Abstract

In this article, Kierkegaard’s depiction of the teleological suspension of the ethical is contrasted with Levinas’s articulation of the emergence of the ethical in the Akedah narrative drawing on Jewish, Christian, and Chinese philosophical and religious perspectives. The narrative of Abraham’s binding of Isaac illustrates both the distance and nearness between Kierkegaard and Levinas. Both realize that the encounter with God is a traumatic one that cannot be defined, categorized, or sublimated through ordinary ethical reflection or the everyday social-moral life of a community. For Kierkegaard, the self is forced back upon itself, exposed to the otherness of its singular unfathomable source; in Levinas a traumatic exposure and delivery over to the Other occurs. It leads to an inescapable ethical responsibility more fundamental than either religious faith or theoretical cognitive knowledge. The rupture and aporia of Abraham’s sacrifice appears to destroy the categories of the ethical. Yet it might suggest something other than the nihilistic or voluntaristic destruction of ethics. It indicates instead a different modality of the ethical; an aporetic and paradoxical ethics that resonates in part with classical Chinese Daoist sources such as the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi.

I. The Akedah and the Dao

In this article, by focusing on Emmanuel Levinas’s alternative to Søren Kierkegaard, I bring a crosscultural and comparative perspective—drawing on Jewish, Christian, and Chinese sources—to bear on Kierkegaard’s depiction of the suspension of the ethical through his reading of the narrative Abraham’s binding of Isaac in Fear and Trembling in relation to Levinas’s contrasting articulation of the provocation of the ethical. Their respective analysis of the Akedah—which is the older transliteration of Aqedah used by the authors under discussion—narrative of Abraham’s binding and near
sacrifice of Isaac is indicative of the distance and nearness in their thinking that each pivots on the relationship between the ethical and the religious in the encounter with alterity, infinity, and transcendence.

In the writings of Kierkegaard and Levinas, the encounter with God occurs as a traumatic interruption and aporetic encounter with a transcendence that cannot be defined, categorized, or sublimated under a concept. While in Kierkegaard, the self is forced back upon itself, exposed to the otherness of its singular unfathomable source, a traumatic exposure and delivery over to the Other as other person occurs to the self in Levinas. In this incalculable exposure, I am—to use the language of Levinas—inescapably “accused,” called, and elected to an inescapable ethical responsibility—even before those who do not recognize me or persecute me—that is more originary than either faith, knowledge, or conventional morality.

The interruption, paradox, and aporia of Abraham’s sacrifice might seem to break and transcend the ethical, leaving us with a voluntarism and terror of arbitrary divine commands or with a nihilistic loss of all ethical orientation. However, the troubling narrative of Abraham and Isaac in the land of Moriah might suggest something other than either a nihilistic or voluntaristic destruction of ethics. It might provide a different modality of experiencing and reflecting on the ethical, indicating the aporetic and deconstructive performativcharacter of the ethical that resonates in part with early Chinese “Daoist” (daojia 道家) sources such as the Daodejing 道徳経 and particularly the Zhuangzi 《莊子》. These different sources and examples from radically diverse contexts can provide no unified understanding of ethics, nor form the basis of a system of ethics. They suggest the impossibility of such a system and only incompatible variations on the differences and ruptures that constitute the ethical itself.

II. “Here I Am” in Intercultural Perspective

It is described in Genesis/Bereshit, 22: 1–2 how Abraham responded to God’s call with the words “Here I am”:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֵלֵיהֶם אֶל עַבְרֵי, וְאָמַר אָדָם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֵלֵיהֶם.

And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: “Abraham”; and he said: “Here am I.”

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אִנָּךְ חָי אֲשֶׁר אִנָּךְ חָי וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֵלֵיהֶם אֵל עַבְרֵי.

And He said: “Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”
It is noticeable in this passage—and this would be recognized outside of the Abrahamic religions by, for example, the orthopraxic Hindu Mīmāṃsa School with its prioritizing of Vedic commandments and their self-justifying character—that this “take” in “take now thy son” is in the imperative form “qakh.” Abraham is being commanded to act. It is a commandment (mitzvah). In Levinas’s reading of the Jewish Torah, God’s command occurs prior to its communication or a list of commandments. The exposure to God is enacted through an appellation and question prior to reflection and communication itself.

In a communication without restriction or symmetry between agents, God’s address is answered—in a sense anachronistically, before it is articulated—with the performative utterance or speech act “hineni.” This is the “Here I am” of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, and Isaiah, in which the stress is on the “here” rather than the “I” that modifies it. This place of the “here” singularizes the “I” in its response to the divine address. Or it is evaded. In evasion, Cain denied his responsibility for his brother Abel. Jonah fled his prophetic mission without being able to escape God and his own self in its responsibility. With God’s question “Where are you?” (ayekah), Adam cannot hide as he is exposed in his nakedness in communication and is consequently summoned to respond. With God’s personal address “Abraham” and “here am I” as his confirmation of obedience, Abraham is bound to binding (Akedah) his beloved son Isaac.

Abraham’s “Here I am” has a deep resonance in the Jewish tradition. Adam’s hearing the voice of God is an anarchic shattering of the self-enclosed garden of the egoistic self by the glory of the infinite that leads the ego to sincerity before and responsibility to the Other. God’s initial question, “Where are you?” calls for the “Here I am” that Adam refuses to speak. Levinas notes that it is here where God becomes involved in words so as to bring humans to words. This entering into language—as interpersonal performative saying rather than the propositional said—is an awakening to responsibility.

Adam’s “Here I am” differs from that of one of the creation narratives of the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad in which there was only a single mass shaped like a human in the beginning. The first being (purusa), the primordial self (ātman), utters “Here I am” (aham ayam)—that is, a self-reflexive “It is I”—out of its solitude, thus bringing the “I” into being from itself. Motivated by the desire, fear, and loneliness of this self-reflexive I, the plurality of the world unfolds from out of its own immanence. The ultimate reality of things in this Upaniṣadic narrative is the self coming to know the entirety of the world by awakening to itself. It likewise differs from the impoverished foolish “I” and the “I alone” (wo du 我獨) of chapter twenty of the Daodejing. This “I” parts from the ordinary customary life of people.
and things and responsively nurtures them by being nurtured by the nourishing mother (ṣī mu 食母), that is, the generativity of the dao 道, in this chapter’s concluding statement (Wo du yì yu ren, er guì shì mu 我獨異於人，而貴食母。). This expression of being singled out in the dao, the disruption of ordinary everyday attitudes and the reorientation existentially indicated in the “I alone,” occurs in three chapters of the Zhuangzi.

Whereas the anarchic and transformative immanence of the dao might be revealed in the “I alone” of Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi, Levinas stresses the disruptive moment of unconditional exposure and anarchic transcendence to which the Hebraic “Here I am” answers. This is not the self-assertion of the I asserting its place in the sun and maintaining its virility and mastery in the world. This saying of the I—in its passivity it is not quite appropriate to call it a speech-act much less a propositional thesis—accuses and signifies “me” in God’s name. The accusative “me,” accused and naked before God, is at the service of Others who gaze at me and speak to me, “without having anything to identify myself with, but the sound of my voice or the figure of my gesture—the saying itself.”

Such a response—the saying in its nudity and sincerity prior to the reification of the propositional and ontological said that needs to be in a sense rectified—to God’s provocation is to bear witness and enter into prophecy for God and Others. “Here I am” is a response to an accusation and command that occurs before calculative prudence and rational deliberation about self-interest and rule-following take hold. The self is neither brought into being nor to the truth of itself through a self-reflexive feeling such as anxiety or a self-reflective awareness. For Levinas, responsibility in the face of the infinite is the condition of becoming a self and the ethical condition of individuation: “The word ['I'] means ['Here I am'], answering for everything and everyone.”

Levinas does not beg the question of Kierkegaard’s challenge to the universal, that is, that it is lower than the singular, by arriving at a universal altruistic benevolence, which—like its contrary egoistic self-interest—already presupposes the interruptive ethical event exposing the self to the Other. More radical than a general altruism is the message he finds in Isaiah’s “Here I am! Send me.” Here “the ego,” he claims, is “stripped by the trauma of persecution of its scornful and imperialist subjectivity” and is reduced to “a transparency without opaqueness.” The obligation enacted in the “me, Here I am for the Others,” of the accused I “in its non-interchangeable uniqueness of one chosen,” is without reciprocity. This is the condition of uniqueness, individuality, and election. That is, it is a being chosen prior to and without my voluntary choice, a responsibility which I either confirm—for example, “Send me!” (shelakh-ni)—or which I attempt to evade.
like Jonah. This unique chosenness is also at the same time substitution of the self for the Other, to the point of dying for the Other and being responsible for and to each person, even my persecutor.21

Substitution, and accordingly the ethical displacement of the ego, is intrinsically asymmetrical for Levinas. This asymmetry operates differently than the asymmetry of gradated benevolence or humaneness (ren 仁) articulated in Confucian conceptions of “establishing others” (liren 立人) and “promoting others” (daren 達人).22 It is true that the asymmetrical priority demanding recognition of the other person over one’s own self is maintained in numerous passages of the Analects (Lunyu 《論語》): whether I recognize others is more important for me ethically than whether others recognize me.23

Since the thesis asymmetrically prioritizing the other person attributed to Kongzi 孔子 is not based on and even transcends instrumental calculation and exchange, it can be said to be genuinely ethical. Still, can it be genuinely ethical without the moment of radical or absolute transcendence, which many interpreters such as David Hall and Roger Ames find foreign to classical Confucian thought, articulated by Kierkegaard and Levinas?24 Early Confucian discussions of asymmetry do not displace or bracket the reference to self-concern found in the demand to broaden, cultivate, and improve oneself. This is not then the self-negation and self-sacrifice of altruistic moralities. Nor is the human respect for heaven (tian 天) and its mandate (tianming 天命) in the thought of early rujia 儒家 equivalent to the asymmetrical dis-relation between the transcendent monotheistic God and the individual self that we see at work in Kierkegaard and Levinas. In the case of Confucian ethics, the asymmetrical priority of the other person occurs as an immanent demand to respond to the other in the context of ethical self-cultivation and communal ethical life, rather than as an absolute transcendent divine command.25

Substitution is for Levinas anarchic and anachronistic even as the command is obeyed before it can be made or heard.26 This can be understood in the context of the Jewish tenet that obligation precedes understanding and interpretation, or that ethics is prior to hermeneutics as Levinas would say. This primacy is articulated in passages such as Exodus 24: 7 in which the people say first “We will do” and then add “and we will listen” (na’aseh ve-nishma’).27

Levinas insists that I am asymmetrically responsible to the point of substitution for the Other, even as I cannot expect the Other to substitute herself for me, since such an expectation “would be to preach human sacrifice.”28 This non-transferable, irreversible, and gratuitous responsibility is the traumatic passivity of my obligation for and to the Other, rather than my obligating the Other.29 This substitution extends to the point of persecution. I am hostage to the Other,
even when the Other troubles and persecutes me.30 It is the I who is addressed and singled out as responsible through the Other’s unavoidable face and irrevocable height.

In his philosophical works such as Otherwise than Being, Levinas does not establish a moral theory or guide to moral action, but interrogates the conditions of the ethical.31 Nevertheless, the hineni (“Here I am”) of the Akedah presents a peculiar challenge to his thought, insofar as Levinas is committed to interpreting the experience and category of the religious through the ethical, such that there can be no separation of the obligation to God and the Other even as he indicates their non-identity.32 This understanding of the religious motivates his criticisms of visions of participation in the divine and enthusiastic, fideistic, and voluntaristic portrayals of God. Analogous to the portrayal of Kongzi in the Analects, speculation concerning the supernatural and the transcendent is deemphasized and bracketed without being rejected, such that one’s own ethical disposition and comportment become the central concern.33

In neither Levinas nor early Confucian thought is there a “secularization” of the religious, since religious practices are interpreted through the ethical without being thereby eliminated. Nonetheless, the aporetic paradox of absolute sacrifice revealed in Kierkegaard and Levinas appears to be distant from classical Chinese thought, which has no drama similar to the Akedah. The Confucian interpretation of ritual sacrifice to spirits (shen) prioritizes its ethical significance in maintaining a sense of tradition for the sake of sincerity (cheng) and ritual propriety (li) as normative conditions of social life and self-cultivation. Confucianism give the impression of being a variety of this-worldly thinking, as seen in the charges articulated by Mozi against its disenchantment of heaven’s will (tianzhi) and ghosts and spirits (guishen). Even the judgmental heaven and spirits of Mozi enforce a worldly moral order that they do not contravene. Revealing an affinity with Levinas’s vision of Judaism, the ethical orients the religious at the same time as the ethical is realized in ritual life in early Confucian texts.

Despite the centrality of Abraham’s “Here I am” in his writings, Levinas frequently elucidates this utterance through Isaiah’s inspirational call to prophecy, in which the reply precedes the appeal: “Before they call, I will answer.”34 Whereas Abraham is an indication of Jewish ethical humanism in interceding with humility for mercy for Sodom and Gomorrah, Isaiah’s prophetic mission responds not only to God’s address, but to that of the contrite and the humble, as he calls for sharing bread with the famished and welcoming the most wretched into one’s home.35 It is Isaiah who expresses God’s consecration of “the stranger, the widow, and the orphan.”36 Focusing on the
ethical significance of the “Here I am” in the Hebrew Bible, Levinas’s most explicit and detailed discussions of the difficulties of the *Akedah* appear in his criticisms of Kierkegaard’s retelling of the narrative of Abraham’s binding of Isaac.

### III. **Contextualizing the Question of Abraham**

Abraham did not only reply to God with the words “Here I am.” He used these very words in response to his son who God commanded him to sacrifice:

> ולאור, נונה אל-אבערב, וָלָאָשָׁר, וָלָאשָׁר, נפַּי נִנְּה; וָלָאשָׁר, והָֽהַ נַגְּשִׁי גַּאוֹלָה.

> וּלְאַלְּעַל.

> אֶלָֽה.

> אִישׁ אָבֵי, אִשֶּׁה אָבֵי.

> לֹא אָבֵי אָבֵי.

> וָלָאָשָׁר, נפַּי נִנְּה; וָלָאשָׁר, והָֽהַ נַגְּשִׁי גַּאוֹלָה.

> וּלְאַלְּעַל.

> אִישׁ אָבֵי, אִשֶּׁה אָבֵי.

> לֹא אָבֵי אָבֵי.

> And Isaac spoke unto Abraham his father, and said: “My father.” And he said: “Here I am, my son.” And he said: “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt-offering?”

The priority of ethics has led to using moral norms to measure religious truth and validity for thinkers such as Kant. Since morality sets the standard by which the validity and worth of religious claims ought to be evaluated, claims contradicting that standard should be rejected—despite every other appearance of being a genuine religious command, miracle, or revelation. In Kant’s deontological understanding of the ethical, morality necessitates the universality of practical reason and the recognition of each person’s autonomy as an inviolable end-in-itself, which challenges the particularity and partiality of positive religions. The Enlightenment’s reduction of religion to its rational ethical core was protested by Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher did not articulate the relation of the ethical and the religious as an aporia or paradox, he argued for the uniqueness of the religious experience that had its own social and ethical character in contrast with the morality of abstract universal reason.

Another strategy highlighting the ethical truth of religion was proposed by Leibniz, who did not reject the *Akedah* narrative, but relativized its sacrificial dimension by differentiating the obligation and the act: “It is true that God may command something and yet not will that it be done, as when he commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son: he willed the obedience, and he did not will the action.” In Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, in which voluntaristic and legal positivist conceptions of God’s will are rejected as arbitrary, despotic, and irrational, God’s command to bind Isaac and later command, through the angel, not to sacrifice him are—through the distinction between command and will—both ostensibly consistent with each other and the goodness distinctive of God.
The traditional Jewish reading also prioritizes the ethical moment of God’s mercy, which does not allow Isaac’s sacrifice and “represents the abandonment of pagan sacrifice.”40 This is why, as Hermann Cohen notes, it is called binding (Akedah) rather than sacrifice and “manifests the reciprocal effect of Abraham’s love for God and God’s love for him and his descendants.”41 In an intriguing account of the issues at stake between Levinas and Kierkegaard in the context of Jewish readings of the Akedah, Claire Katz argues that religious responsibility calls for and culminates in ethical responsibility to the extent that the actual drama—that of living within the ethical order indicated in the face of the Other—begins for Levinas after it has concluded for Kierkegaard.42

Detractors depict the Akedah as the primordial model of patriarchal monotheistic violence that never asks or concerns itself with the mother Sarah, which they argue continues to condition the social reality of followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.43 The sacrifice of one’s only beloved son prefigures the central Christological event, in which God’s mercy does not intervene for the sake of this one singular concrete human being who is sacrificed for the sake of redeeming the many. Even if this story were not the absolute negation of the ethical, it remains a difficulty for interpretation and—given its questionability and horror—it should not be too easily reconciled with the ethical as Kierkegaard emphasizes. But it is not only Kierkegaard; there are a number of authors in the Jewish tradition who emphasize the horror, questionability, and uncertainty of Abraham’s trial and the extraordinary and exceptional character of the Akedah that can and should not be explained away.44 Philo in particular insisted that Abraham’s conduct is “wholly novel” and cannot be derived from custom or tradition.45 Abraham’s unique significance cannot be underestimated; indeed, it serves to distinguish the Judaic from the pagan: “It is of more importance than all the actions of piety and religion put together.”46 No one is like or equal to Abraham, as the pseudonymous figure Johannes de Silentio would later maintain.

Portrayals of the Akedah, such as that of Kierkegaard, present a challenge to Levinas’s interpretation of the religious. One can well ask whether Johannes de Silentio’s paradoxical trial of faith—in which the ethical is the temptation, in which murder becomes “a holy and God-pleasing act,” and in which responsibility is beholden to no one except God—is inherently incompatible with Levinasian ethical responsibility for human Others.47 In emphasizing the conclusion of the Akedah, and God’s benevolent mercy instead of Abraham’s traumatic exposure to the commandment to sacrifice his only beloved son as a burnt-offering, does Levinas underestimate the significance of its drama stressed by Silentio? Does Levinas miss the shudder and
paradox of a God, whose primordial command is “Thou shall not kill” as shown—prior to the announcement of the Ten Commandments in *Exodus* 20—by the narrative of the advent of murder in Cain’s killing of his brother Abel, and the command to kill Isaac on Mount Moriah? Does he misunderstand the faith that overcomes despair and the obedience that overcomes one’s questionability, which makes Abraham a new and unique hero for Philo and Kierkegaard?48

These suspicions can be pushed further: Does the critique of Kierkegaard’s reading as a variety of fideistic enthusiasm, and his avoidance of a Christian—or perhaps modern Protestant—understanding of faith, lead Levinas away from the Akedah’s questionability and horror? Should we conclude that Levinas—comparable to Kant before him—does not allow the religious to exceed and challenge the ethical that is ultimately its measure? Is this another reduction of the religious to a modernist ethics that undermines its very meaning? In response to such questions and suspicions, and readings that promote them, I suggest that Levinas’s explication of the Akedah is more multi-faceted, just as the Jewish tradition itself is.49 The Akedah cannot be read purely ethically for the sake of the human Other, or as a story of moral edification; nor is it the trans-ethical suspension of the ethical suggested in *Fear and Trembling* by Johannes de Silentio—the pseudonymous authorial name Kierkegaard uses in this work.

In Levinas’s analysis, the binding of Isaac cannot represent either the negation or affirmation of the ethical. It cannot be contained by Kierkegaard’s either/or and choice between the ethical and the religious, because it constitutively presupposes violence, betrayal, and the aporia of the ethical; that is, mercy for the Other appearing within the midst of and interrupting this scene of patriarchal religious violence. Levinas concludes that the founding moment of Israel, and of Abrahamic religiosity, is not then Abraham’s willingness to ritually perform the sacrifice of his beloved son commanded by God, but the intervening mercy that interrupts it.

**IV. THE SUSPENSION OR THE PROVOCATION OF THE ETHICAL?**

In its third expression in the Akedah narrative, Abraham responded to the call of God’s intervening angel with the words “Here I am”:

> וַיֹּאָמֵר אַל֞וּ אִנִּי אַבֹּרֶהְא אֲבֹרֶהְא רָאִיתִי

And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said:

> “Abraham, Abraham.” And he said: “Here am I.”50

On being asked in an interview whether one should evaluate Biblical characters such as Samuel according to ethics, Levinas
responded: “I don’t believe one can kill like this face to face as easily as Samuel does. There are definitely certain things in the Bible that shock us, and I think that one shouldn’t start with these. But even in these texts, you need to listen to what they are saying.”

It is undeniable that Levinas prioritizes the ethical moment of the Akedah, arguing for the primacy of the third hineni, when Abraham listens to “the voice that brought him back to the ethical order.” Levinas notes that it is remarkable that Abraham listened to and obeyed the first voice, God commanding his son’s binding, but “that he had sufficient distance with respect to that obedience to hear the second [divine] voice—that is the essential.” Listening and responding to the second voice of God spoken through the angel does not negate his obedience to the first voice of God; yet it does transform its significance by placing God’s first traumatizing address, and Abraham’s two previous utterances of “Here I am” to God and to Isaac, in their ethical context. To this extent, Levinas recognizes the enigma and violence of the transcendent that “traumatizes and compels.” Given this trauma and violence in the midst of which the ethical appears, Levinas cannot be said to sublimate or overcome the religious for the ethical, as might be said of Kant’s rational religion, even as the ethical is the necessary and genuine even if impossible and hence aporetic demand of the religious.

Levinas accordingly insists that the intervening moment that interrupts human sacrifice and reveals God’s mercy for Abraham and Isaac should be interpreted in the context of Abraham’s failed intercession with, and plea for mercy from, God for the sake of Sodom and Gomorrah. That is, for Levinas, Abraham is not Johannes de Silentio’s “father of faith”; Abraham’s story in all of its fragility is a more elevated revelation of mercy.

Kierkegaard also did not forget how Abraham prays for others, and not selfishly for himself, as evidenced by his prayers to God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah. But instead of being a Kierkegaardian hero of faith or new model for faith, with the activity, subjectivity, and return of the self to the self that this suggests for Kierkegaard, Levinas comments how “Abraham is fully aware of his nothingness, mortality, and fragility: ‘I am but dust and ashes...’” The humility of “me, dust and ashes” is a “destitution which reveals glory.” It is such humility for the sake of Others in dialogue with the transcendent that marks Abraham’s elevation and election as the father of ethical humanism.

It is Abraham’s humility rather than a masculine pride and virile self-assertion that, as Catherine Chalier notes, leads him to the urgency and promptness of the “Here I am” “without taking time to inquire about his reasons.”
The divine law therefore is not the voluntaristic or positivistic command of an arbitrary and despotic will:

... an oppressive grip exerted upon the freedom of the faithful. It signifies, even in its constraining weight, all that the order of the unique God already provides for participation in his reign, for divine proximity and election, and for accession to the rank of the authentically human.61

Not unlike Leibniz’s anti-legalistic conception of God, on this point at least, yet without his concern for systematic reconciliation of Abraham’s initial and final *hinenei* in the *Akedah*, Levinas insists that God is best interpreted through universal goodness rather than the primacy of will, power, or subjective faith. The primacy of the good over the sovereign will serves, for Leibniz as much as for Levinas in his hermeneutical practice, as an interpretive guide to those difficult Biblical passages that seem to make God despotic and contradict divine goodness. But by not taking these exceptional passages as the norm and by listening more carefully, another kind of hermeneutics is possible. Given such an interpretive approach, the *Akedah* neither discloses the primacy of subjective faith nor the voluntaristic conception of God suggested by divine command theory; it is an indication of the priority of the good that is shown in God’s mercy and grace.

The humanism of the other person revealed in Abraham and the prophets exhibits the ethical truth of monotheism more fundamentally than faith and its subjectivity. This difference in response to alterity distinguishes Judaism and Christianity for Levinas. Prior to faith and its subjective “I believe”—and though it should be noted that faith is for the sake of “this life” and is “a task for a whole lifetime” that culminates in the moment in Johannes de Silentio’s account62—is the embodied and performative “Here I am,” in which one is singled out before God and in service to the Other, and “in which God comes to be involved in words.”63

In spite of Kierkegaard’s radical decentering of the conventional self, and his emphasis on how faith makes one an alien in the world, Levinas regards Kierkegaard’s Abraham as still having too much expectancy and hope, too much activity and agency. Levinas, to an even greater degree than the conceptions of *wuwei* 無為 articulated in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, stresses passivity and responsiveness in order to overcome the narrowness of the ego. Kierkegaardian subjectivity remains too close to the egoism of the same, an irresponsible and thus “atheistic” egotism of pure faith.64 Levinas rejects the thesis that religion concerns faith as a kind of belief, subjective truth, or what he argues is an egotistical and self-interested search for consolation, redemption, and salvation. Levinas contends that in Kierkegaard
these belong to the violence of the *conatus* and preservation in being, instead of being turned around and moved toward the Other. Faith, including its radical Kierkegaardian form, continues to speak “the language of being,” which is in Levinas’s analysis inevitably egotistical and narcissistic in its self-concern.

Levinas persistently distinguishes between the indifference of the ontological “there is” (*es gibt*) and the personal “Here I am” (*me voici*). Abraham’s relation with God reveals a more fundamental passivity, the passivity of inspiration that is a waking and sobering up, rather than the enthusiasm of participation and intoxication. It is a passivity that would be more passive than even the abjection in faith and suffering truth imagined by Kierkegaard; “Life receives meaning from an infinite responsibility, a fundamental diacony that constitutes the subjectivity of the subject.” Levinas interprets diacony, which is a Christian concept of serving those in need, as the condition of becoming a self. The ego does not make or posit itself; it comes into being only through the Other such that ethics (alterity) always precedes ontology (identity). Levinas’s reading resists reducing the Biblical narrative of Abraham to the conclusion, or to mercy alone, which would suppress the suffering and trauma central to the dynamic of the ethical self for Levinas. The story of Abraham is a teaching of mercy and grace without excluding the problematic of justice, as God commands both the binding and unbinding of Isaac, and destroys Sodom and Gomorrah despite Abraham’s pleas for mercy.

According to Levinas, *hineni* is a fundamentally ethical saying interrupting the self for the sake of the Other. Yet the first instance of *hineni* in the *Akedah* does not appear to be for the sake of the human Other (Isaac), but in response to the pure command of the divine Other. And Abraham’s second *hineni* appears to be a lie and an evasion of Isaac’s question—which perhaps as inadvertent prophecy becomes the truth as events unfold—or is it, as Levinas comments of Agnon, a question without answer or response? Does it indicate the impossibility of responding; the impossibility of ethics without the unethical, without betrayal, complicity, and sacrifice?

According to Levinas, it is the third *hineni* in response to the angel that is crucial. It reveals God’s mercy in a call that turns Abraham toward the ethical. Does this reading underestimate the trial, temptation, and suffering—emphasized by Kierkegaard—that leads up to the ethical turn? Levinas does underemphasize the moment of faith and its suffering that would turn the exception into the norm, because in his interpretation the narrative does not concern God’s ability to supersede the ethical (as in the fideistic reading of Kierkegaard) or to arbitrarily decree any possible command through the divine will (as in voluntaristic divine command theories). This does not signify a return
to the ethical after its religious suspension, as a particular reading of Kierkegaard might suggest, but indicates instead an intensified affirmation of the primacy of the ethical beyond sacrificial exchange of the firstborn for a god’s favor or disfavor.

The Levinasian understanding of the ethical is defined by singular mercy rather than universal justice or brutal compulsion. It places in question a strict and limited justice governed by a logic of exchange and sacrifice. The angelic intervention disrupting human sacrifice binds God and the Other more tightly together for Abraham, such that God’s command without service to Others becomes incomprehensible. Despite appearances, then, and in keeping with one traditional Jewish reading, the *Akedah* teaches a lesson in the interruptive possibility of mercy in opposition to the despotic power and blind obedience that exclude mercy.

**V. Either the Ethical or the Religious?**

Johannes de Silentio defined the ethical as the universal that annuls the singular. The singular that interrupts and breaks with the ethical is interpreted by Levinas as violence. Suspicious of the violence of his language, Levinas explicitly challenges Kierkegaard’s point of departure, challenging his distinction between the ethical as the universal and the religious as the singular. There is no irresolvable aporia between the ethical and religious in Levinas, as interruptive aporia does not take place between spheres or levels of the same existence as it does in Kierkegaard’s writings. It occurs “between” self and Other. Yet it is not this “between” that binds them together and separates and individuates the “I” and the “you,” insofar as the “between” is a space of immanence, but only the transcendence and height of the Other, the formless and the invisible that shines forth in the Other’s visible face. Accordingly, both the ethical and the religious are interpreted as proceeding to my singular and asymmetrical responsibility from the Other who transcends my existence.

Although Abraham bound and almost sacrificed his beloved Isaac to follow God’s initial command, Levinas does not attempt to resolve the disparate elements of the narrative, as Leibniz or Kierkegaard did, into God’s goodness or the power and truth of faith. Despite the sacrificial command and near killing of Isaac, its meaning only becomes apparent after God’s mercy is revealed. Levinas insists that Abraham’s asymmetrical responsibility is for the singular human Other, instead of the divine Other, even as it has a moment of universality to the extent that ethics concerns the fate of all, including those who are deemed unworthy of life. The *Akedah* narrative
culminates in the mercy—which is breaking through the violence of the ontological realm of being and its logic of sacrifice—that saves Isaac as this singular concrete human being. This is exactly where the ethical is discovered. In this sense, ethics cannot be subordinated to theology or religion, as “creation, omnipotence, rewards, and promises” are always secondary to responsibility of one-for-the-Other and to love, “the trace of the coming of God to mind.” Nonetheless, we might ask from the perspective of Kierkegaard: does Levinas adequately account for, or does he evade, Abraham’s lack of initial resistance to God’s order to sacrifice his child Isaac?

Levinas describes how ethics cannot be derived from theoretical or cognitive knowledge about the ontic facts of the world and their ontological conditions, including theological ones, even as my pre-reflective responsibility inherently elicits reflection. Reflection, and its tendency toward rationality and universality, is not omitted from the ethical or the religious as anti-cognitivist interpretations of Kierkegaard and Levinas maintain. Instead reflective reason is related to practice, and derivative of the chosenness and election, in being uniquely and singularly responsible for the Other without expectations about the Other. That chosenness is responsibility rather than superiority is indicated in the Jewish conception of “covenant” (berit). Ethics is accordingly inherently religious, in the sense of being irreducible to and interrupting the logic of exchange, the economy of being, prudential calculation, and the human sacrifice these require and excuse.

The multifaceted threads interweaving Levinas’s interpretation of the Akedah with traditional Jewish readings consist in the intervention of mercy, which disorients and reorients the self toward the ethical order, and the renunciation of human sacrifice. The disorienting aporetic narrative of Abraham’s binding of Isaac consists of God’s command that binds Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and God’s merciful unbinding of Abraham’s sacrificial action. His drama does not so much transcend or suspend the ethical in devotional faith as it indicates the anarchic and immemorial beginnings of the ethical in generosity and the gift; that is, in the mercy, grace, and love that interrupt the demand for inhuman sacrifice.

According to Levinas, there is a “Torah before Sinai,” which—from Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel to Abraham and Isaac—already involves the drama and complication of the ethical. Ethics does not begin in the self and totality (i.e., in the order of the same), which cannot recognize the Other and refuses even its own brother and neighbor. The ethical is always anachronistic; it can be neither pure nor “original,” since it arrives with fall and betrayal. Neither law nor faith can be separated from the betrayal, the complicity, and the fragility that is constitutive of the human condition. Ethics means to
be complicit—to be both betrayer and betrayed—and yet to be without excuse for one’s betrayal. It arrives from afar and in the night in the prophetic moment. It breaks through in the Other in whom the self hears God’s word.77

The holy word is irreducible to conventional morality and the calculations of politics. Yet it is not without its own ethical resonance that disorients and reorients human expectations and calculations. The disruptive word, depicted by Levinas as more exceptional than any kind of faith, is in fact the prophetic saying of a justice to come; that is, the transcendent good beyond being that exceeds, escapes, and resists both the objectivity of beings and the subjectivity of the self.

VI. Anarchy and Aporetic Ethics

The “an-archy” and “in-finity” of the good expressed by Levinas appears as something foreign and alien in the realm of the visible. It appears if at all only as irreducible to the common space of identity; that is, as diachronic, asymmetrical, and aporetic. The human genuinely occurs “between two”; in not denying, like Cain, that one is one’s “brother keeper.” Such constitutive co-humanity, and the priority of the ethical, is indicated in a different manner in the ethical-anthropological understanding of the human (ren 人) as “co-human” or constituted between two humans (ren 仁) in the Mengzi 《孟子》.

The primacy of the ethical for Levinas means that the self or ego presupposes an Other without being able to control, equalize, or neutralize that Other. Just as there is no ethical relationship that is not shot through with paradox, impossibility, and aporia, and so demands the constant vigilance and renewal of the ethical in response to the Other, there is at the same time nothing prior to or more ancient than the ethical that did not “begin” with the written laws handed down at Sinai. The ethical moment is aporetic because it is “impossible”: the possibility of the impossible, the otherwise, interrupting the usual, the probable, and the calculable. Derrida formulates the aporetic character of ethics through the notion of impossibility: “To do the impossible cannot be an ethics and yet it is the condition of ethics.”78 The aporetic and interruptive is the condition of the ethical; as such, ethics is anarchically irreducible to moral conventions, rules, virtues, or to a given form of historical ethical life (Sittlichkeit). The ethical is a promise, as Derrida proposes.

It has been argued that Kierkegaard and Zhuangzi can be interpreted as essentially religious thinkers who share a spirit of anti-rationalist skepticism about the claims of reason and logical argumentation, all as part of an ultimately soteriological strategy.79
Nothing might appear more foreign to Levinas—with his defense of the ethical, the humanistic and personal, and the rational—than the standard interpretation of early Daoist discourses as problematizing and overcoming ethics, humanism, and rationality through a naturalistic, impersonal, and “amoral” sageliness. It is undoubtedly the case that the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* place conventional, rule-based, and moralizing sensibilities profoundly into doubt as the decay and loss of the dao. Nevertheless, the problematizing of limited conceptions of morality need not entail the rejection of the ethical. Indeed, the infinite overflowing systematic totality is a characteristic of the ethical as an interruptive and transformational transcendence. The disruptive and reorienting moment of impossibility that Levinas and Derrida describe as the ethical is articulated in its own way—immanently hidden in the flow of the visible world rather than sustained through the appeal to the transcendent—in the “uneven” and aporetic ethical sensibilities evoked repeatedly in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*.

We can perceive in these early Daoist sources the paradoxical call to cultivate what cannot be cultivated and to not harm, care for, and nurture all things by anarchically abandoning both conventional and philosophical models of ontology (that dictate how the world is) and morality (that dictate how we ought to behave). In contrast to the coercive imposition of one vision of totality, one model of the world, or one moral ideal of behavior onto oneself and others, there is an ethics of transformation. For instance, such an ethical attitude is indicated in an immanent “shifting rightness” (*yishi*) expressed in the *Gengsangchu* chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. In this later “miscellaneous chapter,” which sheds light on themes throughout the *Zhuangzi*, one freely comports oneself toward and thus nourishes life-processes instead of controlling, manipulating, and regulating them to their detriment and needless sacrifice.

Key words of the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* such as *ziran* (as a natural or artless attitude of self-generating self-so-ness) and *wuwei* (as a dispositional “non-acting action” or a non-calculative unforced responsive and nurturing being in the world) do not entail either amorality or immorality, much less nihilism. They suggest instead an ethical disposition and way of comporting oneself through the aporias and paradoxes that constitute life and the care for nurturing life. The anarchic moments exposed by Zhuangzi in the reversals of the dao resist reified cognitive and linguistic categories by unfixing the fixation of the said. Such a saying of the ethical cannot be reduced to moral calculations, conventions, and rules that in fact betray and undermine the ethical itself. This impossible responsiveness of aporetic ethics, its uselessness in the face of the purportedly useful, is
articulated though the ongoing transformation of immanence in the texts associated with early Daoism and through the moment of transcendence breaking through the rigidity of immanence in Levinas. In these two ways of thinking, there is an ethically motivated suspicion of abstract transcendence and of reified unchanging immanence that Kierkegaard challenged through his existential psychologically oriented analyses unfolded most intensely in works such as *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849).

Laozi and Zhuangzi are often thought to offer a more naturalistic way of being attuned within the natural world, in a way that is unencumbered by the restrictions of so-called “Western” morality, monotheism, rationalism, and scientism. It is consequently presented as an alternative to the flaws of “Western” reason and Middle Eastern religiosity. Early Daoism appears as a way of liberation in both religious readings emphasizing soteriological mysticism and in philosophical interpretations accentuating an anarchic and poetic naturalism. Both strategies, however, agree on the need to liberate oneself from restrictive conventional moralities, which produce violence and alienation; they unfold an anti-ethical and an anti-humanistic standpoint that is necessarily more true to a human dwelling within either environmental nature or a mystical cosmic order.

Both the mystical and philosophical readings present early Daoist texts as a mythic exotic other of modern Western rationality and individual personalism. The impersonal interpretation of early Daoism as undermining the possibility of the ethical self and ethical agency is shared by a number of its Chinese and Western critics who perceive it as an inhuman and inhumane doctrine that depersonalizes individuals, sacrificing them as “straw dogs,” and subordinating them like floating leaves in the river of incontrovertible fate.

**VII. Conclusion**

The misconceptions of early Daoism, Levinas, and Kierkegaard discussed above need to be further problematized. First, there is an unconventional yet nevertheless ethical and even humanistic dimension discoverable in the works attributed to Laozi and Zhuangzi. Second, there is an appreciation for a this-worldly sensibility and sensuousness, of bodily and social affectivity, in Levinas’s writings. In these two ethically oriented critiques of morality, ethics is not rejected. It is broader and more radical than moralistic judgments and habitual morality based in calculation and conformity. One finds indications in both varieties of thought of an ethics that happens in the encounter—in the face of the Other and in response to the myriad
things—that cannot be reduced to customs, rules, or prejudices. The Akedah and the dao are to an extent two instances of aporetic ethics that challenge morality for the sake of another ethical sensibility, another way of relating to ourselves and the others around us.

Finally, if one turns one’s attention toward the Kierkegaard of Works of Love (1847), it becomes clear that Kierkegaard cannot be interpreted as an antinomian or fideist anti-ethical thinker as several readings of Fear and Trembling conclude. The paradoxes of the ethical of the latter work in fact lead into the ethics of love for the neighbor in which the unique ethical significance of the singular person is revealed. This ethics of love of the other cannot be reduced to the morality that sacrifices the singular to the universal, articulated in the former work. To this extent, it is dubious to over identify Kierkegaard with Johannes de Silentio’s suspension of the ethical, which is one step in the realization of a different conception and experience of ethical life.

Zhuangzi, Levinas, and Kierkegaard offer three distinct instances of confrontations with conventional morality for the sake of encountering and enacting the ethical in how one—the “I alone” and the singular unique one—dialogically lives in the midst of others. These three occurrences of aporetic ethics—albeit with the undeniable plurality and the irreducibility of their voices, strategies, contexts, and contents—might be said to converge in the endeavor of reorienting their readers toward the ethical through its destructuring crises and paradoxical aporias. The possibility of the ethical—as anarchic and reorienting naturalness, alterity, and singularity—is disclosed in the aporetic tensions of its impossibility.

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ENDNOTES

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2. On Derrida’s deconstruction and Daoism, see Chung-ying Cheng, “Deconstruction and Différance: Onto-Return and Emergence in a Daoist Interpretation of Derrida;”


9. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 144.

10. Ibid., 149.


12. Ibid., 1.4.2–3.


15. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 149.

16. Ibid., 114.


18. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 199, endnote 11 and 17; Isaiah 6:8.

19. Ibid., 146.

20. Ibid., 185; Levinas, Entre nous, 228.

21. Levinas, Otherwise than Being, 146.

22. See Haiming Wen, Confucian Pragmatism as the Art of Contextualizing Personal Experience and World (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2009), 114.


24. David Hall and Roger Ames contrast the Chinese experience of immanence with the Western dualistic conception of transcendence throughout their writings, for example: Thinking through Confucius (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 101, 205. Others, such as Lauren Pfister, have argued for the importance of religious transcendence in early Confucian thought. See his article, “Re-examining Whole Person Cultivation: Reconsidering the Significance of Master Kong’s ‘Knowing the Heavenly Decree’ and Yeshuah’s ‘Beatitudes,’” Ching Feng 1: 1 (2000): 69–96.

33. I argue for this claim in “Levinas and Early Confucian Ethics,” 177–207.
34. Isaiah 65:24; Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150.
40. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 397. Note that this is one traditional Jewish interpretation that takes the story as marking the transition from human to animal sacrifice, which is instigated by God himself as a pedagogical exercise. However, the slate cannot be wiped clean to the extent that Isaac becomes a tragic figure; his later blindness, such as his inability to distinguish Jacob from Esau, is attributed to the smoke in his eyes while on the sacrificial pyre.
41. Ibid., 397.
46. Ibid., 32, 425.
49. Spiegel elucidates the diversity of Jewish readings and appropriations of the Akedah in *The Last Trial*.
59. Ibid., 117.
63. Levinas, *God Who Comes to Mind*, 75.
67. Ibid., 59.
73. Levinas, *Proper Names*, 69.
74. Levinas, *God Who Comes to Mind*, ix.
76. Levinas, *Entre nous*, 222.
84. Martin Buber intriguingly hints at the dialogical and personalist (i.e., ethical individualist dimensions) of the *Zhuangzi* in Martin Buber, *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang Tse* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1910); see Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber’s Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), ix.