

11-2022

Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other by Eric Nelson, SUNY Press, 2020 pp. 480

Emilia Angelova
emilia.angelova@concordia.ca

Curtis Hutt
chutt@unomaha.edu

Leah Klmanson
Leah.Kalmanson@unt.edu

Eric Nelson
eric.nelson@ust.hk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Angelova, Emilia; Hutt, Curtis; Klmanson, Leah; and Nelson, Eric (2022) "Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other by Eric Nelson, SUNY Press, 2020 pp. 480," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 12, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.12.1.1197>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol12/iss1/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Reviews/Response

Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other

Eric Nelson. SUNY Press, 2020. pp. 480.

Emilia Angelova,^{*} Curtis Hutt[†] and Leah Kalmanson[‡] with response from Eric Nelson[§]

The Relation of the Ethics of the Material Other to the Rights of the Stranger

Emilia Angelova

My response introduces several main arguments from Eric S. Nelson's *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (2020) by paying special attention to his term of the stranger, or the third party, and how it does not lie outside of the dialogical relation between

^{*} **Emilia Angelova** is an associate professor of philosophy and chair of the philosophy program at Concordia University.

[†] **Curtis Hutt** is an associate professor of religious studies, founding director of the Leonard and Shirley Goldstein Center for Human Rights and director of Programming at the Schwalb Center for Israel and Jewish Studies at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

[‡] **Leah Kalmanson** is an associate professor and the Bhagwan Adinath Professor of Jain Studies at the University of North Texas.

[§] **Eric S. Nelson** is associate professor of Humanities at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology and author of *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (2020).

I and you. At the end I raise a question about a theoretical discourse of political reality today which benefits from this positioning of the relation to the third: aspirational universal rights, the nation-state, and the stranger.

Nelson's most recent work is provocative and novel, arguing for a connection between Levinas and Adorno that is seldom made. Adorno affirms "non-identity thinking" (2020: 44, 86), distinguishes it from Hegel's theory of synthesis as sublation, and sets it up as the third term—not to be negated by the complicity between the twin logics of a constitutive idealism of individualist subjectivity and the domination of nature. Levinas affirms the asymmetry of the ethical relation to the Other, distinguishes it from the absorption of the Other to Being in Heidegger, and sets that up as a third term—evading subsumption to the twin logics between the ego of impersonal, anonymous individual being and the ontology of being and the thought of enframing both social totality and nature. Nelson shows that rather than determinate negations, both these third terms, instead ought to be read through Kierkegaard's teleological suspension, as reversals within the system, general equivalence of representation and instrumental rationality (181). All told, this promotes a materialist and a constructivist ethics, primarily aimed at justifying discourses oriented to decolonizing the marginalized subject, extending to the nonhuman (79). The book offers a critical re-evaluation of modernity, amidst the best of its kind.

The argument posits the relation to the third party as common to both thinkers—Levinas's word for the Other and "all the others" (2020: 121, 125–28), and Adorno's word for the prophecy of redemption of "damaged life" (58, 82) and "natural history" (50, 86). In the actions of appropriation and co-appropriation, as processes of the mutually addressable humanization of the "human," this relation elaborates exposure to the "senselessness" of suffering (81).

Nelson pays equal attention to both these figures, but it suffices to introduce here through Levinas this relation to the third, a mode of delivering ethical meaning, tied to the constitutive materiality of the "face" of the Other. Ethics is not transcendently presupposed, prescriptive, and autonomy-oriented; rather, it is indicative of a more radical sociality we belong to.

The ethical relation sets itself up within the system and code of language but is irreducible to it. Levinas recalls materiality and need, in the relationality of acts emphasizing the "food, drink, shelter," and "tenderness" that I offer "to" the other. (2020: 82, 97). Materiality has no representation in the system of language; it is a diacritical form,

subjecting the I anterior to the ego's will of self-mastery and self-control over my speech. The idea of ethics as responsibility to and for the Other is the paradox of my subjectivity, where the will is not an attribute that I possess. The paradox of my subjectivity is temporal since constitutionally it is "after the fact" of the encounter that the relation of self to oneself occurs. Yet the recurrence of the self-relation is normative, because articulating the subjectivity of self is a possibility only in the account of realizing the priority of suspending violence against the "stranger" and the "child"—to use two of Levinas's images (200).

To sum this up. Through their third terms, both Adorno and Levinas appeal to something other than bourgeois codes of morality as higher than ethics, namely, a possibility available within a general economy and a political economy, too, of the exchange of goods and pleasure. Both appeal to alterity, as opposed to the ideological identity of presentism, isolated individuals. Nelson employs, in this theory of extended thinking and intelligibility, the term "interruption" (Hegel, Derrida) to understand both thinkers as allied through a common interest in an indirect materialism, affinitive with Derrida's *Specters of Marx*.

In more detail, here are some key points of the argument. First, we see the often-neglected claim about the face of the Other revived—that the face *is* the materiality of the Other. This approach takes not a religious but a "rhetorical" language as centre in Levinas. Choosing materiality through the face, as the center around which to unify Adorno and Levinas, is novel—both are thinkers of "other-constituted" (2020: 47, 117), inter-material life and the "evasion" of oppression.

Second, Nelson, who was trained in German idealism, skillfully shows the two share a common philosophical inheritance vis-à-vis the tradition, which they receive in anti-doxastic and anti-authoritarian ways. Both receive Hegel through the early Marx's materialism, the messianic account of time and history, and the theory of alienation of labour. More importantly still, both treat language as filter and the empty symbolic ground of reality, from which emerge all of the individual's personal and political agendas.

To substantiate, Nelson recalls how Hegel engages the legacy of the French Revolution ("freedom toward the object," 2020: 50, 57, 77, 86; cf. Hegel, 1991, paragraph 10). Hegel claims that Culture, the Enlightenment's battle with Faith, does not exhaust the concept (58). Rather, for Hegel, metaphysics as a system resorts to ideas such as justice and time, which apply to empirical beings through the symbols of language, tying the ground of the relation to the Absolute, and to a quasi-transcendental principle unifying the

subject—over these symbols, neither social institutions nor the individuals in them in a given epoch hold sway. In Hegel approached in this manner there exists no way of overcoming the schism of substance inhering in itself as subject and between the general address of the Other and the singularity of the addressee. For a moment, I will make a remark about Hegel—before returning to Nelson.

To expand on this narrative a bit. I seek to emphasize the power of the actuality of the schism of Reason in Hegel, an asymmetry of obligation to the other in embodied concretely situated ways of being. Recall Kant who presupposes that “Reason is all reality” (Hegel, 1977: M343), which made notorious Hegel’s view of it. Hegel is right that Kant recovers the uncanny—at the cusp of Culture and the Enlightenment as its most historico-philosophical event. Namely, by way of overcompensation for the loss it suffered (French Revolution, Absolute Freedom and The Terror, in both Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*), a solipsistic, anguished Kantian Reason as unitary subject thinks itself supreme. And yet, as Hegel shows, it is not the case that Reason reigns supreme. Rather, the objective movement of Hegelian negativity finds the *free* subject as emerging in the continuous movement—from “comedy inherent the Greek democracy,” through the advent of revealed religion into the logical totality traced in the French Revolution. In Hegel, the subject precisely does not strive toward an Other in order to reduce it to the same. Precisely the opposite.

That is, as Hegel writes:

“But that an accident and such, detached from what circumscribes it, what is bound and is actually only in this context with others, should attain an existence of its own and the separate freedom—this is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy (*Energie*) of thought, of the pure ‘I.’” (1977: M19)

The boldness of phenomenological articulation here stems from a negativity that is not posited in a subject anguished by an inaccessible sociality or transcendence. Negativity is the “mediation” that reformulates the static *terms* of pure abstraction as a process, dissolving and binding them within a mobile law of thought.

Returning to Nelson’s work. Hegel is not taken up as a Statism—the State does not have to be repressive. By affinity with Hegel, the unifying role of thirdness is not as synthesis—this indebts both Levinas and Adorno to a messianic account of time, tied to the materiality of the face, the address of the other (2020: 255–56). Treating consciousness

and its engagement with not simply its inner/outer relation to the object, but as enlarged in its non-relational relation with exteriority, works transversally across disciplines. This yields the “intermaterialism” and the expansive materialism of the weak powers of self-overcoming—regulative concepts and boundaries are dissolved.

Nelson brilliantly contrasts this Hegel—as a philosopher of the socially-situated and embodied political modernity, the actualization of the concept as a self-revising process of rationality becoming, taking responsibility for Being-becoming, being-for-itself—to Kant, who acclaimed Enlightenment as a “perfectionism” (2020: 245) of the conditions of possibility, given and delimited by the concepts of pure reason itself.

Assessing this contrast from Kant to Hegel pays off exceedingly well for the entirety of this project. (2020: 43, 73, 77) The severity of the self-discipline of reason as set in the interiority of a self-enclosed subjectivity, over and against an unchanging being and a thing in itself, leads Kant to value individual autonomy and conscience over heteronomy, and dualism between theoretical and practical reason, where norms, values and idealization are internally set up to disavow facts. The schism in Kant lies with the counterfactual method of producing propositional validity into true judgements, built into the system of reason as debasing “facts” of their value, normativity and embodiment in definition (89).

Nelson is an uncanny reader for the ways he inhabits diverse schools and thinkers, not limited to the West. The legacy of Levinas in contemporary philosophy has been productively engaged through Derrida’s deconstruction (2020: 195). On the other hand, Adorno’s legacy has been resisted in Habermas and Honneth’s third generation of the Frankfurt school. For Nelson, failure to detect both a positivity and critique (e.g., negativity in the non-identity thinking of nature) in Adorno is akin to the failure to detect the same things in deconstruction, for example in Habermas’s *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

When Nelson structurally decodes the causes of this failure to engage productively Adorno, and by extension Levinas, what becomes apparent is the inability, a crystallization of bad memory, pain, guilt, a hasty foreclosure plaguing contemporary political language, Habermas and Honneth’s models of democracy, “ethics of discourse,” and “freedom’s right,” respectively (2020: 61). In the argument against foreclosure of the symbols of modern institutions and politically structured wholes, the reader will find Adorno’s ethics of non-identity thinking and material others superior.

Nelson substantiates his argument by singling out Adorno's perhaps most "revolutionary" (2020: 59) volumes of *Minima Moralia* (239) and *Aesthetic Theory*. Adorno does not relent in defending the semiotic practices of "music" (68); discourses through his "natural history," "mimesis," (61) and "art" (70) defend a more "expansive materialism." (59–63) For Nelson, key to this critique of language "is the nonidentity between language and the contents and objects it seeks to signify." (50) Instead of inventing new deontological or deliberative rationality discourse ethics, or even care ethics, we are rather to look behind the tropes of semantic or legalist positivism or originalism, around which the so-called countries of the First World build current ethics of symmetry and reciprocity. "Ethics of the material other," (94) as Nelson coins the phrase, is felicitous, and in both Adorno and Levinas, the underpinning notion is that of the primacy of the "indirect materialism" and non-phenomenological encounter of the other, where the encounter, far from being the end, is that with which giving an account of subjectivity, as being for the other, begins.

Nelson's overall critique is directed toward the "pathologies of freedom" (2020: 289, 324) as nested into power-autonomy relations of epistemological knowledge of subject and object relations, where normativity rules warrant validity claims of symmetry and reciprocity that represent one power for and to another power—symbolic status is granted to those who can purchase it and excludes those who cannot. The question therefore becomes how to disrupt dominant ideologies of symmetry and to reorient from out of the ethics of the primacy of the asymmetry of the other person. Capitalist value systems of maximization of profit relegate nature to secondary and derivative status. In today's political moment of various related crises, such as race, class, gender, colonialism, and the capitalist crisis-tendency (60, 211), exposure to acute vulnerability is far from invisible.

To address the crisis-tendency, Nelson begins by affirming the methodological priority of "nature"/ "the materiality of the face of the other." Before we change the world, we ought to change our practices of *episteme*, and concomitantly re-evaluate the importance of disrupting dominant practices of subordination and cycles of "interhuman subordination."

At this juncture, I want to introduce an author's view, Kristóf Oltvai's position of 5 October 2021, which appeared in *Phenomenological Reviews*. The author takes issue with whether liberalism necessarily forgets its enabling truths—e.g., asymmetrical rights of the Other, or it forgets only contingently. The author argues that Nelson opts for the

latter throughout his book, but on the face of it, the book is an argument in favour of the former, therefore Nelson confronts Habermas and Honneth as neoliberals. Neoliberalism, then, rejects the early Adorno's materialism of non-identity thinking, rejecting as well Levinas's politics of the third. But the author argues, assuming Habermas and Honneth's neoliberalism and the nation-state has very good reasons for rejecting Adorno and Levinas, for indeed only the former framework allows that "unrestricted solidarity" is a possibility.

How does the objector proceed? The author makes a point that a conflation between capitalism and liberalism causes Nelson to be at odds with his own position. I do not think that Nelson conflates the two. However, the opportunity for Nelson to address this cluster of assumptions that the objector raises is too good to miss.

The objector writes:

"Ultimately, then, Nelson's embrace of "unrestricted solidarities" (2020: 2) may contradict some of his sources' terms." "I can have an unrestricted sense of responsibility for every possible Other, or a solidarity with the actual others I encounter in my embeddedness in my particular context, but unless 'the face of the Other' is but a cipher for a universal ontological determination (which Levinas would surely reject), I cannot have both."

For the objector, Levinas aligns with Arendt: "Arendt certainly lauds such welcome, but her basic argument is Burkean. Universal human rights are an aspirational norm, but they are meaningless outside of a concrete political community; the nation-state's particularism is thus the vehicle that realizes the universal." And Arendt would agree with Levinas that "justice remains justice only, in a society where there is no distinction between those close and far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest" (Levinas 1998: 159). But, the objector emphasizes, she would stress that "said 'society' must be bounded" if we wish to "retain a lived and practical meaning for 'passing by' the neighbor."

On my view, the above cited objection does not provide the point at which Nelson and the author of the review might actually disagree, if indeed the two disagree at all. I would like to invite Nelson to discuss this controversy.

REFERENCES

- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nissbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1806). *Phänomenologie des Geistes*; H.-F. Wessels und H. Clairmont (eds.) (1988). Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag./ *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller. (1977) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- Levinas, Emmanuel, (1998). *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (1998) (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).
- Nelson, E. S. (2020). *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (New York: State University of New York Press).
- Oltvai, Kristóf, Z. (). Eric S. Nelson: Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other. Phenomi. *Phenomenological Reviews*.

Nelson's Defense of Asymmetrical Ethics: On Religion and Human Rights

Curtis Hutt

Eric Nelson's *Levinas, Adorno and the Ethics of the Material Other* (SUNY 2020) is a dense text that deserves more than a single close reading. Compelling arguments and insights are found from beginning to end on a very wide range of topics related to the work of Levinas and Adorno. I am going to focus less in this short response on Nelson's assessments of and comparisons between Levinas and Adorno, or how the two thinkers read other philosophers and social theorists. Instead, I want to hone in on Nelson's central, innovative defense of asymmetrical ethics and how it might impact the ways that we think about both the study of religion and human rights.

Nelson champions an asymmetrical ethics not based on the inherent identity, sameness, or equality of human beings but upon our exposure to the "prophetic" manifested in the demands of material others. Asymmetrical ethics differs from established liberal egalitarian ethics not just in terms of its focus on inequalities but in terms of its scope. Asymmetrical ethics do not simply concern the interactions between similar humans, rational animals with souls that are capable of acting autonomously. Rather, it purports to open wide a door to ethical encounters with disparate material subjects, others unlike ourselves, who—to use the language of Levinas—impose ethical demands and obligations upon us. A primary, introductory example of this is Nelson's work found in part one of the book *After Nature*. Many people working in human rights studies today understand that our well-being as human beings depends upon our ability to forge new interactions with the natural world around us—severe environmental crises impact human rights. We become more and more aware of important intersectionalities between human rights and environmental ethics. It is not easy to formulate ethical priorities related to these, however, when you approach the specific topics at hand with a view of the world where the "material" or "nature" is, by definition, of an entirely different kind than "spirit/soul/mind" or human culture. Critically, Nelson's asymmetrical ethics takes a step beyond naturalizing and "materializes" human rights. He completely dismisses old familiar dualisms that have not only removed humans in theory from the natural world but put them in a domineering

position over it. At once, Nelson promotes a critical natural history and ethics of our human interactions with an un-souled material world—other human beings included. The biggest question that I will raise in this response, is will this specific kind of strategy work in the world that we find ourselves in today. Why not do the opposite and following indigenous traditions around the world, move to ensoul different parts of nature—extending protections to rivers and mountains as we in the United States have already done for businesses?

Obviously, in the face of the cries of other people, it is clear there are all kinds of differences between humans that make them relatively unequal and unknown to one another. Some are biological. Others are the consequence of entrenched cultural and socio-political hierarchies. Sub-personhood is ascribed in multiple ways. It proliferates normally with little difficulty as habit and reflex. We continually find ourselves in lopsided relationships with other human partners, whether these are children or parents, students or teachers, patients or doctors. Many are de-humanized by market forces in addition to natural and other human guided catastrophes. In what sense do we need to reconcile ourselves with others not present? Whether these are across the world from us or time. Asymmetrical relations are also apparent with ancestors and descendants. Can the past or future suffering of such others impose moral obligations upon us as well? I'm not certain that these more distant kin qualify as "material others" though they were and will be more than mere narrative constructions. Certainly, asymmetrical relationships in many cases are the result of brute power relations. Not only are we blind to the suffering of unequal others that we never even consider because their lives are obscured to us, but such blindness is often acted out knowingly and, yes, intentionally. Damaged life, in spite of the call of the prophetic material other, is mostly hidden life. I have been convinced of this in my work as a historian with a keen interest in subaltern pasts. I have only become more and more aware of the differences between what people think they know about cherished pasts and what actually happened. The past, especially that of subaltern groups, imposes from the outside an ethical obligation on us as historians too. As opposed to simply passing on received authorized traditions, historians optimally rewrite and compose new historical narratives based upon new information about the past. Regularly, religious and political discourses "disguise" asymmetrical relations to secure dominance. This has an impact upon what we end up learning about religions in the past. Interestingly, Nelson's portrayal of unequal power relations—alongside his Levinasian appeal to the prophetic—provides

scholars interested in religion and human rights some explanation of my central query concerning the complicated relationship between the two. Why is it that some religious conduct is complicit in the most disturbing human rights abuses, while at the same time other behavior can be a motivating source for lessening suffering in this world? The answer would be, that these two tracks derive from very different sources. I'm not so certain. In addition to trying to escape from the traps of old familiar dualisms, I fear that the only way forward here requires some meaningful incorporation of the prophetic which we must assume does not emerge from context-less vacuums.

If I didn't know Eric Nelson's work beforehand, I might have been able to characterize myself as a "stunned critic." His deep readings of so many theorists span a couple of centuries and continents. I would even add that his work is successfully comparativist even if comparison based upon some underlying identity is theoretically untenable—for example, between Jewish and Asian thinkers. To what extent do we share a lifeworld, replete with not only "insufficient" (Levinas) and "imperfect/damaged" (Adorno) conditions but perspectives? Nelson is less pragmatic than myself; as he knows, I also prefer Husserl over Levinas on alterity (Hutt 2009). Understanding empathy as a result of some kind of "rational" simulation, even if pre-conscious, almost inevitably entails some sort of imperial ego-centric move. The tactic that I use when pursuing my craft is to try to identify this, "reflexively" to use the language of Pierre Bourdieu or via Husserl's *epoché* or *rückfrage*, and to try to take everything that we can into account in our moral calculations. I have always had a problem with Levinas' discussion of "Otherness." I don't think that what is extremely "Other" is even cognizable. While I have to say that I agree with Husserl and folks like Donald Davidson on this front, I think that Nelson following Levinas has provided us with a strong call for developing new tools for incorporating the demands of material others that we are in asymmetrical relation to within our ethical reckonings. I agree with Nelson that we need to make room for revelations from the outside. We need to create and modify political tools to not only to do this but to then establish new equities.

Following Dewey, I do not see "ideal ends" designed to expand basic rights such as are found in the Universal Declaration or the assertion that we all have souls to be the problem in toto. Such formulations are tools to get us to new places. Problems invariably arise when these "ideal ends" become deified, naturalized, and unquestioned. This was Dewey's problem with the human rights discourse. The Universal Declaration, for

example, he argued isn't really universal—it is neither a law of heaven nor nature. Rather, it is an extremely useful political tool developed at a specific time with wide ranging applicability (Dewey 1973: 148). When needed, it should be tweaked and even modified. This is especially the case when radically changed situations require us to come to new understandings about the world we live in or when adapting basic principles to local situations. Levinas' claim that we have an infinite responsibility for the "Other" and the Adorno-like turn made by Nelson to the "material other," in my view, are something akin to Dewey's ideal ends. Levinas' moral perfectionism and Adorno's assertion that the horrors experienced by tortured others are beyond our grasp can help guide us to a better place – even if the rhetorical trappings make less than perfect sense. Like Gayatri Spivak (2000: 13) who challenges us to consider whether the subaltern can ever speak, I think that enabling what Nelson and Levinas describe as the prophetic revealment of the "Other" is—as in all cultural translation—at the same time "necessary but impossible." We should continue to probe and listen, finding novel ways to coax and make room for the revealings. The "cosmopolitan" turn suggested by Nelson in this and earlier work rightfully re-focuses us away from universalized abstractions and towards the local. I think this has implications for those of us engaged in both religious and human rights studies. Any move forward is going to require a lot of new language learning and translation. There is so much diversity just outside our physical and virtual doors, even though we express this using the tools we have at hand. In addition to asking us to consider what we don't know and to investigate and listen, Nelson also asks that we step back and consider how we arrived in the particular situations that we occupy— in what Husserl described as a method of critical, clarifying self-reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*). We need to minimally check what we bring with us to our interactions with unequal neighbors. The impositions of totalizing schemas and declarations must be recognized as such. I still think these are useful especially when flexible and adaptable. Once again, they should not be designated except in extreme need sacrosanct, beyond question and re-evaluation. This said, I'm not certain that we are operating at the moment in a political environment where very much needed progressive, radical overhauls of religious studies or human rights agendas are viable. It is especially important that we hold on to what has been gained through the use of the widely accepted ideal ends in service until now, and to proceed forward step by step.

REFERENCES

- Dewey, John. (1973). *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*, trans and ed Robert W. Clopton and Tsuin-Chen Ou (Honolulu: The University of Hawai'i Press).
- Hutt, Curtis. (2009). Identity, Alterity, and Ethics in the Work of Husserl and His Religious Students: Stein and Levinas. *Philosophy Today* 53.1, 12–33.
- Nelson, Eric. (2018). Cosmopolitan Tolerance and Asymmetrical Ethics: Adorno, Levinas, Derrida, *Jewish Religious and Philosophical Ethics*, C. Hutt, H. Kim, and B. Lerner (eds) (London and New York: Routledge, 153–72).
- Spivak, Gayatri. 2000. "Translation as Culture," *Parallax* 6:1, 13–24.

On Nelson and East Asian Philosophies

Leah Kalmanson

While reading Eric Nelson's *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*, I recall thinking that every sentence is a potential thesis statement. In other words, in one rich passage after another, any given statement in the book could easily generate an essay's worth of commentary and discussion. Undoubtedly, I will barely have time to scratch the surface of Eric's achievements in his book via this brief engagement.

Given my own areas of research, as a reader I was attentive to the various appearances of East Asian philosophies throughout the text—these are woven in seamlessly and meaningfully. This is not “comparative philosophy” as I and others sometimes practice it, but it is simply the range of argumentation possible when a scholar is, like Nelson, astonishingly well-read and able to work across an incredible diversity of primary source languages.

I was especially interested to see the prominent role given to the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism, whose concept of “other-power” (他力) grounds Nelson's own reading of goodness at several key moments. In the Pure Land tradition, “other-power” refers to the power of the Buddha to facilitate our enlightenment or liberation even when, or especially when, our own efforts are inadequate to the task. Other-power appears in Nelson's book, for example, in a discussion of Iris Murdoch, where goodness is invoked as that which “confronts the limiting prioritization of self-interest, the will, and power in moments of love and unselfing” (251). This dynamic of “unselfing” is key not only to the ethics of the material other that Nelson discusses throughout but also to the politics of open-ended solidarity that he urges us toward in the last third of the book.

For another example, other-power is linked to what Nelson describes as the “unique noncalculative temporality” of prophecy, which strikes from beyond: it “exceeds, escapes and resists both the naturalistic objectivity of beings and the subjective interiority of the individual self” (188). This links Nelson's use of other-power to the Kamakura-period innovator Shinran (1173–1263), founder of the largest Pure Land sect in Japan today. In Shinran's formulation, good acts are in fact impossible, thanks to the calculating (*hakarai* 計らい) mental process of the self who sees itself as the doer of deeds, the reaper of benefits, the target of blame—in any case, the one to whom credit is due. In other words,

for Shinran, the ego immediately tarnishes its deeds by “doing” them in the first place, such that any self-directed action is already misguided.

But, once, even for Shinran, in the distant past a monk did attain the superhuman feat of liberation via self-power (自力) practices such as meditation. This monk eventually became the Buddha Amitābha, or Amida in the Japanese, who famously has opened up the purified realm where he resides to any who call on his name. Amida is able to do this because his own efforts have earned him an incalculable store of karmic merit. Although we mere mortals could never “earn” our way into a rebirth in the Pure Land, the compassionate Amida freely donates enough merit from his limitless store to allow us entry.

Key to Shinran’s work here is a common account of Buddhist time in which the dharma is predicted to arise, spread, and eventually decline. In our lifetime, the era of self-power is over: we (along with Shinran) live in the so-called third age of decline. The extent to which we behave efficaciously in the world at all is thanks to the power of Amida’s compassion working through us. As such, Amida’s free distribution of merit from his vast storehouse destabilizes the logic of karmic production and exchange and makes immediate interhuman compassion and goodness possible (for more on this, see Ueda and Hirota, 1989: 143).

This story of Amida may sound quite fantastic. But it was precisely the fantastic elements that I contemplated as I traced the references to other-power throughout Nelson’s book. I was reminded of a comment by Melissa Anne-Marie Curley in her 2017 *Pure Land/Real World: Modern Buddhism, Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination*. As she discusses, early 20th-century political thinkers in Japan invoked the Pure Land as an image and possible instantiation of a coming socialist utopia: “These instantiated Pure Lands are neither strictly transcendent nor strictly immanent. I will suggest that they are best understood as ‘supernatural’” (23). In other words, Amida is not a “transcendent” being in the same sense that we think of the monotheistic God as necessary, independent, and self-caused. Rather, Amida was once just a person who nonetheless gained supernormal powers through intensive practice. As Curley indicates with her choice of words, the transcendent/immanent paradigm is ill-equipped to handle Buddhist modes of thought regarding this dynamic. Hence, she selects the term “supernatural” as a marker, in the English, that might help us think past transcendence and immanence to reimagine Amida’s relation to the world and to us.

I had her word choice on my mind at those moments in Nelson's book where he discusses other-power in relation to Levinas's vision of transcendence and alterity. I asked myself: what if we take the dynamics of other-power in Curley's direction and read Levinasian alterity as "supernatural"? This opened up an entirely different dimension of Nelson's book as I read it, even while I realized that such a reading parts ways with Levinas himself (perhaps irreconcilably, as I will discuss later).

Let me begin here with one of Levinas's short essays "Sociality and Money," which aligns well with Nelson's ethics of the material other. In it, for Levinas, money itself becomes the unlikely link between the ethical and the political. He resists the easy move, which would be to align economic exchange with the order of the political and thus reject any economizing of ethics. Instead, he says, money itself is rooted in the same foundational sociality that marks the openness of the self and the welcoming of the other. From this angle, the third party appears not as an intrusion on the face-to-face relation but as a sign of my own failure to manage the ethical burden: "Are the elevation and sanctity of love for the neighbour not comprised in this lack of concern for the third, which, in an anonymous totality, can have been the victim of that very one I answer for and that I approach in . . . mercy and charity?" (2001: 206). In other words, the other with whom I am so single-mindedly concerned can turn around and abuse someone else. Here politics is presented not simply as a necessary compromise but as an appropriate reflection of the underlying moral asymmetry:

Between the unique ones, a comparison, a judgement is needed. Justice is needed in the very name of their dignity as unique and incomparable. But to compare the incomparable is, undoubtedly, to approach people by returning to the totality of men in the economic order, in which their acts are measured in the homogeneity immanent to money, without being absorbed or simply added up in this totality. (2001: 206)

In this, ethics is not an escape from politics but rather is bound to the political by the bonds of sociality that express themselves concretely as *money*—the money that makes possible the charity that transforms the real world.

This is not simple materialism. The circulation of money is subversive when it resists economic theory, when it allows charity to run rampant, when it becomes the flagrant expression of compassion. This, indeed, gets us close to something like the radical

compassion of Amida, whose flagrant and free donations of merit destabilize the seemingly ironclad logic of karmic exchange.

Let us note here that the case of Amida is not an outlier in the Buddhist context—the merit economies of the Buddhist world are inherently destabilized along these lines. For example, the contemplative practices of Buddhist monastics are believed to generate great karmic merit; and, in turn, monetary donations to the monasteries or nunneries on the part of lay-practitioners are also said to generate karmic merit. In this monastic-lay circuit of exchange, laypeople give of their money and receive karmic merit in return, and even that merit is ritually given away—it is dedicated for the benefit of all sentient beings via a common recitation performed at the time of donation. But, yet again, the charitableness of that ritual divestment of merit is itself a good deed that produces *even more merit*. In this process of rampant merit production, monasteries and nunneries also accrue very concrete material wealth, and with that accrued wealth, they provide certain social services—e.g., running food pantries, providing schooling for children, offering pastoral care and spiritual guidance—in addition to the many important rituals and ceremonies monks and nuns are trained to manage (for more, see Kalmanson 2019).

In a very direct sense, these material realities are intimately tied to spiritual liberation and the force of compassion as a moral value in Buddhism. Jamie Hubbard has commented:

It should not surprise us, perhaps, that a this-worldly focus on material giving and its equally worldly reward formed such an important part of the practices of the laity, for, although Buddhism is primarily a renunciant movement, philosophically it denies a transcendent absolute and affirms the interdependently originated world. (2001: 159)

In the denial of a “transcendent absolute” that grounds the world to account for the way things are and ought to be, we see a hint of what Levinas has elsewhere called “faith without theodicy,” where there is no other outlet, as it were, for the fruits of spiritual goodness, other than the mouth of the stranger who needs the bread (1988: 162).

At times like this in Levinas’s work, I do begin to see evidence of the superhuman: he calls us beyond what we would normally count as human, toward the messianic expectation of an unrealistic future where ethics is never compromised by politics, where each person has the strength to be moral along the lines of Levinas’s uncompromising asymmetry—which is to say, where each person has the strength to care for every single

other as the Other, without compromise. And of course, in line with Levinas's generally inordinate ethical vision, we are waiting on no messiahs other than ourselves: "the Messiah is just the man who suffers, who has taken on the suffering of others. Who finally takes on the suffering of others, if not the being who says 'Me' [*Moi*]?" (1990: 89). For anyone familiar with Buddhism, this sounds less like a messiah and more like the bodhisattvas, who commit themselves to the superhuman feat of alleviating the suffering of each and every living being; and who, through the momentum of their spiritual liberation, gain enhanced powers to do just that.

In the eighth chapter, Nelson comments: "Levinas praises atheism as disenchantment while at the same time rejecting atheism as the absence of transcendence" (216). Again, the odd line that Curley tries to walk with her use of "supernatural" as a moment of intervention in the transcendent/immanent paradigm opens up intriguing possibilities here. I am fully aware that I part ways with Levinas when I say that I would like to leave "transcendence" to God and consider the alterity of the other as "supernatural" instead. But my suspicion is that perhaps I do not part ways with Nelson, at least based on how he positions "other-power" in his ethics of the material other.

For example, there are several points where Nelson presses Levinas on the use of "transcendence" in the ethics of alterity. Of course, in one sense, a philosophical reworking of transcendence is Levinas's foundational move: i.e., he relocates the transcendence usually reserved for God and finds it instead in the flesh-and-blood face of the other person. And yet, as Nelson investigates here, the materiality of the other person calls for something more than just the paradox of thinking "transcendence-in-immanence." Ultimately, such a paradox invites us toward mystical contemplation or perhaps phenomenological theorizing. I think that this is precisely the trajectory Nelson wants to resist through his call for renewed emphasis on material existence, material bodies, and hungry mouths. Like Levinas (and like Nelson, too, I think), I am suspicious of some of the calls for the so-called re-enchantment of the world, if this enchantment diverts our attention from the realities of material suffering. And yet, I still seek a marker in language that indicates an engagement with material life and material reality that speaks precisely to the impossibility of totalizing or thematizing the natural.

The interesting thing about a supposedly supernatural occurrence—and this is a point that Curley stresses in her book—is that it signals something that *just might happen*. If we were going to pursue this discussion more fully within an Asian philosophical

context, I might say that the better word here would be “hypernatural.” In other words, we are not signaling what is beyond or outside the natural but rather opening ourselves toward the astonishing possibilities for transformation in the world we occupy right now.

Hence, I have come to think of the hypernaturalness of materiality as marking the site where we enact real change. And reading Nelson alongside Curley and my own perhaps irreconcilable divergence from Levinas has helped me re-envision the scope and radicality of that change. Reclaiming a sense of the supernatural may not accomplish the metaphysical task of re-enchantment so much as it accomplishes the political task of challenging Levinas’s own biases that divide the “idolators” from the “religious” precisely along lines that privilege transcendence as a philosophical position. Ultimately, Nelson’s picture of a more radical religiosity in his book has invited me to reconsider the “supernatural” as a term of philosophical engagement, and I remain deeply interested to hear more on whether this maps at all onto directions he might also consider.

REFERENCES

- Curley, Melissa Anne-Marie. (2017). *Pure Land/Real World: Modern Buddhism, Japanese Leftists, and the Utopian Imagination* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press).
- Hubbard, Jamie. (2001). *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press).
- Kalmanson, Leah. (2019). Lessons from the Sanjie: Merit Economies as Catalysts for Social Change. *Studies in Chinese Religions* Vol. 5, 2, 142–50.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. (1988). Useless Suffering, trans. Richard Cohen, in Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (eds) *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge), 156–67.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. (1990). *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
- Levinas, Emmanuel. (2007). Sociality and Money, trans. François Bouchetoux and Campbell Jones. *Business Ethics: A European Review* 16, 203–207.
- Nelson, Eric. (2020). *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (Albany: SUNY Press).
- Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota. (1989). *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center).

Author Response: The Ethics of the Material Other and the Right of the Other

Eric S. Nelson

1. INTRODUCTION

I am deeply thankful for the thoughtful engagement of Emilia Angelova, Curtis Hutt, and Leah Kalmanson with this work concerning ethics and material others (Nelson 2020). I will begin by briefly situating the book's context and then respond to these significant questions concerning the nation-state and the stranger, religion and human rights, and the other, other-power, and other-constitution.

Lévinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other has had a long journey into publication. An earlier shorter version was accepted with need for revisions by Duquesne University Press that then shortly thereafter halted the publication of new works. This was a great loss to Emmanuel Lévinas studies. It meant that the manuscript went through a second review process and the final published version was influenced by four reviewers' suggestions and concerns leading in divergent directions and making some facets of the book overly abstract and complex.

One misconception that I want to note is that the purpose of this book is not a communistic Lévinasianism that rejects liberalism in every sense. It concerns the dialectic of liberalism in which its economic and libertarian forms undermine and restrain its political forms for the sake of a more radical democratic socialist and rights-oriented politics conceived through the other rather than the self. This book accordingly offers a critique of what can be described as classical possessive or economic liberalism and neoliberalism (i.e., liberalism in the sense of capitalism) while defending a social form of the aspirations of political liberalism (i.e., democratic and individual rights) through critical models of asymmetry, non-identity, and otherness that are unfolded in works of Lévinas and Theodor W. Adorno that can orient social criticism and deliberative communication.¹

This work is accordingly not a comparative commentary of their works, but an analysis of contemporary questions informed by their thought. Asymmetry and non-identity can reorient political thought and praxis in significant ways, including an intercultural approach to the public sphere, democracy, and human rights that could

formulate models to contest oppressive forms of universality (as in colonial and neoliberal forms of cosmopolitanism) and particularity (as in ethnocentrism, nationalism, or varieties of multiculturalism that seek to exempt repressive authoritarian regimes from criticism through cultural essentialism).

This project encompasses two key hermeneutical strategies: one historical, and the other more systematic and diagnostic. First, its historical task was to explicate the radical French republican, Marxist, and prophetic Jewish context of Lévinas's philosophy. I take the ethical to be already intrinsically political, or the ethical to be a response to the political, which is situationally first as Lévinas strongly states in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* (Lévinas 1994: 21-30) or as indicated in Leah Kalmanson's discussion of Lévinas's essay on money. It also traced the ethical moment in Adorno's thought that is often suspicious of and resists ethical and normative ways of speaking as ideological. Although they are frequently interpreted as incompatible modes of philosophizing, there are astonishing intersections between Adorno's ideology-critique of the ethical and Lévinas's ethical confrontations with the political.

Secondly, drawing on Lévinas, Adorno, and other sources, its diagnostic and therapeutic task was to reimagine Lévinas's philosophy for the sake of a critical social theory of the present. The historical reconstruction of the critical and prophetic potential of Lévinas and Adorno could not be separated from our own current interpretive situation and ecological and social plight. Consequently, critical models (that are somewhere between the factual historical situation and normative and utopian demands that can operate as ideology and critique) from their writings were deployed to question the devastation of the environment and climate crisis, the social-political pathologies of religion and the potential of its prophetic vocation in response to suffering and injustice, and the corrosion of the public sphere and democratic practices and institutions. These three problematics might appear to be separate topics; yet they express the entanglement of the domination of nature with interhuman domination that must be addressed as a whole in its material, intersubjective, and ideological reproduction of contemporary societies.

2. THE NATION-STATE, THE STRANGER, AND THE PARADOX OF RIGHTS

Emilia Angelova addresses this problematic of universality and particularity, the nation-state and the stranger in her rich and complex essay, drawing on the political philosophy of Hegel, Arendt, and a recently published review that critiqued my critique of liberalism.

First, to begin with the last point concerning liberalism, part of the issue at stake is the differing concepts of liberalism. For most of modernity, liberalism did not signify the priority of democratic rights and political participation, but the right to person, property, and commercial activity that formed the legal and political basis of capitalist economic activity. Liberalism means possessive individualism and the priority of negative liberty and the reign of the unregulated free market; republicanism, from Rousseau through Marx to Lévinas, signifies the priority of the general will and what was once called in gendered language the “rights of man” to liberty, equality, and fraternity. Most European and global political and economic theory maintain this usage, whether Enrique Dussel, Jürgen Habermas, or the libertarian Friedrich Hayek who long refused to abandon this previously standard meaning of liberalism. In chapter one of Hayek’s 1960 book *The Constitution of Liberty*, liberalism is defined as the priority of individual personal liberty to which rights to equality, solidarity, and democratic political participation must always be secondary. This sense of liberalism is at play in Lévinas’s political writings which uses and transforms through the other the shared language of French republicanism and Marxism. Several political readers of Lévinas, discussed at length in the work, have criticized Lévinas’s political thought as republican. One task of my book was to disclose the radical context and implications of Lévinas’s reinterpretation of the French republican paradigm of universal human rights and the mutuality of liberty, equality, and solidarity in citizenship.

This sense of liberalism from Locke to contemporary advocates of neoliberal economics is a justification of capitalism. However, if liberalism is identified with political liberalism of political rights as in recent American political thought, then this liberalism demands not only restricting the power of the state but also the power of the market over the public and the state. This last point is a key aspect of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry that teaches and enforces heteronomy and Habermas’s still relevant 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* that traces how private interests and structural features of capitalism have undermined democracy and the critical capacities of the public.²

Secondly, Angelova is right to identify the nation-state as the crux of the problem and as a contested site structured by tensions between universalizing aspirations and particular local bonds that constitute the flesh of social life of individuals. Adorno and Lévinas are both suspicious of the totalizing character of the state while recognizing the necessary role of the state in preserving individual rights and liberties. The latter moment

prevented them from embracing the Leninist program and Soviet communism despite their own varying Marxist tendencies. The notions of the freedom of the public and the expansion and protection of individual rights had been a key facet of Marxism and social democracy, as Rosa Luxemburg argued in her 1918 book that praises the socialist aspirations while critiquing the anti-democratic practices of the Soviet Revolution (Luxemburg 1961: 68–71).

Adorno and Lévinas both demanded rethinking philosophy after the Holocaust. Lévinas's concern for strangers, refugees, widows, and orphans does not only refer to prophetic Judaism. It refers to the persons made stateless, driven away as refugees, and then annihilated by the Nazi state. On this point, to a certain extent, Lévinas shares a concern with Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Human rights make a universal demand even as they cannot be universally or absolutely justified and are only weakly enforced and made real through the legislation, institutions, and practices of nation-states and their tentative agreements. The naked appeal to human rights appears empty for the persecuted and the refugee whose last appeal to humanity receives no response; except perhaps by the dog Bobby who Lévinas describes in his narrative of the last Kantian in Germany.

The critical comments about Arendt directed at my work in a previous review, mentioned by Angelova, miss in my mind a crucial feature (namely, the aporia of human rights) in Arendt's analysis of the perplexity of the very right to have rights.³ Angelova describes this right as paradoxical and unenforced in the totalitarian state but not as illusionary or delusional. It is inevitably conditioned by the realities of the nation state, as a naked appeal to rights has no power by itself to stop the state bent on annihilation. Yet the appeal is nonetheless made in the face of such destructive forces. They are bound to nation-states while aspiring and appealing to a universality that places the all too often brutal and inhumane policies and practices of nation-states in question. It points to the basis of rights itself, the right to rights, which requires communities and states to enact and force them if, as Lévinas writes, we are not to practice human sacrifice; or, as Adorno states, the new categorical imperative is not to allow Auschwitz to happen again.

This paradox is still evident today in the plight of refugees trapped at the gates and borders of the ostensibly free world are making a claim to a more radical solidarity that is the very basis of right even if political parties and nation-states refuse to recognize them. Minimally, at least, unrestricted solidarity for the sake of bare human rights can be a critical

model to diagnosis political problems even if its normative application is refused.⁴ More exceptionally, it is a prophetic calling that Lévinas associates with the religious and leads us to the essays of Curtis Hutt and Leah Kalmanson that each opens my materialistic and the naturalistic interpretation to more expansive senses of the spiritual and the supernatural.

3. PARTICULARITY, UNIVERSALITY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Curtis Hutt asks in his thoughtful and complex reflections whether we should pursue the opposite strategy than the one proposed in my work. His points lead to an alternative conclusion about the relation between religion, human rights, and our contemporary situation. I will need to be somewhat brief to respond to these issues.

First, he begins by asking whether we can advocate for indigenous traditions that ensoul different elements of nature to encompass rivers, mountains, and other natural phenomena instead of embracing the material ethics of nature proposed in the work. After all, in the contemporary world, to considerably modify Marx's statement about commodity fetishism, commodities and businesses appear ensouled while humans and the natural world itself undergoes disenchantment and is described as if they were without life, personality, and soul.

While I discuss Buddhism and Daoism at points in this work, and even more at length elsewhere, the primary emphasis concerns how we suffer from a disconnection with sensuous material environmental life itself. This connects with Marx's analysis in his early writings that played a key role not only in Adorno's early notion of natural history but also in Latin American progressive thought and in Enrique Dussel's reading of Marx and Lévinas. I agree that we can and should embrace and advocate more balanced indigenous forms of life. At the same time, as Donna Haraway and Vandana Shiva have shown, there is a need to contest the forms of material and social reproduction themselves of the Capitalocene and the deepening environmental crisis-tendencies that we face regardless of our willingness to recognize them or not. To this extent, critical intercultural discourses need to be articulated that can negotiate between indigenous and traditional practices and ways of life, insofar as they enter into conflict, progressive aspirations for equality, liberty, and solidarity that are the prerequisites of intercultural democracy. An intercultural approach to democracy and human rights requires balancing appeals to customary traditions, local senses of identity, and universalizing aspirations toward a cosmopolitan humanity that have a troubling Eurocentric and colonial history. Chapter Thirteen in

particular traces how a critical interculturality can be achieved through the Levinasian priority of the other.

One nexus of problems is cultural and intersubjective, in which shifts in our attitudes toward nature and our “culture of nature” are necessary; another layer consists of the structural dynamics that call for deeper socio-economic transformations to lessen the effects of drastic environmental degradation and climate change. This structural dimension intersects with the point concerning how much of the damaged life of individuals, communities, and ecosystems remains invisible and unheard. It concerns the abject and subaltern that remains mostly inapparent and disturbs existing society when its realities are glimpsed in, for instance, violence at national borders.

The positionality of the abject and the subaltern can be thematized minimally in a critical model that expresses, describes, and diagnoses this situation. An immanent critical model, as conceived by Adorno, does not need to appeal to ideal ends or a realizable normative prescription. It is both more minimalistic and more expansive than norms and prescriptions that must negotiate the tensions between the ideal and the pragmatically realizable. Thus, to mention two notable normative political philosophers, John Rawls and Habermas introduce numerous conditions and restrictions for norms such as equality to potentially be enacted. These conditions performatively weaken and contradict their very aspiration to equality. Liberty, equality, and solidarity (the classic unrealized principles of radical republicanism and Marxism) are deformed in nationalist and communist societies according to Arendt and Lévinas, who indicate ways of reimagining the troubled democratic paradigm. They can only begin with the recognition of their priority in the other, in Lévinas; otherwise, they are limited by the self that reduces these to its own positionality and power, as in classical possessive liberalism and contemporary neoliberalism.

Adorno once wrote that “only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth” (Adorno 2005: 99). Adorno and Lévinas deploy no doubt exaggeration and hyperbole. They do so to encourage thinking and life in its sociality as resistance, interruption, and reversal. It is in this context that asymmetry and non-identity can prove more helpful than accounts of the self/other relation based on empathy and the primacy of self-consciousness as expressed in Husserl, and pragmatic accounts of politics, as in John Dewey’s problematic relativization of rights that is incompatible with the universalizing aspirations described by Arendt and Lévinas. Rights not only potentially protect

individuals from state coercion, as Hayek claimed in response to Dewey, they also limit the coercion of economic interests as Habermas described in his work on the public sphere. Habermas's normative model of unrestricted communication provides a valuable critical model to question and contest any given restrictions even when they appear pragmatically justifiable according to a given social condition. However, Lévinas's ethics offers an even more radical vision of unrestricted solidarity. This language appears to be an overly hyperbolic and exaggerated rhetoric to his critics. Yet, interpreted through Adorno's notion of a critical model, it encourages each denial of rights and humanity in the name of self-interest, pragmatic usefulness, or mere indifference to be interrogated.

Arendt's paradox of human rights and Lévinas's ethics in the face of war concern a similar problematic. Personal and political rights appear fragile in a world characterized by power and without adequate justification in God, nature, or humanity; yet the claim motivates not only the remnants of hope but the resistance in hopelessness of those facing oppressive regimes and hopeless situations in which prophetic justice can still speak and traces of the other-power of the good potentially appear in acts of resistance and responsive solidarity.

4. OTHER-POWER AND OTHER-CONSTITUTION IN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

“Without the aid of this Other-power, the human freedom of self-power is closed off to us.... The realization of human freedom in self-power becomes possible only through the assistance of Other-power.” (Tanabe 1990: 184)

I appreciate Leah Kalmanson's insightful and nuanced remarks as she has extensively worked on Lévinas and Buddhist and Japanese philosophy. Her present essay concerns the intercultural dimensions of the book, which primarily are East Asian, and the intercultural questions of otherness and “other power” (*tariki* 他力) that is drawn from Pure Land Buddhism and the works of the Kyōto school philosopher Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 that deserve greater attention in Western discourses. Tanabe and Lévinas would be too difficult to discuss here at length. In Tanabe's work *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, however, other-power not only expresses the great compassion (*daihi* 大悲) that characterizes the other-orientation of the bodhisattva whose merit we rely on. As transcendence-in-immanence, it forms the deepest elements of the self and its very self-relation (Tanabe 1990).

Very briefly put, East Asian Pure Land Buddhism developed from earlier Indian meditative practices of keeping the Buddha in mind, visualizing the bodhisattva, and repeating a mantra that connected one with a bodhisattva. It emphasizes devotion to and reliance on Amitābha's other-power. Its other-oriented ethics and notion of the other as formative power makes it a significant intercultural source for engaging the ethics of the other. The Japanese expression *tariki* means the force, power, or strength of another in contrast to one's own power (*jiriki* 自力). They signify two different routes to awakening (becoming or relying on the bodhisattva) and, more broadly, forms of life-comportment. Pure Land Buddhism stresses the role of compassion in contrast with Zen Buddhism's meditative illumination, which leads to different ethical sensibilities concerning the concrete other. To simplify, the focus on the self in Zen is often considered more active and individualistic, and the other in Pure Land Buddhism more passive and social. As Tanabe demonstrates, Pure Land teaches significant philosophical lessons concerning alterity and ethics. They also contrast the perfectionist uses toward which Buddhist mindfulness and other practices have been directed in recent decades.

Although responsiveness and dependency might appear to be conservative and reactive comportments leading to absorption in uncritical or subservient heteronomy, it is revealing that they take on a radical potential in Adorno and Lévinas, as they do in progressive forms of Buddhism in modern East Asia. Adorno and Lévinas both insist on elements of relational heteronomy in the formation of the self and its sense of autonomy. For instance, Adorno traces throughout his works the mimetic basis of ideology and critique through his later writings. Forms of bodily and sensuous identification can function as fixations; they can also operate as an openness and playfulness toward the object that shapes and can be rediscovered in forms of art, communication, and rationality that resist instrumentality and commodification.

Lévinas and Adorno often concentrate on the abject suffering other. Drawing on and reversing Hegel and Marx, Adorno elucidates the moment of non-identity and the priority of the object. Drawing on Jewish prophetic sources, Lévinas portrays the other as ethical and prophetic source. The other does not only make an ethical demand upon me, externally from the distance, but in a radical sense constitutes and invests my ethical selfhood. In contrast to the constitution of the self that is advocated in Idealist and transcendental philosophy, or its intersubjective reformulation in Habermas, the self inevitably becomes itself through asymmetrical "other-constitution" and "other-power."

Other-power in this book concerned relations with material non-human and human others through mimetic and experimental (in Adorno) and ethical and religious interaction (in Lévinas). Lévinas, of course, refused to abandon the expression God in his ethics, even as he refused other spiritual forces that he deemed idolatrous and pagan as Kalmanson describes in her contribution.

In analogous ways to how rights and prophecy have sources in the other, in whom we cannot radically differentiate the material, ethical, and the religious demand, the notion of other-power cannot be separated from its Buddhist historical contexts in which it cannot be reduced to a purely material condition in a reductive sense. In this non-reductive sense, it can encompass spiritual or supernatural powers, particularly as they reflect ethical, prophetic, and soteriological concerns. Even as my interpretive approach accentuates the materialistic and the naturalistic dimensions of Adorno and Lévinas to engage the environmental and economic reproduction of human life, I don't think it needs to exclude or limit different senses of the spiritual and the supernatural as operative through material conditions (as in Buddhist ritual and ethical practices involving karma and merit) or through the ethical demand and the good appearing in the finitude and imperfection of interpersonal encounters and social relations.

5. CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY OF THE OTHER AND THE IMPERFECTIONISM OF THE GOOD

This leads us to a crucial point of my book. Democracy is currently facing a new legitimization crisis as it is caught between the false universalism of neoliberal capitalism and authoritarian chauvinistic and localist populist movements that deepen its crisis-tendencies. Orthodox liberal and Marxist analyses have failed to adequately address this complexly mediated situation. One way of rethinking democracy to begin to confront this situation is through a turn to an interculturally reimagined non-identity and alterity.

Democracy itself in my analysis requires embracing imperfection, non-identical multiplicity, and reorientation toward alterity if it to survive the relentless compulsion toward identity (trenchantly diagnosed by Adorno) and totality (Lévinas). While Lévinas exaggerates the ethical demand, he simultaneously moderates it by critiquing moralistic and other forms of perfectionism (a compulsion toward identity) that are interconnected with ideologically deploying ideas of the good, the right, and the holy as instruments of terror and justifications of ruling moral, political, and religious elites. Lévinas thus offers

an answer to Adorno's legitimate suspicions that ethics is primarily an ideological compulsion toward identity as it, nevertheless, has a prophetic vocation and critical potential.

Adorno is correct to conclude that ethics serves both critical-emancipatory and ideological-disciplinary purposes and Levinas that the good is inevitably betrayed. The demand for self and social perfection is a form of disciplinary control that forgets and violates the good it would enforce.⁵ Prophetic justice and unrestricted solidarity are powerful ethical-political models that are undone in the fanaticism and perfectionism that would totalize them and which consequently cannot recognize the imperfection of the good amidst ordinary everyday life that calls forth in Lévinas (like Tanabe's Pure Land Buddhism) compassion, forgiveness, and mercy in daily interactions and in extraordinary situations where all contact, tenderness, and hope are denied and appear lost.

NOTES

1. "Critical models" are in Adorno exemplary constellations and thought-images of immanent critique articulated from current dissonances, fractures, and resistances. They are neither overly normative, and thus in danger of being detached from social realities as an empty ought (the anti-naturalistic fallacy), nor uncritically absorbed in current existing conditions (the naturalistic fallacy).
2. Habermas (1991). Habermas most recent work revisits the idea of the public sphere in the context of the new social media, right-wing populism, and the systematic distortions that undermine their communicative and democratic potential (Habermas 2022).
3. Arendt 1973: 290–302. Angelova is referring to Oltvai (2021). I agree with many of his points, except his descriptions of Arendt's paradox of rights (it misses the universal aspiration that constitutes its paradoxicality), Levinas and Murdoch on the immanent occurrence and imperfection of the transcendent good (the imperfection of the good without which it is no longer good), and his problems with Judaic and ethical prophecy as a religious category (I reconstruct it as ethical). On unrestricted or unconditional solidarity, see the essays in Sussemichel and Kastner (2021).
4. On unrestricted or unconditional solidarity, see the essays in Sussemichel and Kastner (2021).

5. On the ideology of perfectionism and its disciplinary character and anti-democratic elitism, compare King, Gerisch, and Rosa (2019).

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. (2005). *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- Arendt, Hannah. (1973). *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).
- Habermas, Jürgen. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- Habermas, Jürgen. (2022). *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp).
- Hayek, Friedrich August. (2011). *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).
- King, Gerisch, Benigna Gerisch, and Hartmut Rosa (eds). (2019). *Lost in Perfection: Impacts of Optimisation on Culture and Psyche* (London: Routledge).
- Lévinas, Emmanuel. (1994). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).
- Luxemburg, Rosa. (1961). *The Russian Revolution; Leninism or Marxism?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).
- Nelson, Eric S. (2020). *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press).
- Oltvai, Kristóf Z. (2021). Review of Eric S. Nelson: *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*. *Phenomenological Reviews*.
- Susemichel, Lea, and Jens Kastner (eds). (2021). *Unbedingte Solidarität*. Münster: Unrast.
- Tanabe, Hajime. 1990. *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press).