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Samuel Moyn’s Origin of the Other is a provocative and well-researched work of intellectual history. It refreshingly, if sometimes imperfectly, challenges orthodox secular and theological interpretations of Levinas by complexly and richly contextualizing the sources and itinerary of Levinas’s thought in order to clarify its historical significance and potential limits. Moyn begins by portraying Levinas’s primarily secular Russian-oriented upbringing in Lithuania amidst the late Neo-Kantian and Bergsonian intellectual context of the 1920’s. Especially noteworthy is the underemphasized role of Jean Hering, professor of protestant theology at Strasbourg, who developed a Barthian inspired phenomenology of the religious — an intimation of things to come — and introduced Levinas to phenomenology.

Despite the contrary impression created by Richard Wolin’s positive but misleading review in The Nation (February 20, 2006), Moyn cautiously and
non-polemically demonstrates the undeniable importance of Levinas’s early enthusiasm for Heidegger as well as his subsequent critique and search for an alternative in the face of Heidegger’s embrace of National Socialism in 1933. Yet, far from reductively caricaturing Heidegger’s thought, and thereby Levinas’s concerns, Moyn carefully articulates the difficulty of avoiding and overcoming Heidegger — not just for Levinas but for Heidegger’s students and, as he argues in the conclusion, contemporary philosophy — and particularly the problematic of intersubjectivity bequeathed by Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time* of social “being-with” (*Mitsein*) and individual “being-there” (*Dasein*). Moyn sees a duality between neutral, impersonal, and anonymous social being and solitary and solipsistic *Dasein* — rather than *Dasein* as the very individuation of *Mitsein* — that forced Heidegger’s students and readers down alternative paths. Whereas Arendt responded to the ethical deficits of Heidegger’s account at first with an Augustinian-inspired charity and then with secular universalism, and Löwith with communitarianism, Levinas reached out to theological sources such as Rosenzweig in the midst of the strong reception of Barth and Kierkegaard in France during the 1930’s.

In addition to elucidating Levinas’s sometimes repressed Heideggerian point of departure, including Levinas retrospectively excising Heidegger from earlier writings, Moyn analyzes the unacknowledged origins of central concepts such as transcendence and the other in protestant theology, i.e., in the shift from humanizing and subjectivizing God in the “liberal theology” of the nineteenth-century to the insistence on the absolute transcendence, revelation, and alterity of God in Karl Barth and the German Kierkegaard revival of the 1920’s. Although this movement initially appealed to Schleiermacher for help in its sacred war against the historicizing, psychologizing, and relativizing of religion, it soon interpreted him as its primary source. Moyn does not consider how Barth borrowed notions from Schleiermacher while critiquing him, since feeling and devotion point beyond themselves in dependence on something wholly other and infinitely higher than oneself. These theological debates were gradually transferred from Germany to France. Moyn proposes that their French reception in the 1930’s illuminates Levinas’s creative appropriation and transformation of Rosenzweig and Judaism. Contending that the emphasis on the continuity between Rosenzweig and Levinas essentializes Judaism by giving it a more continuous and stable identity, Moyn argues for their discontinuity as part of his strategy of proving the radical and innovative character of Levinas’s Judaism. Instead of discovering a timeless ahistorical essence, Levinas reinvented Judaism in response to his own philosophical questions and the historical crises of the time. It was Rosenzweig who grounded ethics in the particularity of historical Judaism and a theology of revelation. For Rosenzweig, human relations are not asymmetrical but only the relation between God and humans, thus explaining the distinctive character of religious as opposed to human love. God’s love is the model of human love rather than vice-versa. Despite asserting the asymmetry of the human and the divine, Rosenzweig explicitly rejected Barth’s avowal on the utter otherness and complete transcendence of God. Humans cannot reach God’s height, but God is not restricted by such alterity. As Judaism itself records, God can always step over that boundary...
into immanence and touch the human. Likewise, Rosenzweig did not reject Hegelian totality for “difference” or protestant individuality but for a new integration of God, individual, and community rooted in revelation.

Levinas did not loyally follow but betrayed Rosenzweig, a criticism true to Levinas’s own insistence on the impossibility of not betraying the other. Levinas reversed and “secularized” Rosenzweig’s vision by eventually explaining the religious through the ethical and the human-God relation via the asymmetry of intersubjective human relations. Just as transcendence and alterity only began to take shape in Levinas’s thought during the 1930’s, ethics took on its primacy for Levinas after the second world war and early post-war works in the context of cold war debates concerning individual moral responsibility vis-à-vis collectivist political engagement. As Levinas’s thought is historically associated with the antifascist personalism of the 1930’s, so it is with the anti-communist personalism of authors such as Gabriel Marcel in the 1950’s. Like Levinas, Marcel emphasized the absolute character of individual responsibility against the Hegelian-Marxist dream of utopia and the justification of violence for the sake of progress. Levinas was clearly anti-Stalinist, however, he was not as unsympathetic to Marx as Moyn suggests (see Caggill, Levinas and the Political, for a more detailed and nuanced account of Levinas’s politics). Relying on Judith Shklar’s liberal critique of French personalism, and its supposed apolitical and individualistic conservatism, Moyn contends that the tension between ethics and politics is irresolvable when it is conceived from such an individualistic and moralistic position, even if it involves a shift from self to other as in Levinas. For Moyn, Levinas’s philosophy is caught in a constitutive contradiction between attempting to secularize theological concepts and their inherent theological character as well as between ethically universalizing the Jewish tradition and its historical particularity. Yet the very question of modernity, and the challenge of Heidegger that continues to haunt contemporary philosophy, is whether secularized concepts can transcend their religious contexts and justifications. Can ethics be justified in purely human terms or must it rely to some degree or another on the religious?

This is a challenging work that Levinas scholars will need to seriously consider. However, it leaves many unanswered questions, especially as it concludes with Totality and Infinity and dismisses the radical transformation of Otherwise than Being. Further, one might wonder whether this last mentioned aporia is in Levinas or in Moyn. If Levinas’s was truly interested in secularizing ethics, and to some extent he was and must be, then why did Levinas retain and rely on highly charged religious language? Given its value for Levinas, and the pertinent detail that he explained the religious through the ethical but did not reductively eliminate religion in ethics, religious language must be more than merely rhetorical if not dogmatic theological truth. If the religious in Levinas is not so much a failure at secularizing ethics as it is a vehicle of its enactment, then we might need to more carefully distinguish the dogmatic content of theology from the philosophy or phenomenology of the religious. After all, Levinas’s “secularization” questioned the theological not by dismissing but by addressing, saying, and unsaying the religious. One might accordingly question Moyn’s claim that ethics needs to be secular, immanent, and autonomous
rather than involving obedience to something outside of oneself — or het-
eronomy to the transcendent. Yet excluding all dependence would not sim-
ply exclude power but love, charity, and respect. Even if we are in need of a
satisfactory critical social theory, this argument does not bring us any closer
to it. Unfortunately, Moyn’s claim problematically conflates ethical respon-
siveness, heteronomy as the other in the self that is the prerequisite of acting
for the other, with its preclusion in mere sacrifice and subordination. In an
important sense, and despite the many merits of this book, Moyn’s appraisal
of Levinas’s liberalism of the other in the name of the conventional liberalism
of the self betrays Levinas’s challenging legacy and emancipatory potential for
contemporary thought, one which we have only begun to address.

Eric Sean Nelson

Sharon Todd, Learning from the other: Levinas, psychoanalysis and ethical
possibilities in education, Albany, New York, State University of New York

“Saying bears witness to the other of the Infinite which rends me, which
in the saying awakens me” (E. Levinas, “God and Philosophy”, 1975).

Levinas’s well-attested distinction between the “saying” and the “said” is
reflected in recent explorations of his work in the context of educative prax-
is. Although Levinas did not address pedagogic questions as directly as did,
for example, Martin Buber in Between Man and Man (1947), his stress on ethi-
cal obligation and the absolute role of the Other in communication have found
strong resonance among educators. One strand of writing has investigated the
latent meanings of Levinas’s gnomic texts for the practice of moral, religious
and environmental education. Here, the content, or what is said in pedagogy
is thematized. In contrast, other researchers have stressed the importance of
Levinas’s thought for understanding the face-to-face encounter of teacher and
learner, at the axis of educational practice.

Although the premise of her book is the practice of social justice educa-
tion, Sharon Todd adheres closely to the second approach. She is more inter-
ted in the possibility of ethical praxis through education, than in a teaching a
specifically Levinasian ethics. Indeed, as guest editor of a special issue of the
journal Studies in Philosophy and Education in 2003 and in several other pa-
pers, many of which are collected and extended here, she is emerging as a cen-
tral figure in bringing education to light through dialogue with Levinas. Writing
as associate professor of education at York University, Canada, Todd’s work
appears in the shadow of North American anxiety over the possibility of vi-
olence both towards and by the sociological “Other”, whether seen in the re-
pressive schooling of aboriginal peoples or in fatal school shootings.

This wide-ranging text is steered by the question, “What constitutes ethi-
cal possibilities in relation to learning from others?” (p. 3). The argument turns
on the distinction between learning from the Other, where alterity is given due
recognition as opposed to learning about the Other, in which otherness is ren-