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Radical Passivity

Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas

This volume includes critical approaches to radical passivity from a variety of perspectives (both critical and favourable) covering the entire scope of Levinas's oeuvre, including both his philosophical as well as his so-called spiritual works or *Talmudic Readings*. The contributing authors speak with widely diverse voices, which will hopefully appeal to a diversified and interdisciplinary readership. This collection will certainly be of interest to an expert academic audience in a wide variety of disciplines, including Philosophical Ethics (or Practical Philosophy), Philosophical Anthropology, Social and Political Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, Applied Ethics, Theology, Judaic Studies, etcetera. It is also likely to appeal to people outside of academia interested in that which makes ethical agency possible. The host of featured authors (from Canada, America, the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Austria and South Africa) and their varied perspectives accord this work an assured international appeal. All the contributions have been subjected to extensive peer and editorial review.

Benda Hofmeyr
 Pretoria, South Africa
 July 2008

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Editor's Introduction: Passivity as Necessary Condition for Ethical Agency?

Benda Hofmeyr

Starting with a radical passivity of the subjectivity, our analysis has come to the notion of "responsibility overflowing freedom" (whereas freedom alone should have been able to justify and limit responsibilities), an obedience prior to the reception of orders. Starting with this anarchical situation of responsibility, our analysis has, no doubt by an abuse of language, named the Good (CCP, 135).

The question concerning the 'radical passivity' of the ethical agent undoubtedly constitutes the proverbial 64,000 dollar question in Levinas scholarship and reception. In other words, the question concerning the radically passive ethical agent as opposed to the active autonomous agent, with the freedom to act independently without an inherent imperative or inner directive steering its actions, is the decisive issue separating supporters of Levinas from his critics. Levinas claims that taking responsibility for others in need follows from neither sympathy and compassion nor a free, rational weighing of options. Rather, ethical action is made possible by a primordial, an-archival responsibility that is pre-consciously felt as the 'Other-within-the-Same'. We are passively obligated before we can actively choose to help. Levinas therefore argues that the needy other disturbs and incapacitates our customary egocentric ways, and that this 'radical passivity' enables us to recognize our inherent responsibility towards others in need. The present collection of essays seeks to appreciate this central conviction underpinning the entire oeuvre of Levinas and to provide its readers with a sturdy framework for conceptualization, problematization and in-depth analysis. In addition, it offers us a much needed critical reevaluation of key issues in Levinas's thought which are, more often than not, uncritically assimilated or taken as a matter of fact.

The Problem of Freedom | While Levinas stresses our overriding responsibility towards the Other, and insists that freedom cannot be the basis for taking ethical decisions because it is self-serving, this volume confronts him with the following unavoidable – but as yet underexposed – critique: how can we continue to care for others if we don't take care of ourselves? And what is the moral significance of responsible action if it is not freely chosen but passively imposed? The central problem underlying radical passivity is undoubtedly the problem of freedom. Is freedom a necessary condition for the possibility of ethically significant behaviour or is freedom, as an expression of self-concern, a hindrance to ethical action?

Levinas's own thinking on this subject is not unambiguous: while his early works stress the fact that we cannot care for others if we do not first take care of ourselves (i.e. the ethical necessity of individual freedom), his later works focus exclusively on the other as locus of our ethical responsibility (i.e. the ethical necessity of the sacrifice of individual freedom). Following this line of thinking, a false opposition has emerged between an absolutized egoism and a crushing altruism that threatens to undermine the recent resurgence of ethical concerns. This problem arguably constitutes a significant lacuna in Levinas scholarship – something which this volume attempts to fill. While it presents us with a much needed critical account of Levinas's thinking, it avoids the pitfall of a biased account that sides with one of these two options. The scholars featured are well aware that his thought cannot be reduced to one pole in a binary opposition, that is, *either* egoism *or* altruism. Together, the varied contributions succeed in mediating between two opposing systems of ethical thought (e.g. happiness vs. goodness; egocentrism vs. ethics; self vs. other). Secondary literature on Levinas has, all too often, been content to contribute towards the fostering of an irreconcilable (or partial) opposition, leading to an untenable ethical position.

The Turn to Ethics | The last few decades have been characterized by an overwhelming preoccupation with ethical concerns in a diversity of fields (including but not limited to Philosophy). Levinas's thinking was certainly instrumental in the current resurgence of ethics, which has established concern for the other as the virtually uncontested cornerstone of ethics. This volume facilitates a critical reevaluation of the work of Levinas, distinguishing between his later work (with its emphasis on [the impact of] the Other) and his early works (with its emphasis on the self as a necessary condition for assuming our responsibility towards the Other). Rather than encouraging untenable ethical oppositions, such a reevaluation seeks to provide a critical framework for fostering the recovery of ethics in and beyond the limited sphere of Continental philosophy.

While this so-called 'ethical turn' constitutes a reaction against the rampant individualism of our times, it also brought the two-pronged danger of a debilitating moralization (already signalled by Nietzsche more than a century ago) in its wake, on the one hand, and moral relativism, on the other. While the thinking of Levinas provides us with a powerful defence against these dangers, it remains a fragile recovery of an *ethical* (as opposed to a *moral*) sensibility, for it undervalues the necessary condition for other-responsiveness: the self and the duties we have regarding ourselves. The critical framework constituted by the various contributions and widely diverse idioms represented in this collection, which covers the whole spectrum from the phenomenological roots of radical passivity to its embedding in Levinas's *Talmudic Readings*, will hopefully prove to be instrumental in augmenting and furthering critical Levinas scholarship.

Contributions | Benda Hofmeyr's contribution (**Chapter 1**) introduces the problematics by way of a contextualization of radical passivity in terms of our present-day ethical quandary and the resultant resurgence of ethical concerns in contemporary

both in a critique and a defence of radical passivity: Hofmeyr commences with a problematization from the perspective of Kant's practical philosophy. She asks whether radical passivity in Levinas's scheme is premised on an understanding of freedom as irreconcilable with necessity; whether any moral significance can be attributed to radical passivity, if it does not coincide with at least a minimum of radical freedom (the freedom of Gyges), instead of merely incapacitating it. Hofmeyr's contribution concludes by following the suggestion of renowned Levinas scholar Roger Burggraeve that the paradoxical dynamics at work in radical passivity can be best explained by tracing Jean Wahl's influence on Levinas. These analyses show that transcendence or openness towards the other would be impossible if it originated in a free subject. According to Levinas, the responsible ego is only possible in being obsessed by another, in the trauma suffered prior to 'the autonomy of subjective freedom' (Dialogue, 27).

Bettina Bergo (**Chapter 2**) excavates the phenomenological roots of Levinas's conception and approach to radical passivity by exploring its relationship with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's multiple perspectives on passivity as developed in his 1954 Collège de France lectures. When we start from the primacy of everyday thinking, or the primacy of an objective world, Levinas's later work never makes sense, Bergo contends. Readers have to beat a retreat into languages of tropes or the uncertainty of a wager about intersubjectivity. Reading Levinas through Merleau-Ponty allows us to weaken the sceptical reception of this wager. Both draw on Edmund Husserl's work on passive synthesis, from the consciousness of internal time to association, and attempt to outline the conditions under which passivity can be approached, fully aware that a thematization of passivity will reinsert it into intentional consciousness, thereby re-establishing its dualism with activity. They aim to evince the phenomenological priority of passivity, while both realize that something other than the passivity of flowing time-consciousness is necessary. Also, something other than 'me' is inscribed in my development and introduces change in the constructive and iterative course of my intentional acts. For both, then, passivity is rooted in a fundamental intersubjectivity that presupposes bodily existence and flesh, though Levinas interprets the flesh in terms of a more ethical focus. As becomes clear in the course of Bergo's explorations, for both Levinas and Merleau-Ponty the ground of meaning is not un-conscious but phenomenologically indeterminate.

The core difference between Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, with regards to the problem of situating passivity and activity, concerns the status of the world. Levinas presupposes that consciousness is in the world but comes into being without a world (out of sleep) and therefore can be interrupted by the other, who is likewise not of this, my private, world. Merleau-Ponty's supposition is that consciousness in all its passive forms is tied to a world. He insists upon the importance of our exchange with a world perceived as the locus of truth and he therefore requires an all-encompassing theory of perception. According to him, if we are to avoid absolutizing positions in which one term of the intersubjective passivity-activity binarism is not 'crushed' into the other, then the either/or that made the duality static must be rendered fluid.

is why Merleau-Ponty's investigations, Bergo argues, open another horizon for us. His enlarged perception shed a different and perhaps more illuminating light on the dynamics at work in Levinas's later phenomenology. In fact, Bergo concludes, it succeeds in expanding, without contradiction, Levinas's phenomenology of fissured immanence. It allows us to conceive the split consciousness of substitution as a modality of perception, possibly akin to falling asleep, or to Merleau-Ponty's sense of dreaming, in which the other becomes all, in which the posited 'I', the body-subject, belongs to a field crossed by other fields or other 'others'.

For their part, Adriaan Peperzak (Chapter 3) and Alphonso Lingis (Chapter 5) respectively incorporate a finely honed critique, moulding Levinas's thinking into wholly internalized and personalized adaptations. Peperzak turns his attention to Levinas's analyses of 'the I' (*le moi or me*). He begins with *Totally and Infinitely* in which Levinas focuses on the human individual as an ego that participates in the 'economy' of a world in which the fulfilling of his/her needs and wants establishes this ego as the centre of all enjoyable possibilities. According to Peperzak, this paradisiacal phenomenology of *jouissance* gives rise to a hyperbolic account of the ego-centric structure of the elemental economy of naive happiness that does not account for the fact that life is rather a mixture of happiness and misery. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas presents us with a new phenomenology of our basic dealing and coping with the world. The basic characteristic of all being is now formulated with the help of Spinoza's expression '*conatus essendi*', an effort of all beings to be, to maintain and intensify their own being at all costs. According to this phenomenology of being, a basic kind of selfishness is constitutive of all beings by the simple fact that they *are*, so that the human dimension of ontology can be characterized as a self-centred, egocentric and egoistic manner of existence. On this – most primitive – level of enjoyment and endurance, then, human life can be characterized in terms of an overall addiction to consumerism and self-centred hedonism. As long as I am passively immersed in an economy of pleasure and pain, I remain addicted. As long as my life coincides with my enjoyment of it, I am not ready to welcome anything other than that is essentially and existentially different from me or my world without trying to subject that other to my own egoist economy. Openness to the Other would necessitate a fundamental disruption of my egocentrism. This disruption, in the form of the appeal of the face of the Other, draws me out of my homely complacency in the world and converts me to a more demanding existence. I find myself 'absolutely passive', wholly determined by the Other's command and demands. What moves me is my *unchosen* Desire for the Absolute (or the Good), which reveals its demands on me through and in the eyes of human Others. This is the essence of my *a priori*, pre-voluntary, 'pure', and 'absolute passivity' that enables selfless action.

According to Peperzak, to live in a world that is good and bad complicates my responsibility not only for others, but also for myself. Levinas hardly ever focuses on my responsibility for my own world and life; but how could I serve you, asks Peperzak, without taking care of myself? His appreciation for Levinas's revolutionary – although not unproblematic – account of this turn from hedonism to morality, or

a 'phenomenology of "me" (*le moi, l'ego*)'. It can be read as a deeply reverential amendment to, if not corrective of, Levinas's own account of *le moi*.

In Chapter 4, Joachim Duyndam responds to Peperzak's phenomenology of 'me' by focusing on enjoyment, distinguishing it from asceticism on the one hand, and addiction on the other. According to Duyndam, asceticism and addiction should be understood as an imbalance between activity-passivity whereas enjoyment – as deployed by Levinas in *Totally and Infinitely* – refers to the radical passivity of self, prefiguring sensibility in the later *Otherwise than Being*, which re-orientates the self-centred self to the Other. The radical passivity of enjoyment opens the 'inverted' self to the transcendent other. Unlike Peperzak, who seems to identify enjoyment with the economy of my egoistic life, with being addicted to my world of consumption, Duyndam stresses enjoyment as providing the subject with a certain measure of independence or separation from being, which is necessary to meet the other as other. Therefore, enjoyment does not so much conflict with the other's appeal to me, but functions as the very condition of my openness to the appeal. This is, as Duyndam argues, what Levinas calls 'the permanent truth of hedonism' (II, 134) as distinguished from the sublime truth of asceticism, which most religions consider to be the way to God or salvation, on the one hand; and from the humiliating truth of addiction, which is commonsensically regarded as the excess of enjoyment, on the other.

In the distinctively more literary idiom that we have come to associate with Alphonso Lingis, Chapter 5 investigates the nature and conditions of the ethical experience in which I find myself *obligated* to act in a certain way. Levinas locates this experience in the encounter with the appeals and demands addressed to me in the face of the neighbour. According to Lingis, there are certain theoretical and practical difficulties with Levinas's conceptualization of the ethical experience. His distinction between our economic life in the world, on the one hand, and the ethical life following the encounter with the face, on the other, means that outside of the face to face encounter, our engagement with the things of the world is exclusively conceived in terms of appropriation: we seize them for our own use. What Levinas does not acknowledge is that the things of this world, and the living creatures of other species with which we share this world, also place demands upon us. For him, the infinite demand of the human face is distinctive in that it is identified with God. Lingis argues, however, that in the measure that God is conceived as 'the wholly Other', constitutive of the otherness of every other human who faces us, the exigency of the human other loses its situatedness in the midst of the common world and its determinateness. How can Levinas identify the alterity of 'the wholly Other' with the needs and wants of another, which derive from the other person's fundamental positivity, from the fundamental satiability of his/her needs? Lingis concludes that Levinas's insistence upon our infinite responsibility for all others, our passivity in the face of our responsibility for their very responsibilities and irresponsibilities, cannot be the basis for effective action.

What comes to the fore in Lingis's expressly *empirical* account of the ethical situation – which, he insists, is not an intemporal transmundane dimension in which

concrete, the transcendental and experiential. When asked how sacrifice or giving – the concrete ethical situation – is possible, Levinas insists that what one will ultimately find, behind consciousness and knowing, is the one-for-the-other of substitution. Critics of Levinas's conceptualization of ethical agency in terms of substitution often complain that the conditions of ethical action are so far removed from the ethical situation that they also make possible the worst kind of subversions of ethics. It is obviously not possible to 'deduce' ethics or politics – in any conventional sense of the terms – from substitution. Although Levinas's thought remains directed toward and grounded in the concrete ethical situation, the interconnection between the formal and experiential remains open to the kind of problematization exemplified by the contribution of Lingis (cf. Bernasconi 2002: 248–249).

Contrary to Lingis's claim that radical passivity cannot form the basis for effective ethical agency, in **Chapter 6** Peter Zeillinger argues that it is precisely the later Levinas's reconceptualized notion of alterity and consequently of subjectivity that renders ethical action – understood as substitution and sacrifice – possible. The argument proceeds by way of a close reading of the 'passage to the Third' inconspicuously located towards the end of Levinas's second magnum opus, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). In response to critique levelled against his early conceptualization of the self as radically independent and autochthonous, the later Levinas introduces the notion of substitution, which entails a self *always-already* 'infected' by the other. The encounter with the other is therefore no longer premised on atheism and autarky, but anarchically located within the self. The an-archy of passivity signals the possibility of ethical agency without the *arche* of identity. Agency therefore does not follow from the possibility of an activity, a freedom, being posited behind this passivity. Rather, the other concerns me precisely because the other is *not* absolutely outside-of-me. The other (*autrui*) is now conceived as the other-within-the same, within me, as the very essence of my humanity.

According to Levinas, our capacity to assume the suffering and failings of the other (*autrui*) in no way goes beyond passivity: it is passion – and it is precisely this passion that moves us. The passion of passivity serves as an effective basis for ethical agency precisely because it is not an empirical accident of the Ego's freedom, but can nevertheless limit itself. In the name of our unlimited responsibility towards others, we may also be called to be concerned with ourselves. The fact that the other person, my neighbour, is also a third in relation to another is the foundation of justice. In other words, in addition to being responsible for my neighbour, I am also responsible for others who exist beside my neighbour, the third. If I could limit myself to my neighbour – the one facing me here-and-now – there would be no problem. However, the third disturbs the immediate relation of the twosome and its intimacy and divides my responsibility. I am no longer first and foremost responsible for the one other, but also for others simultaneously. I cannot know or calculate who came first. What are my neighbour and the third to one another (Peperzak 1993: 229)? Hence the need for consciousness, judgement and justice. Justice does not do away with ethics, however. Justice and the institutions to which it gives rise are susceptible to perversion and corruption. Ethics precedes justice and must continue

'dwells in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity... This passivity... is... an impossibility of slipping away' (BPW, 95).

The final section of this volume is devoted to a hermeneutical retrieval of radical passivity in Levinas's *Talmudic Readings*. Levinas presented most of these readings within the context of the academic seminars of French-speaking Jewish intellectuals. In the wake of the Holocaust, these seminars were intended to instruct university educated Jews, who had mostly gone without traditional Jewish learning, in the wisdom of their heritage. These readings are, more often than not, considered to be of secondary importance by Levinas scholars, who tend to favour his *philosophical* work above his so-called *spiritual* works, that is, the books consecrated to Judaism. But, as Catherine Chalier (2002: 100) points out, the rigidity of this demarcation seems highly questionable given Levinas's definition of Europe in terms of a double loyalty, a loyalty constituted by the tensions and oppositions between the Jews and the Greeks, the prophets and the philosophers, the good and the true (TI, 24). At stake here is the question whether the relation between Jew and Greek is ultimately one of unity or one of tension. Do they constitute the two sides of the same coin – that which we call History (or Being) – or are they ultimately incommensurable? Joyce's phrase 'Jewgreek is greekjew' suggests at least some kind of compatibility between the two, whereas Derrida's revisiting of the terms, while preserving that nuance, uses it to point to what he considers as a contradiction in Levinas (Derrida 1978: 153).¹

It is this apparent contradiction between Greek and Jewish impulses in Levinas's thought that forms Anya Topolski's point of departure in **Chapter 7**. Instead of writing in two separate and contradictory languages – confessional (Jewish/Hebrew) and philosophical (Greek) – she contends that Levinas's thought is articulated in a 'language' that came into being as his thought evolved, a language she dubs 'Judeosophy'. This is a language that allows for a dialogue between Jewish thought and Greek philosophy, a language that challenges the symbolic boundaries between Athens and Jerusalem. It therefore facilitates an interaction and cross-pollination between the two modes of wisdom that form the wellspring of Levinas's thought. This means that one cannot fully appreciate either the purport or purview of Levinas's thinking without grasping how and to what extent it is neither a fusion nor a translation of one into the other, but an intertwining of Jewish thought and Greek philosophy. To further the insight of more philosophically oriented readers, Topolski offers us a brief primer on Levinas's use of the 'language' of Jewish thought. She subsequently focuses on three Jewish 'concepts', which Levinas employs in his so-called philosophical writings and discusses at length in his Jewish writings and Talmudic readings: (1) the face; (2) 'here I am'; and (3) God.

¹Levinas repeatedly points out that it is the experience of rupture that calls us, in the first place, to totalize, which is to say that behind any imposition of Greek totality there is always already a Hebrew rupture. However, he also insists that rupture is always the rupture of a totality, which is to say that behind any Hebrew rupture there is always already a Greek totality. Derrida's point is that the contradiction as it stands provides us with a truthful account of human experience as long as it is understood to mean that the distinction between Hebrew and Greek does not operate in human experience in a mere form (Derrida 2005: 146).

According to her, a proper understanding of radical passivity only becomes possible once we have gained insight into the Judeosophic roots of these three concepts.

In **Chapter 8**, Seán Hand also argues for the philosophical relevance and significance of Levinas's readings of the Talmud by pointing out that in Levinas's detailed historical and generic description of the Talmud – presented in his 1968 introduction to his first collection titled *Four Talmudic Readings* – he insists that the original sages or *Tanaim* compiling the *Mishnah* (or codification of Jewish law) 'most certainly had contact with Greek thought' (NTR, 4). Levinas explores a task of reading (the Talmud) that recognizes but also breaks conventions, seeking to *trans-late* the meanings of a text into a modern language, and so to extricate its universal dimensions from what he describes as the confining details (*où nous enferment les données*) (ibid., p. 5). Levinas deliberately effects a translation of the Talmud into a predominant Western chronology of ideas in order to characterize its aims, but also to challenge a number of assumed priorities. Levinas's translated Talmud is apparently located within a conception of modernity taken from Kant, according to Hand, but also problematizes such an epistemological break through its continued transmission of commentary on commentary (7). Its existence as both *sui generis* and deferring text complicates any assumed supplementary status, including that in terms of its Greek Other. For Levinas, the Talmud's essential (as opposed to optional or supplementary) status is unequivocal in light of the discursive linkage between Israel and the West, upon which he insists. In fact, he defines the essential task of the University of the Jewish state in terms of the translation of the Talmud into 'Greek' (10).

By closely following the arguments put forward by Levinas in 'A Religion for Adults' (1957) (DF, 11–23),² 'The Temptation of Temptation' (1964) (NTR, 30–50)³ and 'Damage Due to Fire' (1975) (NTR, 178–197),⁴ Hand discovers that Levinas's 'spiritual' interpretations repeat and sometimes even foreshadow his philosophical insights. Hand uncovers, for example, the point where 'the freedom taught by the Jewish text starts in a non-freedom which, far from being slavery or childhood, is a beyond-freedom [*un au-delà de la liberté*]' (ibid., p. 40). Moreover, Levinas specifies how his extraction of the notion of otherwise than (the being of) freedom or beyond freedom (as essence) from the Talmudic text, is an intellectual power facilitated by the Talmud itself, which contains a 'permanent dissonance' generated between that which it draws from the biblical text and that which is literally found in the text (39). This beyond-freedom means that from the beginning freedom is un-done or un-made or de-feated by or beneath suffering (*dé-faite sous la souffrance*), and that this condition or uncondition (*incondition*) of being a hostage is

² A talk given by Levinas in 1957 at the Abbey of Tioumliline in Morocco, during several days' study on education.

³ This reading was given in the context of a colloquium dedicated to 'The Temptations of Judaism', held in December 1964.

⁴ This reading was given in the context of a colloquium dedicated to the topic of war, held in

an essential modality of freedom (50). In its primary emphasis on suffering subjectivity rather than the Other, and on the linguistic wrenching that seeks to both say and unsay philosophy, we have a clear demonstration, according to Hand, of how the move from *Totality and Infinity to Otherwise than Being*, which philosophically charted a necessary progression from a critique of totality to the detotalizing of critique itself, that is, from a thematics of the Other to a more radical passivity, is predicted here by, and to a degree predicated on, Talmudic reading.

Far from possessing a subordinate or supplementary status, then, Levinas grants the exegetical process of the Talmud what Hand calls an *ab-original* significance and status in relation to his philosophical work. Neither surpassing philosophy nor yet merely illustrating its complexities in an 'apparently childish' way for the purposes of a religious retreat, here the Talmud signifies as the site of a fundamental relationality, in terms of both the ethical relation and the difference between modes and genres of revelation. At the same time, it operates in a performative mode in order to enact a reconciliation of agency and radical passivity.

In **Chapter 9**, Luc Anckaert concludes this volume with a close reading of 'And God Created Woman' (1972) (NTR, 161–177)⁵ in an attempt to deconstruct the concept of woman in order to demonstrate the radical passivity preceding human freedom. In this reading, Levinas points to the orthographic issue of the duplication of the *yod* in 'vayyitzer' ('made' as in 'The Lord God made man' [GCW, 161]), which registers a duality in the act of creation: a creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) in which human responsibility is at stake; and a creation out of humanity (*creatio ex homine*), in which the relationship between man and woman is established. In the first creation out of nothing, humanity is at issue. Creation is the condition in which man appears in total exposure to the all-seeing omnipotent God. This passivity, without refuge, makes ethics possible. This is called 'the mystery of the human psyche' (GCW, 170). In the second act of creation, the relation between man and woman is established as the concrete shape of the first creation. Here Levinas deepens responsibility to unconditional responsibility. Being created means being made responsible.

In the first act of creation – creation out of nothing – two creatures are created in one: being human means being two precisely in being one. The substance is 'torn apart' in its intimacy. This existence is at the junction of two possibilities excluding one another: conscience and freedom of choice. Together, they create reason. Passively, man is created with an inner division between rationality and arbitrariness. Being human is understood as universal rationality transcending and belonging to the natural order. The created man is a citizen of two worlds. The creature therefore finds itself in an impossible position through an inner dilemma. As obedient to the creator's will, the creature is no longer a natural creature. But as obedient to its inclinations, the creature becomes a stranger to the creator and the law. The creature is torn apart between obedience to the law and giving in to its own desires.

⁵ This reading was given in the context of a colloquium on 'Ish and Isha or the Other par Excellence', held in October 1977.

The meaning of woman becomes clear from the meaning of inner division of being human. In distinction from the human creation, another word refers to the creation of woman: 'built'. The discussion concerning the second creation does not concern the question of whether woman is part of being human. The question is whether she is created simultaneously with man or postulates a second act of creation. In the first case, man and woman are perfectly equivalent and the sexual relationship is part of the essence of being human. In the second case, woman is called to life in a separate act of creation. Man and woman are created in two original acts of creation and are, like the two *yods*, contiguous. Both creatures are persons. The sexual difference is subordinate in this respect. The difference which, in the first place, is an element of being human, characterizes man and woman as open beings summoned to responsibility. From this position in creation, the feminine is understood as an original category of being. This original fact of being is not based on any sexual difference, but is possible through a division of being in which different people comprise a different category of being. Different people are the full and different manifestation of creation in their responsible actions in the world.

Man is the last created being. The world preceded humankind and has not come into being through the projections of man. On the contrary, the world is given to man, which means that man can reply to what he has not made himself, and can be responsible for creation as he received it. Humanity is, therefore, precisely situated in a responsibility for all. As the last aspect of creation, the authentic humanity of man and woman consists in a responsibility for all. The sexual difference is subordinate to this.

Anckaert concludes his contribution by turning to the alterity of the son as the incarnation of created responsibility, specifically with reference to Kierkegaard's and Cathérine Chalier's commentary on the Abraham story. The son – Isaac – teaches (his father) by asking the question about the reality of the covenant that registers itself in being created. From the reality of the covenant, the question of creation appears in its ultimate passivity.

What is at stake here in the final pages of this volume is the burning question concerning the limit of ethical responsibility. How far can the subject extend in replying to the appeal of the other? At which point does ethical responsibility become violence and evil? Does absolute responsibility, founded in the covenant of creation, mean the destruction of the subject? For if the subject becomes the neighbour's hostage in responsibility, this may well destroy his/her own identity. Anckaert concludes with a Levinasian response to these questions through a reading of the tale of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac – the third promised in the covenant.

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