

Stavros Panayiotou

GOD, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE SELF

**A Comparative Study between
Levinas and Kierkegaard**



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To my mother – whose non-reciprocal love has been the
ethical anchor of my life

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Stavros S. Panayiotou

*This book is mainly based on the author's PhD dissertation
approved by the Faculty of Philosophy, Sofia University,
"St. Kliment Ohridski"*

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ABSTRACT

On the one hand, due to Hegelian totality and the Heideggerian manifestation of being *qua* being, subjectivity cemented itself within an epistemological framework that seems quite sufficient to proclaim itself absolute and divine. In addition, Descartes's *cogito* has been considered as the culmination of the cognitive dominance over metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics. On the other hand, the post-Hegelian critique of the thinking subject influenced several continental thinkers across Europe to present a new postmodern interpretation based on ethical metaphysics and intersubjectivity as well as faith and religion. The former ideal of ethics was first introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, and the latter line of thought was explored by Søren Kierkegaard, the founder of existential philosophy. Levinas defends the thesis that it is the "Other" who gives a meaning to the self and not the opposite. Overcoming the notion of self-reflection of the thinking subject and fundamental ontology, he proposes a different interpretation of the notion of subjectivity by claiming that what really matters is the moral responsibility for the "Other" and that the primordial relation between me and the "Other" starts from the "Other" and not from the self. For Levinas, God commands me through the face of the "Other", but it is my responsibility to understand and answer. In this comparative study of Levinas and Kierkegaard, I argue that, on the one hand, Levinas believes that God exists outside of the cosmos, I can seek only His trace through the other person, and hence I cannot be in a direct relation with God as I am a finite human being and God is transcendence (infinity). That is

why God disappears from human relations after sending the "Other" to me and subjugating me as a hostage. God leaves all human affairs in our hands. In them God is a presence to the point of an absence. I am therefore a subject because of God's commandment and subjection that awaken my thinking and consciousness. My personality as a self-consciousness is secondary and constitutes my "I" in comparison with my moral subjection as "me", which is primary. On the other hand, for Kierkegaard, I am responsible directly to God and my responsibility is a matter of my faith; the religious life does not coincide with ethics and is sometimes absurd if it is measured by ethical norms.

INTRODUCTION

i. Aims and Objectives of Study

This study is an original work¹ that aims at shedding some additional light on the postmodern philosophical tradition as regards the philosophical insights of two prominent thinkers: Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855).² Although other authors have thoroughly sketched Levinas's³ and Kierkegaard's philosophical accounts,⁴ especially Merold Westphal in his work *Levinas and*

¹ In the main body of this study there are some parts containing phrases or extracts from published texts of mine or of other scholars. However, all references and quotations from other thinkers or published works are carefully acknowledged and cited. There are also several excerpts from Levinas's and Kierkegaard's works which yet again are fully cited and carefully highlighted with quotation marks. For instance, Levinas's work *God, Death and Time* (2000) is specifically used and thoroughly analyzed in this study (citing several extracts from it) since from my point of view it is one of Levinas's most important works, evaluating the most significant implications concerning the notion of God and how death and time are integrated with ethical norms. It is worth mentioning from the beginning that in footnotes, at the bottom of each page, references concerning monographs, books, articles, volumes, chapters of various editions, translations into English, etc., contain only brief information, i.e. the first letter of the author's name, surname, title, date and page(s). For a complete list of works cited, see the bibliography (after the conclusion). References in the main body of the study are marked in parentheses, i.e. (surname date: pp.). Books are cited in *italics*, and articles (in journals and volumes) in quotation marks.

² I do not intend to examine all materials and fields of study regarding Levinas and Kierkegaard. I rather focus only on three aspects: God, subjectivity, and selfhood, as well as whether these three subjects are linked to time and death. Levinas seeks answers through ethics as first philosophy, and Kierkegaard develops his arguments in terms of faith and (neo-)Christian religion. Authors' full names are mentioned only once. After the first mention, I just use the surname in the main body and the first letter of names in the footnotes.

³ I prefer to use singular genitive case with 's instead of 's', i.e. Levinas's thought, Descartes's *cogito*, and plural genitive case with s', i.e. researchers' work. However, I do not change the type of citation of other authors' style in footnotes and the bibliography.

⁴ Apart from the above monographs concerning comparisons of Kierkegaard and Levinas, productive and valuable studies have also been written by C. Welz,

Kierkegaard in Dialogue (2008) as well as in the study *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics and Religion*, edited by Aaron Simmons and David Wood (2008), this study is focused especially on the broad field of metaphysics and social phenomenology on the one hand and on philosophy of religion and ethics on the other. What I present in this study mainly raises questions without necessarily seeking genius dogmatic answers, but mostly in order to bring to surface a new dialectic that sometimes is adopted by both thinkers and sometimes provides an objection to and/or a discrepancy between Levinas's and Kierkegaard's philosophical thought. Specific research questions seek to explore arguments on how Levinas and Kierkegaard think about God, persons, and subjectivity. It is common knowledge that the two major modern philosophical traditions, the analytic and continental schools, interpret (if it is possible to do so) God, His relation to persons (if there is such relation), and subjectivity from extremely different angles. For instance, the analytical point of

"The presence of the transcendent – transcending the present. Kierkegaard and Levinas on subjectivity and the ambiguity of God's transcendence" (2007, 149-176); idem. "Present within or without Appearances? Kierkegaard's Phenomenology of the Invisible: Between Hegel and Levinas" (1997, 470-513); C. Welz and K. Verstrynge (eds.), *Despite oneself: Subjectivity and its secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas* (2008); P. Sheil, *Kierkegaard and Levinas: The subjunctive mood* (2010); P. Kemp, "Another Language for the Other: From Kierkegaard to Levinas" (1997, 5-28); B. T. Prosser, "Conscientious Subjectivity in Kierkegaard and Levinas" (2002, 397-422); D. Murphy, "Levinas and Kierkegaard on Divine Transcendence and Ethical Life: Response to Donald L. Turner and Ford Turrell's 'The Non-Existent God'" (2007, 383-385); A. Hurst, "Kierkegaard, Levinas and the Question of Escaping Metaphysics" (2000, 168-187); A. Wells, "On Ethics and Christianity: Kierkegaard and Levinas" (2012, 71-80); Brothers, R., "Ethics of Ethics, Law of Laws: Kierkegaard, Levinas and the Aporia of Substantive Identity" (1999, 54-68); R. C. Reed, "The Binding of Abraham: Levinas's Moment in Kierkegaard's Fear and Trembling" (2017, 81-98); M. Westphal, "Levinas, Kierkegaard and the Theological Task" (1992, 241-261); S. Moyn, "Transcendence, Morality, and History: Emmanuel Levinas and the Discovery of Soren Kierkegaard in France" (2004, 22-54).

view explores arguments related mostly to the Enlightenment tradition and from the English-speaking world using an epistemological-psychological framework (through the fields of experimental philosophy, neuroscience, philosophy of mind, case studies, and other-worldly scenarios). In contrast, the continental line of thought deals with philosophical accounts from other traditions (most of the original sources are non-Anglophone) such as those of French, German, Austrian, Italian, Russian, and Danish thinkers (in the fields of phenomenology, ontology, ethics, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, existential dialectics, and metaphysics).

The aim of this study is mainly to explore philosophical arguments that are found in Levinas's and Kierkegaard's writings in order to provide a clear picture of persons, their essence and existence, their relations (and the extent thereof) to God, and subjectivity as regards time and death. After considering the most significant primary sources and secondary literature on this topic, the main aim is to deduce Levinas's and Kierkegaard's views related to God, subjectivity, and the self. I intend, in parallel, to find out and answer as sufficiently as possible, through Levinas's and Kierkegaard's arguments, questions such as: What is it to be a person? Can we define God beyond ontotheology? Is ethics first philosophy? Are faith and ethics inseparable? Are there several notions of time? Can we surpass death? Why are, for Levinas, responsibility and "Other"-ness necessary and sufficient conditions of subjectivity? Does responsibility precede freedom and if yes, how? How and why does ethics precede (fundamental) ontology?

Though Levinas was Jewish and Kierkegaard Protestant Christian, Levinas was influenced by Kierkegaard's existentialism⁵ and his tendency to develop his philosophical perspectives within a religious framework. Especially the 'early Levinas'⁶ spent his first academic years studying and discussing philosophical issues revealed by his famous predecessors Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who were the first continental philosophers – after Aristotle and Plato – who revived the forgotten, disregarded and eliminated science of ontology, and, as Maria Dimitrova points out, 'we have to clear it up from the patina of time in order for it to flare up again'.⁷ On the other hand, the 'later

⁵ It is quite clear through the works of early Levinas that he had thoroughly read and interpreted Kierkegaard's ideas, especially on subjectivity and the relation between humans. See, for instance, B. T. Prosser, "Conscientious Subjectivity in Kierkegaard and Levinas" (2002, 397-422); S. Moyn, "Transcendence, Morality, and History: Emmanuel Levinas and the Discovery of Soren Kierkegaard in France" (2004, 22-54); B. A. Walter, *Communication and Response-ability: Levinas and Kierkegaard in Conversation*, ch. 1: "Levinas, Kierkegaard and the Ethical Demand" (2014, 1-34); M. Westphal, "The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard" (2008b, 1141-1162); J. McLachlan, "Beyond the Self, Beyond Ontology: Levinas' Reading of Shestov's Reading of Kierkegaard" (2010, 179-196).

⁶ This definition varies, as several scholars specializing in Levinas assert that he started his philosophy insisting on Judaic religious thought; however, during his philosophical academic scholarship – and after the Holocaust where his family was executed in concentration camps in the so-called Great German Reich – he definitely changed his philosophical method from existentialism to ethics. It is not meant here that ethics covers only the social and political discussion developed within an ordinary sense, but mainly, what it is to be ethics, according to Levinas, is the field "wherein paradox of the infinite appears progressively in relation to the finite". See E. Levinas, *God, Death and Time* (2000, 202). For Levinas's view on phenomenology in his early philosophical stage see W. Heng, "Levinas' Phenomenology of Sensibility and Time in His Early Period" (2008, 105-121).

⁷ For a brief generic discussion on Levinas's views regarding analytic and continental philosophy and his relation to Husserl and Heidegger and their most important implications, see M. Dimitrova & P. Pietrzak, "Interview with Maria Dimitrova on Emmanuel Levinas's Philosophy" (2018, 184). For early Levinas's work and its critique of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, see J. Taminioux, "The early Levinas's reply to Heidegger's fundamental ontology" (1997, 29-49);

Levinas⁸ makes a change of orientation of immense importance by dedicating the rest of his life to developing a prominent philosophical work on social phenomenology and ethics as the holiness of the holy.⁹ This is a crucial point which could be compared to Kierkegaard's faith and philosophy of religion through the broad field of existentialism. It is worth mentioning that what really matters for Levinas is to make clear that ethics as 'First Philosophy' needs to escape from modernity and its disastrous results at the time of his work.¹⁰ Levinas, apart from ethical metaphysics and phenomenology, as developed by Husserl and Heidegger, was also quite interested in politics and justice (Peperzak 2007, 197-214). Levinas often claimed that human beings are obliged to escape from sameness by giving priority to "Other"-ness and closeness, as ethics is a matter of the holiness of the indirect,

B. Bergo, "What Is Levinas Doing? Phenomenology and the Rhetoric of an Ethical Un-Conscious" (2005, 122-144).

- ⁸ 'Later Levinas' is a definition given by thinkers who specialize in Levinas's ethics referring particularly to the reversal of Levinas's thought after *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, where Levinas totally escaped from Heidegger's 'ontological shadow' as well as from the phenomenological process of Husserlian *Pure Ego*, completely defending ethics as 'First Philosophy'. For 'later Levinas', see A. Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy* (1995); A. Yampolskaya, "Prophetic Subjectivity in Later Levinas: Sobering up from One's Own Identity", (2019, 1-12).
- ⁹ J. Derrida himself provides a significant phrase – that apparently Levinas said to Derrida during their philosophical conversations in France – during his speech at Levinas's funeral: "I am always struck by a remark record by Levinas: You know one often speaks of Ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not Ethics – not Ethics alone – but the holy; holiness of the holy, and that makes Levinas such as a fascinating and enlightening figure not just for Philosophy but for anybody; theologians too, anyone interested in the great questions for human living" (Derrida 1999, 4).
- ¹⁰ H. Marcuse in his book *One-Dimensional Man* (2006) clearly describes the dramatic dismantling of ethics during modernity where individuals' freedom, their critical and negative thinking, have been absorbed by the mass production and the technological rationality of liberal capitalism.

non-reciprocal, and asymmetrical holy.¹¹ Yet, according to Kierkegaard, what matters is the covenant between mankind and God but not through the 'strict secularism' of the established Church and the Westernized high clergy. Transcendence, according to Kierkegaard, is above and beyond secularism and fundamentalist criteria (Quinn 1998, 349-375; Malantschuk 1971, Hannay 1982).

ii. Outlined Structure of the Book

This study is separated into three parts. Part One pays particular attention to metaphysics and social phenomenology, covering a brief introductory section of the history of philosophy: How have we arrived at ethics and social phenomenology through ancient and modern philosophy? Is epistemology a necessary and sufficient condition for ethics and Christian ethics? Part One also discusses the insufficient analytical tradition of 'Criterialism' as well as the Orthodox patristic tradition as a problematic condition of the self. This chapter is quite important in order to show how Levinas's and Kierkegaard's arguments concerning the notion of the self and subjectivity in continental philosophy emerged. This part takes into consideration subjectivity and ethical subjectivity in Levinas and Kierkegaard, keeping a distance from Husserl's and Heidegger's ontology and developing in detail Levinas's response to fundamental ontology.

¹¹ The above terminology is thoroughly discussed in a separate chapter below. For a generic discussion of holiness, see Caruana, J., "Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy': Levinas on Ethics and Holiness" (2006, 561-583); R. I. Sagarman, "Through the Lens of Levinas: Preliminary Reflections on Holiness (Leviticus 19)" (2013, 129-143); P. Theisohn, "Reading the Beyond. Lévinas—Literature, Holiness, and Politics" (2008, 61-80).

Part Two deals with infinity, transcendence, and ethics as first philosophy. It explores the argument as to whether we can speak of God beyond ontotheology, unpacking Levinas's responsibility and Kierkegaard's alternative of faith. It deals with the peculiarity of ontological transcendence as immanence. Both Levinas and Kierkegaard raise objections to immanence and knowledge. However, they present their arguments by developing different philosophical methods. Levinas defends the "witnessing of the Saying" (Levinas 1969, 48, 260; idem. 1991, 5-7, 37, 45-48, 153-162) and the non-reciprocal asymmetrical relation between human beings and God (Levinas 1969, 225; idem. 1991, 84, 158) while Kierkegaard claims that transcendence is identified and tautological with faith through a reciprocal and direct interconnection between man and God such as the direct Abraham-God relationship (Goodman 1996, 24-27; Ferreira 1998, 207-234; Mackinnon 1993, 107-125). Part Three covers the discussion on subjectivity and death and their relations with time. Levinas raises an objection to *conatus essendi*,¹² claiming that the good precedes being and presence through the progressive route of diachrony, departing from his phenomenological predecessors (Levinas 1991, 57, 163; Coe 2018, 116, 159, 219). On the contrary, for Kierkegaard, time and death have a religious eschatological teleology with which human beings can achieve a direct relation to God through their faith, love,

12 Levinas rejects the notion of *conatus essendi* as a rotten theory, which infringes on the importance of the "Other", giving priority to sameness and ontology. He claims that "the individuation or super-individuation of the ego consists in being in itself, in its skin, without sharing the *conatus essendi* of all beings which are beings in themselves [...] The subject resting on itself is confounded by wordless accusation [...] Already the position of the subject is a deposition, not a *conatus essendi*". See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (1991, 118, 127). See also E. Wyschogrod, "Ethics as First Philosophy: Levinas reads Spinoza" (1999, 202-204).

and forgiveness (Watts 2014, loc. 2094-2190). The analysis of the bulk of this research is summarized in a Conclusion based on the implementations and results of the arguments of this project exploring Levinas's and Kierkegaard's aspects regarding God, subjectivity, and the self.

iii. Brief Introduction to Levinas's Life and Philosophical Works

"I cannot, nor would I even try to,
measure in a few words the oeuvre of Emmanuel Levinas.
It is so large that one can no longer glimpse its edges."
(Derrida, 1999, 4).

Levinas was born in 1906 in Kovno, Lithuania, and he died in Paris on Christmas Day, 1995. It would not be hyperbole to allege that he does not fit into any philosophical tradition. Instead, he seems to develop a vehement critique of Western philosophy. He was an academic philosopher making his first steps in the tradition of phenomenology, but he was also deeply imbued with the intellectual spirit of Judaism and expertise in Talmudic studies and the Torah. He influenced not only postmodern and post-structural French philosophers but liberation theologians as well. The "Other", which is the other person,¹³ is the dominating theme in his philosophical writings. This is the reason that he begins with the "stranger, the meek and the humblest", who confronts me and calls me to respond and calls me therefore to radical responsibility.

¹³ The "Other" with capital "O" expresses (a) the allegoric infinite Other, something that it is extremely different and exterior to the *egotic* self-enclosed Being (b) as well as the idea of God as the Absolute Other. The *other* in lower case ("o") refers to human beings.

This is what he called ethics¹⁴ and, indeed, for Levinas, philosophy begins with ethics. He talks about ethics as first philosophy. Ethics, according to Levinas, does not merely have the meaning of being good or gentle to others or offering charity to social institutions. Ethics, as Levinas says, is an optics, “the spiritual optics” (Levinas 1969, 78). As Levinas points out in his work *Difficult Freedom*, “Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to Him must find an ethical expression” (Levinas 1990, 17). What matters for Levinas is the ethical relation: humanity as grasped in interpersonal relations, which are imbued with traces of infinity and which promise access to transcendence.¹⁵

¹⁴ Levinas separates ethics from ontology (the study of beings *qua* beings) by using the term ‘good’ as a necessary and sufficient condition of ethics, something that is precluded by ontology. Levinas underlines that “to be good is a deficit, a wasting away and a foolishness in being; to be good is excellence and elevation beyond being; the very possibility of the beyond” (Levinas 1998b, 69). M. Eskin correctly infers that Levinasian ethics can be divided into three principal senses: “ethics as a philosophical discipline going back to Socrates; as Levinas’s own philosophical discourse; [and] as a human being’s fundamental relation to and concern for the other human being, which is the subject of Levinas’s philosophical discourse” (Eskin 2000, 30).

¹⁵ Transcendence in Levinas has a major twofold manner: (a) To show that transcendence is used as a noun, which means God, and that God has nothing to do with (and is irreducible to) immanence, and (b) the usage of the term as verb: to *transcend* “the essence or the move of knowable being which carries on its being in presence; [...] it transcends immanence” (Hand [ed.] 1989, 180). Regarding the argument of Levinas’s trace see M. Dimitrova, *In Levinas’ Trace*, (2011). A. Peperzak also provides a very satisfying definition of transcendence by saying that transcendence (if we consider it the definition of God or not), is for sure beyond and otherwise than being and it has nothing to do with cognition, experience, or knowledge. It refers to another dimension exterior to any human’s mental capacities, beyond the frame of subjectivity and cognition, consciousness, intentionality, and inner properties. Transcendence thus can be defined only through an ethical concept (Peperzak 1997, 162-170). Transcendence therefore is the departure from the immanence of the known (Bruns 2004, 35).

Levinas lived among various cultural traditions: Jewish, Russian, German, and French. His family belonged to an Eastern European tradition of Judaism, but, unfortunately, they were executed during Nazism. However, his wife Raisa and his daughter Simone were spared thanks to Maurice Blanchot, who assisted them in finding refuge in a monastery in the south of France. Levinas had his first philosophical interest in the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881),¹⁶ who provided him with his first motivation to study ethics and philosophy. The quote that changed his academic career by making him take an interest in philosophy came from Dostoevsky's work *The Brothers Karamazov*:¹⁷ "We are all guilty of everything and everyone, and I, more so than all the others" (Levinas 1998b, 72; Jodalen and Vetlesen [eds.] 1997, 48). In 1923, Levinas moved to Strasbourg, where he met Henri Bergson (1859-1941), from whom he received a significant philosophical influence. In 1928, he began his philosophical studies in Freiburg with Edmund Husserl, the 'father of modern phenomenology', and, most importantly, he came under the tutelage of Husserl's successor Martin Heidegger. Levinas always considered Heidegger's *Being and Time* one of the most important philosophical works in the Western world.

Levinas placed his philosophical work in a three-dimensional model derived from the Bible, characterizing it as one in which the Jewish moment mainly shaped his academic

¹⁶ For Dostoevsky's religious/philosophical aspects, see J. Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet, 1871-1881* (2002) and M. Holquist, *Dostoevsky and the Novel* (1977).

¹⁷ See F. Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1970) and W. J. Leatherbarrow, *Fyodor Dostoevsky: "The Brothers Karamazov"* (1992).