Marion functions at the limits of phenomenology. See particularly Horner, *Rethinking God*, 153–83.

Our analysis and evaluation of the work of Levinas and Derrida ultimately lead to a number of important questions and observations: *To what extent is Levinas' and Derrida's critique of the totalizing, logocentric, nature of Western philosophy also true of the theological enterprise? That is, is theology—the attempt to give an account of the character and actions of God—likewise a discourse of totality and sameness, one that therefore excludes the Other? To what extent is all theology of necessity a form of onto-theology? Do sameness and otherness have to be seen as mutually exclusive or in a constant state of oppositional conflict? Is it possible to conceive of an ontology in which sameness/unity and otherness/difference coexist peacefully?*

As Olthuis asks: "Is an ethical asymmetry (with priority of the other person) the only alternative to either manipulative relationships (with the other as object) or the balanced exchange of economic transactions?"[49] Or, can we envisage an ethical relationality of genuine mutuality and reciprocity? Might it be that part of the Levinasian-Derridean critique of ontology stems from an assumption that knowledge of what is Other, entails "power-over"[50] this Other; that *knowledge of* the Other is inevitably violent and violating; that is, that in Levinasian and Derridean thought it is supposed that epistemology subverts relationality? *But is human knowledge and theorizing of necessity violent? Is the very act of conscious representation, of recognizing and discerning the Other inherently an act of totalization and violation?* What if knowledge was not understood as "power-over," but rather "power-with," if epistemology, rather than being primary, was seen as inextricably dependent on a prior ontological relationality? What if one began with an ontology that privileged relationality over epistemology, and mutuality and exchange over distance and asymmetry? Rubenstein suggests that: "Only if ontology is understood as always-already relational can the self give without subsuming the other or destroying it. Only within a non-oppositional scheme of selfhood and otherness (and a non-identical scheme of otherness and Otherness) does the self find itself in the interplay of giving, given selves, constituted and maintained through their participation in divine intersubjectivity, a constant play of unity and difference."[51]

Such an ontology, as Ricoeur suggests, is "one that does justice in turn to the primacy of self-esteem and also to the primacy of the convocation

49. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 153.

50. Ibid., 146.

51. Rubenstein, "Relationality," 78.

to justice coming from the other."[52] In such an ontology the Same and the Other, rather than being in a state of oppositional conflict interpenetrate one another, and "communication," "reciprocity" and "exchange" are construed as the essential and constitutive elements of the relationship between the self and the Other.[53] Such an ontology, one of "*benevolent spontaneity*" in which "receiving is on an equal footing with the summons to responsibility,"[54] is apparent in the Christian accounts of the doctrines of Creation and the Trinity. It is the distinct ontology that stems from these doctrines which will be the theme of our next chapter.

Summary

We commenced this work contending that in a world where the Other is increasingly seen as a threat, and where professionalization and commercialization are rife, there is the urgent need for a reinvigoration of an ethic of hospitality. The work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida seeks to respond to such a world by offering an alternative account of human ethical behavior.

However, while providing an initial stepping stone, a closer analysis of the philosophies of Levinas and Derrida, has raised a number of concerns. Put succinctly, in seeking to overcome the imperialism of the self, Levinas and Derrida offer an account of human relations in which the elevation of the Other appears accompanied by "a necessary disinterest in self-concern."[55] That is, the Levinasian-Derridean account of hospitality stresses ethical asymmetry, and relationships of uni-directionality. Underlying such an account, appears to be the belief that not only are inter-subjective relationships inevitably of an adversarial and conflictual nature, but also that such conflict is embedded in the very fabric of the created world?

In contrast to such thinking, in section two of this work we will offer a theological account in which the human capacity for the practice of hospitality stems from an ontology of peace and communion. From the doctrines of the Creation and the Trinity emerges an ontology of *communion* in which human existence is understood not as primordial struggle, but rather as gift; where relationality is understood not in adversarial or

52. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 331.
53. Ibid., 339.
54. Ibid., 190.
55. Olthuis, "Face-to-Face," 146.

oppositional terms but as characterized by mutuality and reciprocal gift-exchange. The supreme performative action of divine hospitality—the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his life and death—is to be understood not as an act of self-sacrificing violence, but rather as a gift offered back to the Father, which therefore overcomes human hostility. Those who, taking the leap of faith have their lives re-narrated according to this meta-narrative, participate in God's eschatological hospitality and thus offer nourishing hope to the world. It is to an exposition of this narrative that that we now turn our attention.