

# Westphal's Kierkegaardian Appreciation of Levinas: Some Doubts

by John J. Davenport  
Department of Philosophy  
Fordham University  
[Davenport@fordham.edu](mailto:Davenport@fordham.edu)

## I. Introduction: Westphal's Fruitful Approach, and Standing Issues Put to One Side

Let me begin by saying that, like so many others, I find Merold Westphal's way of putting Levinas and Kierkegaard in dialogue fruitful in locating salient similarities and helpful in suggesting what each might learn from the other. Still, while I agree with Merold on many of these points, and with most of his interpretations of Kierkegaard, I have many lingering doubts about the Levinasian ideas that Merold develops in these essays, and their compatibility with Kierkegaard. For example, is the Levinasian critique of Enlightenment ideals (capital E) often attacking a straw man; does the critique of Reason (capital R) go too far? Isn't "revelation" for Kierkegaard a communication whose content goes beyond possibilities that natural reason can understand, but without regarding the work of natural reason as misappropriation and domination through and through? Does not this kind of "revelation," aside from coming from God rather than human others, demand a response from an agent who has already attained enough volitional earnestness or caring engagement with the world to hear it *as* revelation at all? Doesn't Kierkegaard's notion of "religiousness A" also make it easier than Levinas does to recognize the value in conceptions of the divine outside the Judeo-Christian traditions, or even outside post-axial monotheism? And perhaps most importantly for today, does Levinas's account of agapic responsibility revealed in the alterity or "Face" of the other really help defend or make sense of the sort of neighbor-love ethic that Kierkegaard outlined, or does it instead erase any hope of giving viable content to agapic duties by insisting on utter inscrutability.

As stated, these doubts are rather vague. I will try to make them more precise by analyzing

particular themes in Merold's discussions of Levinas. In the process, I will allude briefly to some other figures, such as Martin Buber,<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, whose contributions maybe deserve more of a hearing in this dialogue, since they help explain some of my doubts. In selecting from among Merold's wide range of fascinating topics a few points of doubt or potential disagreement on which to focus, I've been guided by a couple considerations. First, this should be focused on Merold's rich insights and ideas, rather than being mainly a summary of things I've said about Kierkegaard or Levinas elsewhere. Secondly, I hope not to subject Merold to too many objections or arguments that he has seen before, but instead to say something new. These considerations lead me to mention but then set aside three themes that might be of interest to this audience, but which are already familiar to Merold. These are as follows (see handout):

- First, in three recent essays, I have argued that for Kierkegaard, faith is constituted by eschatological hope (widely understood) for the fulfillment of perfectionist ethical ideals by divine power – and especially fulfillment within some temporal order. While this may be largely a difference in emphasis between our readings (e.g. see p.39 on Climacus on hope), it has large potential implications. For example, my eschatological reading denies that access to any moral obligation worthy of the name depends solely on faith for Kierkegaard; on the contrary, existential faith concerns the possible fulfillment of obligations and agapic ideals.<sup>2</sup>
- Second, in an older and more recent essay, I've argued that Levinas's way of grounding agapic obligations and ideals in radically asymmetrical "alterity" makes it difficult to overcome the main theoretical obstacles to developing a viable agapic ethics into a set of norms that can give real guidance in concrete contexts of human action. For this purpose and others, I prefer Buber's portrayal of I-Thou relations to Levinas's descriptions of the Face. I'll allude to these doubts, but restating them in detail here would also require me to address various significant rejoinders from some of Merold's past graduate students (e.g. Stephen Minister).

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<sup>1</sup>My use of Buber in particular will help support Merold's frequent contention that differences between Levinas and Kierkegaard are not generally reducible to Jewish-Christian differences (p.41). As Peperzak has argued, Levinas's differences from Buber themselves partly reflect a divide between pietist Hassidism and more Talmudic-centered forms of Judaism.

<sup>2</sup>I think Merold implies the opposite at several points in discussions of Kierkegaard in these essays, e.g. p.104. Yet Levinas would seem to show that recognition of agapic obligations (one type of perfectionist ethics) is possible without faith in the "absurd" that Silentio discusses, or the highest good and paradox that Climacus discusses.

- Third, Merold knows my convictions that plausible conceptions of personal autonomy which can make sense of it both as an ideal for a meaningful life of responsible character, and as a basis for moral rights, are conceptions of *founded* autonomy, depending not only on unchosen influences that help us acquire the necessary capacities, but also on values or goods with alterity to our will – including the inviolable value of persons as such – and perhaps ultimately on hope for eschatological meaning. While I think both Kierkegaard and Levinas not only allow but even require founded autonomous agency in their pictures of personal existence, I won't argue for this directly (by exegesis of Kierkegaard and Levinas); I'll only address a few of Merold's remarks about autonomy in this collection.

It is also worth emphasizing at the outset that Merold has convinced me of several points of contact between Kierkegaard and Levinas -- especially in the challenges they pose both to secular postmodernists and to secular 'critical modernists' who hope to get along without transcendence. Moreover, like Merold (and I believe Jamie), I have been deeply impressed with Levinas's defense of agapic love against the genealogical and psychological critiques of Nietzsche and Sartre, who I think he often has in mind. So my doubts about Levinas (and thus his potential contributions to Kierkegaardian conceptions of personhood, ethics, and religion) are meant in a friendly spirit – as doubts about the best way to frame and defend a 'personalist' alternative to Rationalism. With that large caveat, I proceed to challenge some of the ideas that Merold seems to want to keep from Levinas, though obviously he also argues for amending or supplementing several others. I will discuss six doubts, three of which are grouped together as questions about agapic ethics.

## **II. Two Initial Doubts about Intentionality and Negative Illeity vs Mythic Divinity**

(1) At several points in his collection, Merold seems to appreciate Levinas's critique of phenomenology and his argument for an alterity that transcends traditional intentionality as helping to show the limits of human reason and consciousness. In his first chapter, for example, Merold refers to Levinas's frequent implication that philosophy has been a series of attempts to "make everything fit within our conceptual schemes" and reduce every other to something that the

subject appropriates, "something to be used, possessed, and enjoyed" (13). But the suggestion that in traditional phenomenology, conscious awareness of other beings in any mode of cognition is a way "constituting" them according to my preconceptions, or appropriating and controlling them<sup>3</sup> -- that "Knowledge is the will to power of a thoroughly egoistic *conatus essendi*," as Merold summarizes this thesis in his seventh essay (p.118; compare p.121) -- has always seemed to me an extreme hyperbole that accuses all past philosophers of having conceived our minds' relation to reality as a mode of (what I call, following Alan Soble) "erosiac" appetite. Outside the Hegelian tradition, it is just false that cognition is anything like consumption (p.119, p.143). Merold is aware of similar objections by Jim Marsh and others, but he seems not to take the objection to heart. For he has Levinas respond first that objectifying knowledge is okay in its secondary place (p.122), and second that "I-It covers the whole domain of intentional objects" (p.123) -- which in both cases is just to assert that the objection is mistaken and to insist on keeping the hyperbole.

So let us ask where this hyperbole comes from. It results, I suggest, from Sartre's underappreciated influence on Levinas (together with Levinas's overly idealist reading of Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger). For it is Sartre who sets up the for-themselves as an essentially appropriative form of intentionality that cannot, for this reason, see other for-itselfs as anything but threats to its own autonomy who have to be mastered or controlled in some way.<sup>4</sup> Of course Sartre was following Hegel (pp.127-28), but Levinas appears to have ceded all ordinary modes of thought to this paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Thus he has to construe his alternative as outside intentionality or being altogether, while Buber can say instead that not all modes of consciousness are instrumental or

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<sup>3</sup>See Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, p.76.

<sup>4</sup>Of course Sartre's whole approach to phenomenology is in this respect indebted to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, and to Spinoza's *conatus ascendendi*, but that only reinforces the special character of the kind of phenomenology that rules out authentic *mitsein* a priori from the get-go. By generalizing this position to all conceptions of mind from Plato and Aristotle on, Levinas makes straw men of most of his opponents.

<sup>5</sup>Sometimes Merold appears to agree with Levinas that Sartre is correct to this extent (eg. p.79 and p.82).

egoistic, aiming to master or control. So it is easier for Buber to avoid Sartre's conclusion that two subjects cannot encounter each other directly as subjects without objectifying one another. But Levinas is stuck insisting, very unfairly, that Buber's account of I-Thou relations is just another "variation on the Hegelian theme of reciprocal recognition as the essence of spirit" (p.77) -- as if Buber had not clearly resisted any assimilation of two persons into a single *geist*, as if the agapic offering and response of an interhuman I-Thou relation is simply Rawlsian willingness to cooperate with cooperators.<sup>6</sup>

It is also important to recognize, as Merold does, that Husserl and Heidegger both argued that the most basic way that human consciousness is aware of reality through being's "disclosure" or direct "presence" is not *representation*, propositional assertion, or application of a concept to an object. It is more involuntary and immediate; presentation is prior to representation, and it is crucial not to conflate them (yet see pp.15, 18, 20, 34, 60-61, 123.....). As Merold admits, for Husserl, in truth-seeking thought, "the subject must adjust to the object *as it gives itself*" (p.141, my italics). This is what analytic philosophers call the mind-to-world direction of fit characteristic of belief. Yet in the final essay, Merold argues that in *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl fails to describe other persons as more than "alter egos" to my consciousness or to recognize in them an irreducible practical significance (pp.143-45) -- and I agree with this critique. But Husserl's failure on this score does not warrant the generalization that in all pre-Levinasian phenomenology, the origin of meaning in all other beings is "'determined by the intrinsic meaning of conscious life'..." (p.142) or that "the object has no meaning but that given to it by the subject" which invests everything with the significance of "'its own project'..." (p.143). This is merely Sartre/Hegel ignoring the difference between mind-to-world and world-to-mind directions of fit.

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<sup>6</sup>The problem is that there are several different kind of "reciprocity" (the Hobbesian shared self-interest sense; the Rawls/Scanlon variety that is similar to Hegel's; Buber's which is shared by Gene Outka's idea that agapic regard can at least hope for response without being premised on or motivated by the prospect of any gain, and so on). The term is too vague to be useful, except as a blunt object for rhetorical battering of one's opponents.

On the contrary, in Husserl (sometimes) and more clearly in Heidegger, it is the other way around. Rather than our mind's innate categories or ideas forcing beings to appear in a certain way when representing them in thought or language, our very capacity to think in concepts, or to experience a unity of apperception, is founded on *being's partial accessibility* to mind, its inherent significance – which still does not mean that all of reality or every aspect of it is designed to be thinkable by us (pace p.116). It is the *inherent* meaningfulness of being that directs minds to arise in response to it -- very much as ethical otherness directs freedom to arise in response to it on Levinas's account. Our "horizons" themselves result from structures of reality that transcend them. Thus the silence that Heidegger finds prior to language as signs (p.63; compare p.65) is anything but a possessive representation; it is a freeing of things and persons to guide us towards them on their terms -- even though not only in terms of an ethical imperative.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that a wider notion of alterity is in phenomenology from its start.<sup>8</sup> For me to be looked at, addressed, spoken to, or guided towards something that I did not even formally anticipate is still a presentation (however mysterious) of something or someone to a mind that is distinct from that which discloses itself. Even if it creates me in the process of showing itself, it has to create me as distinct from it, or standing some distance from it; so I am not a mere spinozistic mode of the Other (I will return to this point).

(2) But Levinas's inversion of intentionality is crucial to Merold for at least two reasons. First, it suggests a close relation between Levinas's critique of rationalism and Kierkegaard's critique of the kind of Reason that assumes its own completeness or total sufficiency (p.31).

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<sup>7</sup>Though neither do Heidegger's (earlier and later) descriptions of disclosure or letting-be-shown seem to rule out that it sometimes could present an ethical call of some kind (to persons, to environmental values, to God?). The Ereignis that brings us to beings disclosed as phenomena could sometimes be like the Infinite "Du" that Buber thinks always brings persons together in I-You encounters.

<sup>8</sup>Levinas seems to concede this point in his praise for Husserl's non-theoretical axiological intentionality in *Ethics and Infinity*, p.32. Even Kant's Transcendental Deduction can be read in the quasi-realist way I have suggested, which brings it closer to Heidegger's notion that Dasein exists because Being is partially self-disclosive.

Second, it is meant to distinguish Levinas's account of moral obligation from other more immanent accounts. I consider the first comparison here as a way into some doubts about the value of Levinas's work for appreciating religious transcendence in general.

Now Merold makes an excellent case that totalizing Reason running aground on the Paradox in the *Fragments* is similar to Levinas's account of ethical "revelation" as engima that is not presented. But since the formal outline of the Paradox in the *Fragments* is largely negative (and Climacus's analysis here abstracts from its eschatological content), this comparison serves to point out the doubly negative character of the "illeity" that Levinas describes as the trace of God (p.37). Not only is the divine in danger of becoming indistinguishable from the ethical status of human persons in their plurality (or vice versa<sup>9</sup>), as Merold acknowledges (p.50); in addition, it seems hard to distinguish Levinas's God from (say) recursive versions of the liar paradox that still threaten the completeness of bivalent predicate logic, or the paradoxes in set theory that attract Badiou's attention, or the paradoxes of absolute nonexistence that so worried Parmenides, Plato, and the schoolmen. Any opacity that disturbs human reason's claim to complete comprehension of reality will meet Levinas's conditions for illeity, it seems. How can such a wide negation of Reason be connected to the ethical alterity of human persons, except by sheer stipulation?

By contrast, even the sacred mythologies of (what I call) archaic cultures with timocratic honor codes do better at communicating the transcendence of cosmogonic and (to some extent) eschatological aspects of the divine. While I agree with Merold's critiques of Levinas for assimilating traditional philosophical theology to "theosophy and myth" and "private piety" to "sorcery" (p.52), for offering us sin without any hope of salvation (p.41), and for stripping the "tremendum" from Otto's tripartite formula for the divine (p.72), these important criticisms do not

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<sup>9</sup>As I have argued, not only does Levinas's approach reduce the divine to the ethical; it threatens to divinize the otherness that marks human beings as persons, or at least the plurality of persons in otherness, including the Third. This would be a non-Hegelian way of collapsing the human/divine difference that Kierkegaard so emphasizes, a way to bring religion not within the bounds of pure reason, but within the bounds of interhuman agapic duty alone.

go far enough. To illustrate with a single example, the old Norse idea of the divine as "Wierd" (a supreme destining power that owns all things by being their source and drawing them back to it) emphasizes that we never have absolute ownership of ourselves; we are decentered in creaturely finitude relative to the sacred cosmogonic origin of all life and value, which moves time yet remains enigmatic, unpresented behind all manifestations (including various gods).<sup>10</sup> Pace Levinas, this is not sorcery; the Wierd cannot be summoned for our purposes by representing it, and even the symbols associated with it are forbidding or apotropaic to indicate its uninvokability.

While the sacred source is reconceived as also the infinite Good or ethical paradigm in the axial turn, the biblical God retains this key feature of being both (what I call) Unappropriable and Pan-Appropriator of all else: God is the infinite Thou (You/Du) who can never become an It, that is an item we cognize in instrumental fashion.<sup>11</sup> As Buber says in his comment on Moses's first encounter with God, he hears that Yahweh is not bound to any place and cannot be "conjured;" for his name, which indicates the ineffability of his essence, means that he is present everywhere, because he is Being itself, or the source of beings.<sup>12</sup> The possibility of recognizing any continuity between that astounding claim at Sinai and the divine Wierd or similar cosmologic archetypes in any other mythos is foreclosed by Levinas's insistence that we attend *only* to the ethical ideals added to divinity in the axial turn -- and in their most demanding personalist form. But as Buber recognizes, there is no reason to think that agapic love conflicts with the other side of divinity that

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<sup>10</sup>That Heidegger reads the Anaximander Fragment as saying much the same thing should indicate how much this mythos influenced his thinking.

<sup>11</sup>Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), Part III, p.160; compare p.123, p.148, and Part II, p.113. On the divine as pan-appropriation that nevertheless does not objectify, see p.127. Like Tolkien, Buber recognizes the world of archaic mythology as one filled with sacramental relation, "magic" that is not appropriation but rather encounter (see Part I, pp.70-72).

<sup>12</sup>Buber, *Moses and the Revelation of the Covenant*, pp.51-53. I think Levinas has learned from Buber's account of "demagicization" of religion in favor of personal names and the Thou-relation; but he exaggerates Buber's more modest claims into the thesis that all previous sacred mythology amounts merely to magic in its instrumental sense.

was recognized much earlier,<sup>13</sup> namely cosmogonic power.<sup>14</sup>

This helps explain why Levinas's conception of "revelation" is impoverished compared to Kierkegaard's, which involves not just ethical content that exceeds our "horizons of expectation" (p.146) but also an incommunicable sense of contact with divine power. This is what makes religious revelation distinct from ethical alterity: it can promise changes in time as realizations of ethical ideals. Moreover, for Kierkegaard, as for Buber, it seems that this contact with divine power is always enigmatic when it is genuine: it speaks only to one who responds personally to it (i.e. in a volitional way); not to respond to it in self-donation or as I to Thou is not to receive the real content of the revelation, whose meaning thus exceeds propositional expression. By contrast, the origin of moral obligation seems to address us whether we are willing to receive it or not.

### **III. Four Doubts about Levinas's Agapic Ethics, Enlightenment, and Autonomy**

(3) Hopefully there is something new or surprising in these suggestions. But in hopes of being more interesting, let me turn to Levinas's agapic ethics. Now Merold and I fully agree that Levinas account of the Face and "metaphysical desire" in *Totality and Infinity*, as well as in essays like "God and Philosophy" is about an originary obligation to agapē that precedes all attempts to formulate ethical norms in concepts known to language (p.64). But I have three large worries

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<sup>13</sup>And, following Eliade's revisions to Jung's archetypal theory, recognized universally in the sacred mythologies of all primary cultures from the earliest origins of religion and the dawn of settled human communities. It should be noted that Buber attended some of the Eranos conferences and was familiar with such work in the comparative study of mythology.

<sup>14</sup>All that said, there is one respect in which I believe Levinas's description of divine "illeity" may be quite helpful – namely as a corrective the popular view that God's "scandalous absence" in contemporary history and personal experience is a good reason to deny that God exists (is?). I note in passing the large influence of Schellenberg's recent atheological argument from the frustration of honest seekers for God who feel that they get no response (e.g. no Thou-experience). A common reply to this argument is that this issue is just part of the general problem of evil, and thus not a new problem; some Kierkegaard scholars, such as Steve Evans, have made this reply. But in fact a more Kierkegaardian response may incorporate a dose of Levinasian illeity and say that prayer should never be thought of as invocation, that God is elusive and often remote. Yet Merold's comments on Levinas's inability to accommodate prayer to God suggest that he might not respond to Schellenberg with illeity.

about the usefulness of Levinas's approach to agapic ethics. The last one (3c) is a metaethical objection that is connected to Levinas's frequent metaphors of "heteronomy," but the first two concern the normative implications of Levinas's account of agapic obligation.

(3a) The first can be stated as a dilemma: either we take the ideas of inverted intentionality and absolute otherness so seriously that Levinas's norm has *no content* (even to try to comprehend what we ought to do for others is to reduce them to our categories, to package obligation in language); or the "infinite obligation" has content that we can state (even if inadequately), but Levinas often states the *wrong content* for an agapic ideal. (3b) The second objection is that, of the more plausible content for agapic duty that we find adumbrated in Levinas's writings, *much* of it (not all) implies and trades implicitly on enlightenment ideals that he either misrepresents or gives no credit to. I will explain these objections together, but start with the latter.

For example, Merold frequently emphasizes that for Levinas, my revealed responsibility is "prior to any free choice by which I might assume" it and limit it (pp.15-16; compare p.135.....). It is unconditional in that it does not depend on my agreement, or the other's merit (p.16). It is prior to my voluntary commitments, and thus not self-legislated, contra Kant (p.19). But does this mean anything more than that my agapic duties are *categorical* in Kant's sense, even if Kant gives an incorrect account of the source of moral obligation? In fact, no theory of moral obligation after the sophists held that it is determined solely by whatever obligations I choose to undertake; even Hobbes thought there were "laws of nature" that are quite involuntary. Locke goes much further, emphasizing that the natural laws that hold whether I like it or not only forbid murdering at will, but also forbid enslaving oneself for a price. Rousseau agrees, but seeks to add a kind of moral motivation that we have called pity or empathy, but which shares more with Levinasian "substitution" of self for other than Levinas admits (see Merold's quote, p.102; compare p.). Kant makes such obligation more categorical by removing the possibility that it is by having particular

desires, or the general desire for happiness, that I am rationally committed to such obligations; he thereby also increases the range of possible circumstances and types of agents covered by moral necessity. Of course, Kant does say that the moral law is "autonomous" in the sense that we can see it as an unavoidable implicit commitment made in exercising the very agency that makes us responsible beings -- but (pace p.90) that is just to say that God, *by* making us free rational agents in his image, also made us morally responsible agents. For Kant, we had as much choice about this as we do about being created or existing!<sup>15</sup> The moral law is constitutive of our nature; the motive that the law grounds is autonomous only in the sense of being an affirmation of our nature.

Of course I'm not saying that Kant has this right, or that he hasn't missed anything that could be relevant for understanding why a distinctively agapic ethic demands *more* than Kant's moral law; the ideas that my responsibility is not first to myself and then *transferred* to others because they share the same nature,<sup>16</sup> nor is it discovered this way (p.130), are vital insights of Kierkegaard, Buber and Levinas. But this vital amendment does not jettison the idea that moral obligation arises for us as part of our very nature, and indeed Kierkegaard's remarks about all persons sharing the "watermark" of their creator reaffirm this idea: as Merold notes, our kinship is "secured by each individual's equal kinship with and relationship to God" (p.136). This means that for Kierkegaard, the facts that God creates all persons, loves them, and they have a potential to love are *the sources* of agapic normativity: it is not sheer otherness as such that obliges us, nor is it God's unmediated command: it is the constitutive *relation* of created persons to the God of love. That it is universal 'essence' of persons as such that obligates us is also compatible with the distinctively agapic idea that our *some* of our responsibilities are ineluctably particular to our

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<sup>15</sup>Kant also concedes in his *Critique of Practical Reason* that our epistemic access to our freedom (it can't quite be called "knowledge" for him) is entirely due to a direct intuition of our responsibility for others and for ourselves. The "primacy of practical reason" that Merold recognizes in Levinas (p.85) is connected to this point.

<sup>16</sup>Whereas all 20<sup>th</sup> century neo-Kantian attempts to deduce the moral law, from Gewirth to Korsgaard, have taken the form of trying to establish this kind of transfer from self to others.

situation, having historically unique content for each of us.<sup>17</sup>

(3c) It appears that in essays like "No Identity," Levinas insists not only that our freedom is constituted as already open to alterity or as responsible for others, but also that I have "already consented" to the appeal of Otherness (p.101); as Merold puts it, "I find myself already to have given" my consent as "reply" to the demand, not as "legislation" of it (p.103). But I think this is an illusion that arises from Levinas's counterproductive yet constant conflation of the *obligation* to love the neighbor with actual agapic love that would (partly) fulfill or accord with the obligation (e.g. TI 50; see Westphal p.84). The bare obligation is not reflected in our intended purposes until we decide on this response, as Levinas makes clear in the few key places (e.g. TI 79, 198, 218).<sup>18</sup> And this is precisely to say that a *certain ontologically modest, founded autonomy* results in my agency from my responses to my originary responsibility, as Merold effectively concedes in a key passage in his discussion of Schrag (p.97; see handout). As he says in a related passage, "my identity will emerge only in my response to this prior uniqueness of a responsibility that cannot be transferred" (p.91). But note: it is my responses, which are not determined by my pure responsibility, that form my *particular identity* as a distinct person.<sup>19</sup>

(3a) I will return to this issue, but first let us return to the dilemma between 'no content' and 'wrong content.' Merold clearly holds that there is normative content in Levinasian obligation,

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<sup>17</sup>In an essay titled "Time and Responsibility," I have tried to indicate how such irreducibly particular obligations can arise from the schematization of universal moral principles in the narrative structure of histories in which the past generates differential responsibilities. Compare Jeffrey Blustein's recent account in *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge, 2008). I have 'essence' in scare-quotes to recognize that personhood is not a natural kind.

<sup>18</sup>This illusion arises partly from another cause if the claim is that I'm constituted not already as loving the other, but as consenting to be obligated to love. Then it arises from the idea that if obligation itself is not coercion (p.101), that the Good does not enslave, then it is not alienating and so I must consent to it in some sense, albeit involuntarily (lest this reinscribe autonomy again). We avoid this contradiction if we recognize that the ultimate sources enabling autonomous agency are themselves *neither* autonomous nor heteronomous; the dichotomy cannot apply at their level. Thus Schrag is correct that there are sources of selfhood that lie "between autonomy and heteronomy" (p.97).

<sup>19</sup>Thus I think Merold confuses matters when he writes in his Introduction that for Levinas, "who we are is a function of a relation to an Other we did not choose" (p.5). That may be true of my shared identity qua person, but it is not true of my distinctive particular identity as this person, i.e. the narrative identity that accrues to me in time.

that it has a kind of intelligibility (p.124): it is an "infinite" obligation (p.15), which means that its demands are perfectionist ones of some kind; they command more than we will ever in fact do (p.63). We have some kind of 'experience' of the other's otherness, which tells us that they are not merely to be "used, possessed, enjoyed" (p.13). This is the familiar idea of the inviolable value of humanity, though we need further criteria to know what counts as "injustice towards my neighbor" (p.41) or as violation of her intrinsic dignity. At minimum, the Face tells us that we must not murder or kill at will (pp.15, 118, 131), though this is *far* from answering such basic moral questions as whether killing my neighbor can ever be consistent with loving him, or even required by loving others. Merold points out that Levinas extends this minimal content to more positive duties not to take the other's "place in the Sun" (including perhaps his goods?), and not to let the other "die alone" (p.69, p.131). He notes, quite rightly, that "this latter formulation goes dramatically beyond anything to be found in liberal natural rights theory" (p.69; compare p.131), as does the famous extension to "love thy enemy."<sup>20</sup>

But do these agapic contents contradict the core of modern natural rights theory? If we ask what connects the normative content considered so far, and recall that Levinas's basic opposition is between attitudes to beings that are based on assertion of one's power (volitional or cognitive) and a receptive attitude that avoids "grasping, conquering, and absorbing" (p.118), I suggest that the most basic revelation of the Face to us is that *might alone never makes right*; force in itself never confers any authority to act; ethical infinity "paralyzes my powers" (TI 199). Though alterity may 'say' more than this, Levinas's concern for this norm clearly motivates his arguments that the alterity of the Other takes hold of us and makes us responsible in a good way (p.81), without violence (TI 197); we do not simply experience brute power acting on us in this so-called "heteronomy" (TI 200). But that violence alone never covers any legitimate authority is precisely

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<sup>20</sup>Though Kant would also say that the moral law commands a certain "practical love" for one's enemy and for criminals as ends-in-themselves, and that I have (imperfect) positive duties to aid others as well.

the core moral principle of all modern natural right theory; although its origin is much older (going back at least to Socrates), it *is* the enlightenment (small e) in a nutshell. I say "small e" because the idea that force alone never justifies anything hardly requires any pretensions that our concepts gives us complete comprehension of history or reality, or that human reason can be Reason (capital R). Thus ironically, the *enlightenment principle* (as I will henceforth call it) does not require what Merold calls the "Enlightenment Project" (p.36). Nor is it threatened by divine transcendence, at least after the axial turn. For God's commands have moral authority for us because we see them as commands of a *loving* God, as Merold repeatedly emphasizes in connection with Kierkegaard (p.56, p.92.....). Cosmogonic power alone is not enough to give God that authority which Merold says decenters our autonomy, because we are already so constituted as to recognize *a priori* (there, I said it!) the distinction between power and authority, and we have to exercise our ability to distinguish these (at least in a minimal way) even to receive divine commands *as* moral imperatives. Thus the fact that God's command has categorical force, not requiring "my consent for its validity," does *not* constitute "full-fledged moral heteronomy" (pace p.89); for I can recognize its authority by drawing on my natural capacities; it is not sheer violence to me. It is the same for Levinasian alterity: why stress that our experience of responsibility is not alienating (p.81) in the way that sheer coercion is for example, unless *autonomy matters?*<sup>21</sup>

As these pieces of a possible post-Levinasian, enlightenment-friendly agapic ethic come into view, however, we should consider Levinas's most extreme addition to the content of our agapic duties. This is the idea that I find myself responsible for the actions and faults of the Other and not just for her suffering, pain, and misfortunes (p.15, p.69. p.131). Here is where we face the *wrong content* objection. For all the likely ways of understanding this alleged aspect of agapic obligation seem highly problematic. First, we might understand it as a notion of collective

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<sup>21</sup>Similarly, why stress that the values revealed in divine command "preside" over us by "with authority and by right" (p.5), unless *to contrast this* with sheer imposition by terror, or direct manipulation of the brain, etc.?

responsibility, where I and other inheritors of a shared history all find ourselves responsible to some extent for certain past harms that help explain distorted motives and (yes) even some moral faults of present members of our community. But aside from the inherent dangers of all such explanations (e.g. excusing people for wrongs they commit because they are members of a 'victim' class), such collective responsibility is clearly not what Levinas has in mind when he stresses that the content of our positive obligations to others is unique to our situation. Nor does he seem to have in mind our collective responsibility to foster just social orders that help enable people to live decently with respect to one another (that's far to Habermasian!).

Second, we could interpret this problematic obligation as recognizing our indirect responsibility for another persons's faults due to our negative influence on that person, or our omission of positive influences that might have helped him avoid such faults. In fact, recent analytic and continental moral theory has not paid enough attention to this large domain of responsibility via influence short of coercion or duress; it is a big gray area that is sorely in need of work. But it is at least clear from Bernard Williams' work that an account of this kind of responsibility for what others do can easily become utilitarian or consequentialist unless it we remember that my responsibility for what *I do* (or omit) *directly* is qualitatively distinct from my responsibility for what others predictably do in reaction to my actions (or omissions). If another agent will murder ten people because I refused to murder one, then their blood is on *her* hands.<sup>22</sup> Any sounds agapic ethic has to include a bright line version of this distinction, but Levinas does not emphasize that agapic norms specify direct requirements on actions, values to which we must show direct loyalty, rather than goods to be maximized. If he did, he would have to recognize and explain the morally vital *limits* of my responsibility for what others do in their freedom.

Third, the problematic responsibility for others' acts could be understood paternalistically,

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<sup>22</sup>See Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*.

as when I am responsible for what my child does, though she is also responsible. In two of the three places where Merold addresses this issue, he immediately denies that it involves any "paternalistic privilege" (p.15), but it is not clear how on what grounds he *can* deny this (mere stipulation obviously will not do). Merold writes,

This is not paternalism, which says (1) I have superior wisdom in relation to the Other and (2) the Other has a duty to be guided by my wisdom. The Levinasian text...knows only my responsibility for the Other's use or misuse of her freedom. It is my job, not to make the Other just like me, but to help the Other become good (p.70).

Agreed, but then I probably have to respect the other's freedom to reject my counsel and help. I might help him become good in numerous ways -- by providing for his education; by friendship or mentoring; through relieving poverty and suffering that tempt to wrong actions; by setting an example that I hope he follows. But how far should I go? In some cases, maybe I should stop her when she is about to do wrong or mess up her life? Every concrete explanation will turn into some form of collective duty or at least soft paternalism, which may be justified within certain limits despite their perils -- but (here's the rub) Levinas leaves us no way to specify such limits, or to articulate the perils. Aren't there cases where what the particular other who faces me (not the Third Man) *most* needs from me is to be told "No, I will not help you any further! Get off your butt and help yourself;" or "I think you are making a huge mistake, but it is *your* life to lead," or "don't try to blame this on others; it is entirely your fault, and *you* need to deal with it;" or "we have different conceptions of the goods that make for a good human life, but I recognize yours as a decent one, and your right to pursue it;" or "Is this what Jesus (or Hillel, or Muhammad, or the Buddha etc.) would do in your situation?" (leaving it to the other to decide this for himself) -- and many other variations on these themes. Cannot all these, and even harder things, sometimes be said to the other as Thou, rather than as a defaced thing? Finally, isn't the best way to help another become good sometimes to leave her entirely alone, or allow her to fail? But then Levinas has the

content of agapic obligations wrong.

As Merold notes, Levinas follows Dostoevsky in saying that agapic obligation makes us *more* responsible than others (p.78, p.132), and Kierkegaard also encourages us to be harder on ourselves than on others; but there is a danger of *subtle narcissism* here. We see it when people respond to this apparent surplus of responsibility by assuming others' guilt for them, when these others may need their guilt *not* to be so quickly assumed (and even want to own it themselves, to guide them in making amends). This rare but striking form of moral narcissism threatens when an agent thinks she must always be the one to act first in response to an ethical problem, thereby denying others ethical opportunities through which they might develop.<sup>23</sup> In this context, it is well to recall Heidegger's important (albeit undeveloped) distinction between two "extreme possibilities" or ends of a spectrum in showing solicitude to others [see handout]:

It can, as it were, take away 'care' from the Other and put itself in his position in concern: it can *leap in* for him. This kind of solicitude takes over for the Other that with which he is to concern himself. The Other is thus thrown out of his own position....the Other can become one who is dominated and dependent, even if this domination is a tacit one, and remains hidden.... [the other possibility is] a kind of solicitude which does not much leap in for the Other as *leap ahead* of him in his existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away his 'care' but rather to give it back to him authentically for the first time. This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care...it helps the Other to become transparent to himself in his care and to become *free for it*.<sup>24</sup>

It ought to scare us to see how much Levinas's obligation to "substitute" myself for my Other sounds like the "leaping in" that Heidegger describes here.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the heart of Heidegger's

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<sup>23</sup>There seems to be an example of this in the old Woody Allen film, *Hannah and her Sisters*.

<sup>24</sup>Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶126, H122 (Macquarrie and Robinson translation, pp.158-59).

<sup>25</sup>Though I believe there *are* circumstances in which a sound agapic ethic does recognize an obligation for substitution that other deontological moral theories would treat as supererogatory. An example is the situation of Sydney Carton in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, and similar cases where we ought to lay down our lives for others. But it is the job of a sound agapic ethics to explain, at least in broad outline, what the contours of such situations are, and why these and only these kinds of circumstances make it the case that to love my neighbor can now only be to substitute myself for him. Similar (very complex and difficult) problems arise concerning different kinds of forgiveness, and what kinds neighbor-love calls for in different relationships and circumstances.

insight in this (one of the most inspired passages in his work) is surely that authentic care for others must in general aim to promote *their autonomy* – both moral and personal. This is precisely what modes of *mitsein* in the form of leaping ahead recognize. Although it remains general and in need of further specification, this is an indispensable part of the content of agapic duty, which is (unsurprisingly) obscured by Levinas. If we add that authentic care for others should help them to *love* their others in turn, we are still faced with the point that we cannot force them to love, or do their loving for them: ultimately, they have to will it – that is, they must *love autonomously*!

(4) Ironically, then, it turns out that the content of agapic obligations cannot be correctly specified without recognizing some kind of autonomy that is valuable for human beings.<sup>26</sup> But this implies that Levinas's attacks on "the" concept of personal autonomy (as if there were only one) are mostly attacks on a straw man. He is not alone in this; some communitarians and feminist defenders of "care ethics" have bashed a similar conceptual pinnata. Here are a few examples from Merold's essays: autonomy would require "presiding" over any norm that obligates us (p.5); it would require that human reason is "self-sufficient" (p.31); as Sartre said, it wants to be God (p.79) or to "establish my identity in a pure relation of myself to myself" (p.82), without being created (p.104), without recognizing any hierarchical or non-symmetric relations (p.92); autonomy demands an absolute monarchy over a private domain (p.97), and to be absolutely self-sufficient (p.138). In short, autonomy must be divine originality and impassibility, or if that seems too strange an aspiration for human persons, at least it must be Stoic *autarky*, or Nietzsche's fierce insistence on independence, or the absolute self-ownership of libertarian political ideology (p.82).

In fact, the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of personal autonomy and their relevance for morality is a complex story of different efforts to liberate this indispensable concept from such extremely implausible demands for total self-ownership (p.148) -- for example, to articulate what

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<sup>26</sup>Just as a complete agapic ethics would have to involve an account of the components of human well-being.

is wrong with coercion for beings who are not (and do not aspire to be) God; or to explain how we can be responsible for our own character despite being created, nurtured, educated, and essentially relational beings. This is a story for another time, but there are enough hints in Merold's book for a careful reader to recognize why moderate, non-autarkic autonomy is also indispensable for alterity ethics. For if, as Merold suggests,

*who I am* is a function of my deepest and most defining relation in fact (ontology) and *who I become* is a product of whomever or whatever I choose to be my Most Significant Other (p.140)

then my choice obviously matters a great deal; or as Kierkegaard says in "The Present Age," echoing Judge William, "personal commitment" or "resolution in passion" are essential to acquiring a self (p.135). Since Merold recognizes this, why does he say that "the self increases as its autonomy decreases" (p.140), when clearly for one kind of autonomy, it is exactly the opposite.

Finally, the relevant kind of autonomy is even *implied in* the idea that finite persons are created *ex nihilo*. For the paradox involved in creating persons is precisely that they are derivative *yet free*; they are not *mere modes* of that which constitutes them. St. Anselm's recognition that in each finite mortal person, there is an "aseity" or new source of reality is part of what the Face in Levinas's sense means, and it is precisely what pantheism and conceptions of the God-relation as total divine governance of all creaturely choices miss. Anti-Climacus's formula for the self as radically dependent on God (p.87) is meant to include this paradox that I am not a mere shadow of God, but rather a being that can even separate from God in rebellion; likewise in Levinas, the point is that my *freedom* arises in relation to the other, not that I reduce without remainder to the other's otherness or its commands. This is why Hegel is wrong to think that the other and I are one (p.88); my capacity for (moderate, situated) autonomy and the other's alterity are in fact two sides of the same coin. Hegel misses that God is distinguished from us most radically in his ability to *create alterity*, or difference from himself. Which is why the God who is always present both in the duty of neighbor-love, and in the agapic relation itself, can only be the God of Open Theism.