

Catriona Hanley

LEVINAS ON PEACE AND WAR

*Loyola College in Maryland,
USA Department of Philosophy
e-mail: CHanley@loyola.edu*

March 11, 2005 was the first anniversary of the Atocha station train bombings, which killed 191 people and injured many more. Kofi Annan, speaking at a ceremony in Madrid on that occasion, said the following: “Compromising human rights cannot serve the struggle against terrorism. On the contrary, it facilitates the achievement of the terrorist’s objectives by provoking tension, hatred and mistrust of governments among precisely those parts of the population where he is most likely to find recruits”.¹ His speech was a clear attack on British and US practices of torture and abuse of prisoners, holding suspects without trial, and in general the abrogation of the human rights of some in the name of upholding the rights of others. The belief that such practices are justified, he said, is the root cause of terrorism, and “our job is to show that they are wrong”.

Annan’s remarks echo those of Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, upon the release in January of that organization’s annual report. The scathing report argues that US disregard of human rights has served as a model for other countries, documenting how Egypt, Malaysia and Russia, for example, cite US practices as justification for engaging in similar abuses. “The US government”, says Roth, “is less and less able to push for justice abroad because it is unwilling to see justice done at home”.²

¹ Guardian Weekly, March 18-24 2005

² Guardian Weekly, Jan. 21-27 2005

Justice provokes justice; injustice perpetrates injustice. On what grounds do we argue for peace in a time when the resort to violence is increasingly tolerated and even championed by both individuals and governments? Do we need an ethical foundation for the practice of justice beyond that of the recognition that the rights extended to the other should match those I expect to enjoy? Is the continued affirmation of the sameness of the other not enough to ensure that my principled outrage at abuses be grounded? This form of universality may provide a ground – but so far it has not led to true peace. It has not led to an equal co-recognition of subjects, since the equality was always only theoretical, and outside the real context of historical suffering. It has led to war, to the imposition of my interests over others, since it begins with the assumption that you are me, and the forgetting that you are precisely not me, and in your uniqueness, inassimilable to me. The calculation of what we, who are equal but *wounded*, owe to each other always seems to devolve to the logic of revenge – or worse, “pre-emptive” action. You are me – then you might do to me what I could do to you, or what I have in mind to do to you – so I had better do it first. And we are all wounded by history, by circumstance, by origin, by experience, by the very particularity, which makes each of us who we uniquely are. My wounds, my suffering is not universal, but intimately particular.

Emmanuel Levinas’ thought provides a way of construing peace that is prior to the contractual agreement I make with another to ensure my survival – an ethical and not a political peace, rooted in the recognition of the radical difference of the other from me. The other is not me, cannot be encapsulated by identification to me, is beyond me, and is thus, in her mysterious and wonderful difference from me, above me. I am at her feet. (And by the way, I think it is much more interesting to conceive of me, the subject, at the feet of the other, than of the widow, orphan, the huddled masses referred to on the statue of liberty as at MY feet. The statue of liberty reduces the intersubjective relationship to that of my pity for the other, and raises all the Nietzschean, and for that matter – strange coupling – liberation theologian’s difficulties with this arrogance of the one over the other.) The troubling question I grapple with in this paper is how we might get from the peace that precedes the political to a peace within the political realm. I am concerned with what Levinas has to say about peace from an ethical standpoint, and how this can be joined with a political stance. Along the way, I will worry about Levinas’ construal of the role of the state of Israel, and the extent to which his ideal form of Zionism is blind to the real abuses that have occurred in the foundation and maintaining of that state. My concern is hardly new to Levinas scholarship, though its particular thrust echoes recent beginnings of a critical stance towards Levinas, perhaps a sign of the maturing of scholarship, which is turning from commentary to criticism.

That famous first line of Levinas' first great work, "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (Levinas 1998: 21) is rapidly followed by a disquisition on peace and war. "The art of foreseeing war" he writes a few lines later, "and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté" (1998: 21). In this post-script, presented as preface, this re-interpretation of his own thinking in *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas makes clear that the political realm which is the cycle of war and peace is secondary to the primary experience of peace. War and peace in the political paradigm are two sides of the same coin, sometimes the one, sometimes the other, but always understood only in relation to each other. This peace, this not-war, is an awaiting for war; this war is an awaiting for the not-war of political peace which is also a form of war. Politics is war. Von Clausewitz is vindicated.

What are the grounds of political peace under this rubric? The foundation is the beautiful notion of the universal recognition of the rights of all human beings. We are identical in our being, as humans. Since you are identical to me in your being, you must be accorded the same rights and privileges that I expect for myself. We are equal. This principle is itself founded on a theory of reason, on a rational ontology that appeals to the universal essence of the human. It is our Greek heritage. But the limitation of the Greek notion is evident historically, given that we are still at war, as the Greeks were, almost constantly. Does this indicate a failure of reason itself? Levinas speaks of the egology latent within Western ontology: the rational identification of you with me fails to recognize that you are not me. It ignores the unicity of you, as distinct from me. Ontology, spoken from the perspective of the I who is the subject, is bound to a notion of the universal, which proceeds from this subject. The reduction of you to me, of the other to the same, leads to the destruction of the uniqueness of you and feeds the belly of my insatiable ego, making it hungrier.

It is not hard in this age to talk of how we are duped by morality. The cynicism of the contemporary casting of morality in this country – the USA – as a function of the political is a good example of another kind of war than that which directly involves arms. Fostered by an economic theory which declares that the workings of the market are apolitical, "natural", and thus amoral, this suspect theory is taken up by those who claim that what is natural is grounded in divine law. This ontology is taken up by the Christian right, who turn Smith's invisible hand (a mere passing metaphor in his text) into the hand of God, and use this to defend a policy of reduction of the other to the same. The beauty of the proposition that all humans are created equal is turned into the impossible idea that all are the same in fact, and that if any

given poor person worked hard enough, she could escape from the conditions of poverty into which she was born. If one can find an example of one individual who through strength of character and force of will (and luck) was able to escape, all should be able to do the same. Bill Clinton came from a tough background, he worked hard and became president, therefore anyone can be president. The social moral law of late capitalism is “to those who can survive, let them, to those who cannot, they deserve to founder”. Otherwise said, *Arbeit macht frei*.

Specious words passed off as Christian morality, “family values”, for example, are used to defend a politics in which the legislated maternity leave (unpaid) at 12 weeks – three months – is the lowest of any developed country, yet in which no subsidized daycare is offered to families, and in which recent legislation refused to enact a minimum wage in line with a living wage. Two million people here are imprisoned (on average eight to ten times the rate of imprisonment of most other developed countries), and six million caught in the legal system of parole, awaiting trial, etc. Morality here – and with this administration “morality” is a big word – dictates that workers be paid less than what is necessary for them to feed, shelter and clothe themselves.

Wars of imperialism, which are defended – cynically or not – through a rhetoric that speaks of establishing human rights and equality, can be understood also as the reduction of the one to the other, as the forcing of you to become me – against your will. The demand that you become me is, for Levinas, a violence not just against your being, but against that in me which is previous to my rational perception of you as “a case of me”. The formal political response to this is that we cannot survive on ethics; we need recourse to public morality, and this reduces to what is socially permissible. How is the “socially permissible” established? We would do well to read some Chomsky here. In brief, what is socially permissible takes recourse in the notion of a marketplace that operates beyond human control. The “market” – not us, because we refuse responsibility, and on a certain dominant interpretation of the market, we are recused from responsibility – the anonymous market dictates that war is justifiable on the slimmest of pretexts, on pretexts that are even demonstrably and publicly shown to be false. There are no WMD; Saddam was not involved in 9/11. It does not matter. The agenda is set on war. But even if the agenda were set on peace in opposition to this, it would be the same. War, or the peace that is opposed to it, is the reduction of each to the all, of the individual to the same as all others.

Strange how what seems a valid move in the establishment of human rights, the decreed universality of the human, the identification of each with the other suddenly becomes eerily dangerous. If we are all the same, all identical, then we are all replaceable. Each can take the place of each, all are cogs, – the

identity of the materialisms of Marx and Smith become evident at this level, as the history of the twentieth century makes clear in such grisly and repeated detail. The ontology of human rights alone does not provide grounds for true peace, because in each case I am excused from responsibility for you at the moment that I abandon my interest in you as a case of you as unique – other.

What hope then is there for peace if the effort of reason, or rational ontology fails? Levinas is perhaps the philosopher who has personally suffered the brutal effects of 20th century history more than any other, from the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917, to the rise of National socialism which he witnessed from France, and the murder in the camps of most members of his family who remained in Eastern Europe, then the occupation of France and his internment in a prisoner's camp, his wife and daughter meanwhile in hiding. Intellectually, he suffered the blow of losing faith in and respect for the philosopher whose work he considered the most important of the 20th century, and whom he numbered among those five philosophers he continued to think the greatest in the history of Western thought. Heidegger was openly and long affiliated with those who murdered Levinas' parents, brothers, wife's family, and never clearly repudiated his political stance.

Personal suffering may not be a necessary condition for enlightened commentary on the suffering of others, though we imagine that suffering opens one more clearly to the dimension of the pain of others. Caygill in his recent book notes that “even a glance at [Levinas'] life shows that reflection on politics and the political was for him a predicament rather than a choice” (Caygill 2002: 2). Levinas' studies of Judaism, his Talmudic research, his dedication to philosophical and religious Judaism are clearly essential to understanding his thought, but the link between his philosophical and religious research, in Caygill's view, lies in the experience of political horror. The ethical thus “emerges as a response to political horror” (Caygill 2002: 2). Noting the absence of the political present in Levinas' texts – his discussion of German National Socialism for example, as an intimation or a memory, the state of Israel as a prophetic promise or a state of the future and not always the actually existing state – Caygill writes that “the political for Levinas is the inassimilable or the unforgettable that returns disruptively to insist on the question of the political” (2002: 3).

Levinas breaks the paradigm of political peace by introducing an eschatological peace, one that precedes any legal contract, any rational negotiation. In the same text quoted above, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes “Of peace there can be only an eschatology” (1998: 24). True peace is other than the cycle or war and peace. “We oppose to the objectivism of war a subjectivity born from the eschatological vision” (1998: 25). This lost paradise – or the one yet to come – is founded in the unicity of the other. The face of the other calls us to peace prior to any legal contract, by its simple exhibition of vulnerabil-

ity. True peace, for Levinas, precedes the political; how it enters the political is unclear. For Levinas authentic peace does not enter into the paradigm of peace-and-war. We are duped by morality, because morality – the legislation of how not to commit acts of war, acts of violence – is always focussed on war. War and peace on this understanding are negotiations to avoid violent confrontations. This war is always the last, it is always the war to end all wars. This peace is the respite, the break between this war and the next. The violence, in Levinas' view, has already been committed in the very act of negotiation, negotiation which secretly plans the next war – the war of revenge.

Levinas offers instead a view of peace focussed on fellowship with the other, “peace”, he says in “Peace and Proximity”, “independent then of belonging to a system, irreducible to a totality” (Levinas 1996: 165). Peace here is irreducible to a genus, to a notion of the universal, to the identification of me with a particular *us* versus an other who is *them*. It is “an ethical relation which thus would not be a simple deficiency or privation of the unity of the One reduced to the multiplicity of individuals in the extension of a genus” (Levinas 1996: 166). In short, he says that the unicity of the one is that of the beloved. I love you because you are unique. Peace is love. Peace is the awareness of the precariousness of the other. We see this in the vulnerability of the other's face – in the pain and joys we are able to read in the complexity of expressions presented to us, in the lines that dignify and destroy the face of the one before us. How clearly we can read through some forms of subterfuge, hiding of self from self and self from others – and how we can be taken in by practiced deceivers. Still, it would be a mistake to identify the face alone as revelatory of the vulnerability and uniqueness of the other. We see the other's uniqueness in her swollen legs, her proud carriage, or in her bowed back.³

How do we get from this peace, from the unicity of the other to the political realm of justice? The discussion of the introduction of the third is well known and I will save you the reader from too much repetition of the familiar here. The face-to-face is a unique encounter of me and you – the arrival of the third thrusts me into the realm of justice, of reason, of discourse, since it obliges me to arbitrate the demands of you and her. The presence of the third forces me to choose, to make a decision about who comes first. Roger Burggraeve in his recently translated book notes that in the last two decades of Levinas' life the question of peace and human rights come more to the forefront of Levinas' thought, even becoming synonyms for his concept of responsibility (Burggraeve 2002: 41). Burggraeve describes how the appeal of the face “also represents the first and fundamental minimal demand of right, namely the right to life, the right to respect for one's own otherness and history, for one's own personhood. To see a face is to hear, “Thou shalt not kill” (2002: 104).

³ Cf. reference to the back in Vassili Grossmans's *Life and Fate* in Levinas (1996: 167).

On this reading, human rights are originally the rights of the other person. Levinas writes that “the foundation of consciousness is justice and not the reverse” (Levinas 1996: 169). We come to rational consciousness, ontological awareness kicks in, as it were, when we are faced with the conflicting demands of two “others”.

Derrida’s *Adieu*, an essay on hospitality, is also, at least in its second part, an interrogation of the concept of peace, and presents a wonderful contrast between on the one hand Kant’s notion of perpetual peace, ironically inspired by the gravestone, and then presented as a future state which overcomes the basic human propensity to war, and on the other Levinas’ notion of peace, rooted in the fundamental fact (for Levinas) of human peace as primary and as the gesture of hospitality. Derrida plays on the relationship between host and hostage, between the way in which I am host but at the same time, as infinitely bound to her, thus also hostage. This plays allusively, intertextually, on the Greek code of hospitality, the guest/host relationship of *xenia* which underlies much of Homeric epics, and thus much of Greek thought. Homer, in the *Iliad*, presents a private violation of custom that has cataclysmic political repercussions (the Trojan war as a result of Paris violating *xenia* by stealing his host’s wife). The Homeric intertext thus illuminates the problematic between a personal “peace” based on face-to-face ethics and the political consequences of an attempt to generalize the one-on-one dimension of ethical hospitality. Using this as a foundation, Derrida questions the possibility of a transition from an ethical to a political in Levinas. I cannot do this essay justice here (as it were) though I would like to take up Derrida’s question when he asks “how can this infinite and thus unconditional hospitality, this hospitality at the opening of ethics, be regulated in a particular political or juridical practice?” (Derrida 1997: 48).

The call to justice through the recognition of the third, and the re-instatement of the noble ends of human rights and a state devoted to justice, now based upon the originary recognition of the insurmountable otherness and unicity of the other is one of the most touching parts of Levinas studies. But how does this really play out? We could turn here to Levinas’ Zionism, his identification of the peaceful state to come with the state of Israel. Levinas has a peculiar reluctance to comment on the actual politics of the present state of Israel, as Caygill notes, while at the same time imagining Israel as the state of the future in which the realization of the ethical ideal of the other would be possible. Is Israel, is Zionism then a utopian ideal, the practical realization of which is not to be touched?

Derrida discusses two possibilities of Levinas’ view of Zionism, a realist and an eschatological vision, but notes that, “whether or not one endorses any of these analyses of the actual situation of the State of Israel in its

political visibility (and I must admit that I do not always do so), the concern here is incontestable: *on the one hand*, to interpret the Zionist *commitment*, the promise, the sworn faith and not the Zionist *fact*, as a movement that carries the political *beyond* the political, and thus is caught between the political and its other; and *on the other hand*, to think a peace that would not be purely political” (Derrida 1997: 79). (As an aside thrilling to scholars of rhetoric and intertext, it is worth noting that the very formulation of Derrida’s question – on the one hand... on the other hand... resonates with the classical *men...de* of Greek rhetoric.) Homer starts with Menelaus and Paris, moves to the Trojan war, and comes back to the vengeance of Odysseus exacted on the private violators of his wife’s hospitality – which is also his own – the suitors. Levinas is similarly suspended in an ethical system based on personal exchange that seems inadequate to the interactions of larger human groups.

The larger group he was most concerned with in his own political discourse was the fate of the Jewish people, focussed particularly in his Zionist impulse on the state of Israel. It is important then to discuss the events of 1982 during the ongoing war between Israel and Lebanon. In East Beirut on Sept. 14, Christian Phalangist president-elect Bashir Gemayel was murdered in a bombing which also killed 25 others. Two days later began the worst single atrocity in the Arab-Israeli conflict: a three-day massacre in the West Beirut Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Chatila. Led and directed by Israeli defence forces, Christian Phalangists entered the camps. Israeli defence forces looked on as up to 2000 (or was it 3500? or 600?) people, women, men, children, babies, were murdered, shot, hacked, mutilated, bulldozed, and as women and children were raped. As Robert Fisk (of the Independent), who arrived at 10:00 the morning of the 19th reported, they even shot the horses. The Israeli Kahen commission report found Begin’s government responsible, and Ariel Sharon, minister of defence at the time - now the prime minister of Israel – indirectly but personally responsible. Jewish communities world-wide were shaken.

On Sept. 19, 1982, the UN security council unequivocally condemned the massacre, which in a resolution six days later, noting as well the homelessness of the Palestinian people, it declared an act of genocide. A 1985 resolution of the Human Rights Commission expresses “deep regret” at the negative reaction of Israel and the United States to the Report of the International Conference on the Question of Palestine of Sept. 1983, and declares that “until a just and equitable solution to the problem of Palestine has been implemented, the Palestinian people will be subjected to grave dangers such as the appalling massacre perpetrated in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps”.⁴

⁴ UN Commission on Human Rights, 26 Feb. 1985.

In an infamous interview soon after what is now simply referred to as Sabra and Chatila, an interview that has subsequently greatly disturbed some Levinas scholars, Levinas did not openly condemn the massacres. Indeed he talks of a “lack of guilt”. When asked directly if, for the Israeli, the “other” is not above all the Palestinian, his answer is equivocal at best: “If your neighbour attacks another neighbour and treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong” (Levinas 1989: 294). Some scholars (Campbell, Shapiro) think that Levinas in this statement is following all too closely in Heidegger’s terrible footsteps, in the impossibility of connecting a current political interest to an established philosophical stance. Others (for example Schiff⁵) more generously adapt these statements to an interpretation in which Levinas accepts the cruelty of politics while assigning hope for change in the separate ethical realm. And again others (arguably Derrida in *Adieu*, and Critchley (2004)) register the view that Levinas, philosopher, is not philosophically responsible for his own particular political views, since there is a disconnect in his philosophical ethics between the ethical and the political. The fact is that Levinas’ silence on the genocide at Sabra and Chatila uncomfortably reminds us of the silence of Heidegger, and we are forced to ask how his astounding ethical insights could relate to a politics.

It comes to this: Kofi Annan’s statement, with which I began my paper resonates clearly of the enlightenment and thus awakens in us, products of the enlightenment, believers in its project despite and against our post-modern critiques, a resounding agreement. Yes of course we must uphold human rights, and condemn the abuses of US and British forces in Iraq, of course we must question the US fire seemingly aimed at Guiliana Sgrena which led to the death of Nicola Calipari. We must demand that human beings, *as* human beings like us, not be subjected to torture, degradation, humiliation, murder. But perhaps we could base that universal admonition on the singularity of the victims, potential and actual. We could begin with the demand that this man, this Calipari, not be killed. Thou shalt not kill this man, this Nicola Calipari. It is not an idea restricted to difficult philosophical texts, or even to texts. We have only to think of the power of Maya Ling Lin’s Vietnam memorial in Washington D.C., “The Wall”, and its strange ability to affect people of all classes and educations, people of all political stripes as well. She managed with her sculpture, or architectural piece to capture the singularity within the multitude.

⁵ On-line article: Jacob Schiff: “Politics Against Redemption: Rereading Levinas for Critical International Theory. (University of Chicago).

I think I will close my paper with this worry, this deep worry about the practical possibility of reaching the political from the ethical, or of translating the ethical into the political. What does it mean to apprehend the face of the other and be committed to it or not to be called to action in response? I fear that it could mean a dry discussion of Levinas in conference rooms and little-read journals – and nothing more.

It may be appropriate here, given the recent 25th anniversary of his death, to bring to mind the assassination of Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, an intellectual who was called to action. Then we need also to recall the recently deceased Pope's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Romero's search for justice and peace in his homeland. What is right – human right – is too easily obscured by human will and personal history. Was John Paul II's refusal linked to his experience of the oppression of his own homeland in the name of a twisted form of Marxism, and his fear, despite the evidence, that this kind of Marxism take root in El Salvador? Then we could say that Levinas' own blindness to the reprehensible conduct of the Israeli government is paradoxically an affirmation of the truth of his pre-political stance.

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Catriona Hanley
LEVINAS APIE TAIKĄ IR KARĄ

SANTRAUKA

Mano straipsnyje tyrinėjama Emmanuelio Levino taikos samprata. Į pirmą vietą iškeliamas klausimas, kaip racionali ontologija, suteikianti pagrindus, kuriais remdamiesi siekiame teisingumo ir lygybės visiems žmonėms (pavyzdžiui, universalus žmogaus teisių reikalavimas), vis dėlto geba įvilioti mus į nuolatinį karą. Levino manymu, problemą sudaro tai, kad racionalios ontologijos universalumas neigia atskirumą. Levino postuluojuama neredukuojama žmogiško individo paskirybės – suvokiamos pirma individo, kaip dalyvaujančio universalume, identifikavimo – samprata siūlo viltį taikos, kuri grindžiama *kiekvieno* individo tesėmis, neapibendrinant *visų* individų. Jo „iki-politinė“ taikos samprata išsiveržia iš nuolatinio karo ir paliaubų pasikartojimo rato būtent todėl, kad yra *kita* jo atžvilgiu. Straipsnyje svarstau, kaip šią taikos sampratą galima paversti veiksminga politinėje praktikoje ir ar pats Levinas galėjo tai padaryti.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Levinas, taika, karas, universalumas, paskirumas.