Bond University
ePublications@bond

French Philosophers in Conversation, by Raoul Mortley | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

January 1991

Chapter I. Emmanuel Levinas

Raoul Mortley
Bond University, raoul_mortley@bond.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://epublications.bond.edu.au/french_philosophers

Recommended Citation
Mortley, Raoul, "Chapter I. Emmanuel Levinas" (1991). *French Philosophers in Conversation, by Raoul Mortley.* Paper 2.
http://epublications.bond.edu.au/french_philosophers/2

This Book Chapter is brought to you by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at ePublications@bond. It has been accepted for inclusion in French Philosophers in Conversation, by Raoul Mortley by an authorized administrator of ePublications@bond. For more information, please contact Bond University's Repository Coordinator.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Lithuania in 1905, though he received a French university education, at Strasbourg. From here, as a student, he travelled to Freiburg where he heard both Husserl and Heidegger lecture. Through his Jewish background he knew Yiddish, and therefore enough German to comprehend the lectures of the two Freiburg philosophers: it was through this social coincidence that a conduit was created from Germany to Paris. As a philosopher in Paris, Levinas introduced and developed phenomenological themes, and became an immensely important influence, widely respected amongst younger philosophers. His institutional career was based on his position as Professor of Philosophy at the Sorbonne (Paris IV); now in his eighties, he has exercised a growing influence in his retirement. His work has evolved considerably in recent years. He suffered under the Nazis, and his work has always had a strong Jewish aspect: especially lately he has become a conscious philosopher of Judaism.

1

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

RM: You're known as a philosopher working within the phenomenological tradition, but I'd like to ask about your training from the very beginning. You were born in Lithuania.

EL: I was born in Lithuania, where I had an education based on the Russian culture; even after the 1914-18 war there were secondary schools where teaching was in Russian. I was greatly influenced by Russian literature, which has been very important to me, and I don't forget it today in spite of all my western wonderments. Then I came to Strasbourg, where I did a year of Latin, and I took philosophy as part of my work towards the *Licence* degree in the French system. I did psychology, sociology, ethics - general philosophy and the history of philosophy. I then wanted to move quickly into personal research, and I became interested in Husserl: I got interested in Husserl by chance. Someone was reading a book of his next to me.

RM: So it didn't come from your formal French training?

EL: Not at all: there I did modern philosophy, contemporary philosophy, and there it was Bergson. And so a love of Bergson has remained with me all my life, though now of course he has been somewhat forgotten. And I would never have been able to bring together my interest in Heidegger if I hadn't had the prior training in Bergson. Of course, at that time Heidegger's name was completely unknown: it was 1928. So I read Husserl, I was very taken by his logic, I read his *Ideas* and I wanted to go and hear him in Freiburg. So I went there to attend his lectures: he had just retired but he was still teaching, and during this summer semester of 1928 we heard the name of his successor - it was to be Heidegger. So, as you can imagine, Heidegger

came with many of his students from Marburg, and, with him alongside Husserl, it was the place where one felt one was getting the last word in philosophy.

RM: So Freiburg was an important philosophical centre: but of course it's even now a very small town.

EL: But in Germany small towns are very important; great philosophical movements carry the names of small towns. There's no Berlin school: but there's Heidelberg, Marburg, Freiburg.

RM: And you learnt German?

EL: Well of course I had learnt German since childhood . . .

RM: At high school?

EL: Yes at high school, but being Jewish we spoke Yiddish, so I had a good grounding in German. I read a great deal in German and so there was no language problem then. I became enchanted with Heidegger and his *Being and Time,* and I still think very highly of it: there are only five or six books like this in the history of philosophy. I am much less attracted by the late Heidegger, everything that's coming out now in the *Ausgabe,* which I know less well in fact, but Husserl's phenomenology as it emerges in Heidegger is still very illuminating to me.

RM: So it was virtually chance which led you to Husserl?

EL: Yes it was, and I felt immediately that there was here a generally new look at philosophy. I thought of it as the last statement on philosophy, and I attach great significance to that sentiment: and so I came to admire greatly the possibilities of Husserl's phenomenology, of developing it through the thought of Heidegger.

RM: The course of your career is rather different in French terms, in the sense that there couldn't have been many French students who went to Freiburg. And of course for some time Heidegger was frowned on in France because of his apparent connection with Nazism.

EL: Ah that. . .! I don't know whether it was apparent, but in any case that was afterwards. At that earlier stage nothing of the kind was weighing on him. He was relatively unknown: there was very little information on Heidegger in France. Heidegger was discovered later, during the war. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty were involved and since then, of course, a

considerable Heideggerian following has established itself in France.

RM: It seems to me to be an important fact that in France it was only a part of *Being and Time* that was published.

EL: It's still the case. . .

RM: But I think that Gallimard is bringing out the rest. . . [now published]

EL: And there's a big quarrel about all that *(laughter).* You know that in France, and this is very interesting for foreigners, there are classes after the final year of high school, special classes after the *baccalauréat,* the *hypocagne,* which offers training for the Grandes Ecoles, and there was a teacher in this system called Beaufret: a whole series of former high school students learnt Heidegger from him at this level. It's unique really.

RM: It's clear also that there is a current of Jewish thought which has been influential in your own work. Did you have a formal training in this area?

EL: I learnt Hebrew and biblical texts, and studied modern Hebrew from my childhood. From the age of 6 we had a special teacher for this purpose. But that was the Bible. I didn't know anything about the background of the Talmud and the Rabbinic commentaries. I took this seriously only at a very much later stage, and it was in Paris that I undertook study in this area, privately, and I made contact with a teacher of exceptional skill, quite remarkable, and I often describe our encounter. He taught me a disciplined way of reading these texts - the way to find complex things beneath things which are apparently innocent - and even within terribly tangled things.

RM: So you already knew Hebrew well at that stage?

EL: Classical Hebrew of course, but the Talmud is partly in Aramaic. This was an important stimulus to me: I am not talking about religious enthusiasm, though I am not attacking that. The essential thing was the invitation to *think* that I found in these documents. Among my publications there is a whole series of works drawn from this, but I never run together my general philosophy with what I call the more confessional writing. I don't have the same publisher: the confessional writings are published with Minuit. But there's certainly some infiltration from one side to the other.

RM: On your method in philosophy, if I may ask you an Anglo-Saxon type of question, how would you distinguish your approach from the empirical approach? What are the essential traits of empiricism?

EL: I know empiricism in its traditional form. But I've never studied analytic philosophy with its linguistic empiricism. My method is phenomenological; it consists in restoring that which is given, which bears a name, which is objective, to its background of intention, not only that intention which is directed towards the object, but to everything which calls it to concreteness, to the horizon. I've often said that it is research into the staging *[mise en scène]* of that which is the object; the object which, left to itself, is clarified, as much as it closes off the gaze - as if the giving was like an eyelid which lowers itself as an object appears, and consequently as if the objective is always abstract. Concreteness is the ensemble of what is lived, of intentionality, which is not entirely heuristic; it includes the axiological and the affective. Consequently meaning is given in this concreteness, and there can be surprises here over the general role of thematization.

RM: And in this schema, or to take the Heideggerian term you used a moment ago, in this horizon, what is the place of the mind? Does the mind. . .

EL: I don't know what you mean by mind: is it the objective mind, objective thought?

RM: I mean the capacity of the subject, the knowing subject, within the framework of the real, and I want to refer too to the subject/object distinction.

EL: I think they are inseparable, not through intentionality, which is an essential moment of the subject. Thought is not purely intentionality; I wanted to come back to that, not purely because of Husserl's idea of the eidetic data. That is not for me the essential break with intentionality. But on intentionality I am rather inclined to think that being, what is given, what imposes itself - that the position or statement, the fact that it shows itself, is like an emphasis of its own being. And when I use the expression that it *shows* itself, of course it does so in the being of the subject, concretely. It is also presupposed that it appears in truth and that this truth is *affirmed.* So that what you call mind, on the subjective side, is for me an essential moment of the positioning itself, of being.

As if the fact that showing itself was the emphatic moment of the positioning of itself. It is the intentional co-relation, and the very concreteness of being. But the question is whether the positioning of being is the essential feature of thought. Insofar as being is the primary philosophical occurrence, I've no great difficulty in grasping that there is a thinking which thinks it: there is the act, and for it the fact of emerging in truth, and its affirmation in being, its positioning, is in fact the act of thought which affirms it as present, in presence. So, in this case, being itself is essentially presence. And it is very easy to show that that which is a memory is re-presentation, and that which is not yet is intentionally anticipated. In any case being is presence, and in this case the mind is that which welcomes it. The mind welcomes it because it shows itself as presence and affirms itself as presence to thought. So I hesitate over the appearing within this being which positions itself, which is the world, rest. Rest, presence, it's the same thing - it's there. There can take place here the encounter of faces, human faces, where instead of this affirmation, this rest, you are called, or you undergo two apparently contradictory things: the appearance of weakness, which does not affirm itself - a kind of mortality. Mortality is in no way *my* death, but the death of the other. But there is not only weakness; at the same time as this weakness appears in the face - this mortality - there appears also the command: do not leave me in solitude. Consequently, there is an imperative, which is in no way the imperative of the universal which arouses my will: on the contrary there is an authority in the face, which commands me not to leave this mortal to dwell alone. Taking up that: here is my responsibility for the other.

RM: The idea of the face, what is it exactly? I am thinking here of the Greek term *prosopon,* with its ambiguity, in that it means both face and mask. The face could be a veil before the person.

EL: The face is always given as countenance. We meet this countenance in the look of the other, and it doesn't declare itself: but behind it there is the weakness. If there were only the mask, if it were only the countenance which was given, there would only be a mask. I don't understand it in the Greek sense: the weakness is in fact unveiled, I would even say it's naked. There is a nudity revealed: *Enthüllung,* 'disclosure', is a state without shame; there is the moment in the human

face which is the most naked and exposed state of human experience. Being is always exposed to consciousness: here it's the mortal which is shown. Inevitably, together with this, there is also the command, or the imperative: do not leave me in solitude. You can't abandon the other person. There is a Hebrew expression: 'Here am I'; it's used by Abraham. And the word which sums up this positioning is *responsibility.* The look is always 'to hand' of course, *zu Hand;* there is a dominance in the look, a technical dominance. But here I am talking about the relation of obligation, and responsibility. One can use the term 'hostage' here: I am the hostage, because I am responsible. Not because I have participated in some past or other, in which I have done something. There is the revelation of a past which has never been present, in which I am, through my responsibility, obligated to anyone who turns up.

RM: The idea of one's responsibility to the other, and to some extent the idea of the face, presuppose an otherness, an alterity, within being, and I think you have been among those who have objected to the reduction of being to sameness.

EL: Otherness is present from the consciousness onwards. Intentionality provides for something which is other and which offers itself to you, or which is given to you – which lends itself to possession and domination. Objects and things, when they are seen, are grasped. This is pursued in the *Begriff,* the taking up: but here the idea of grasping is not present. When I talk about responsibility and obligation, and consequently about the person with whom one is in a relationship through the face, this person does not appear as belonging to an order which can be 'embraced', or 'grasped'. The other, in this relationship of responsibility, is, as it were, unique: 'unique' meaning without genre. In this sense he is absolutely other, not only in relation to me; he is alone as if he were the only one of significance at that moment. The essence of responsibility lies in the uniqueness of the person for whom you are responsible. You are in love, a love without concupiscence, along the lines of Pascal's idea, and love in this sense is access to the unique. And here is the otherness involved. Furthermore, the 'I' which finds itself with this responsibility cannot be replaced. Consequently within this exceptional relationship between me and the

other, he who is responsible is the chosen one. It's the uniqueness of the elect. So, apart from what we called mind at the beginning, the mind which knows and embraces, which invests, which possesses, uses, which takes, understands - all this activity of the mind is in complete contrast to the idea of the self which is passive, under obligation and unique. Consequently, there is the order of knowledge, and on the other hand the responsibility for the other, which is a strange, or foreign, thing, within being. Being is itself continuance or persistence of being within its own being: so you have here a being which is *for* the other. For the other: within the human there is the possibility of being for the other, which is the sphere of ethics, and this is the order of holiness. You can talk about holiness without being holy, of course *(laughter):* very few men are saints, but no man questions sanctity. If sanctity is questioned, it is in the name of another sanctity. Consequently, human nature is not conceived in the light of its position as subject against the world, but in the light of this appeal, this order, which is primary. The position of the thinking self, the transcendental ego which knows, synthesizes, gathers together, embraces, possesses: I wonder if its very uniqueness is not the culmination of an ethical operation, in which it establishes itself as unique. So there are not two modes of the mind, but there is a priority in itself of ethics, or of holiness in relation to the quality of *need* of the world to be possessed.

RM: Holiness is difference, in relation to the ordinary or the profane, so to speak?

EL: I am not talking about religion: it's not a religious analysis I am giving. I am not talking about the sacred: the sacred is the ambience in which holiness often dwells, but they are not the same thing. I have published a little collection of Talmudic writings which is called *From the Sacred to the Holy:* the sacred is the easy way of avoiding holiness itself.

RM: If we look at the idea of otherness for a moment: I have understood your interest in one's responsibility for the other, that one is *for* the other. But don't you run the risk of exaggerating the difference between people, between beings. Couldn't racism and also sexism find some reinforcement in the kind of view you advocate? You often talk about the feminine, or femininity. . .

EL: I haven't quite got to the bottom of this matter, but in the idea that the other is of a different genre. . . everything which is dispersed has the unity of him who grasps it. There is the unity of form . . . the first synthesis of the constituting self. But here, in relation to the other; it is *because* he is alien that he is incumbent on me. It's an entirely different way of coming to terms with the other. Sex itself is otherness of genre, but within a relation: so in a relationship with the feminine, a breaking of genre has already taken place. This is a very important moment in the accession to the total otherness of the face. But you ask me about exaggerating the difference: I would say in reply that there is a philosophy of human nature from the moment that there are two of us. And in fact there are three of us *(laughter);* and there is a sense in which my relationship with another is in conflict with my relationship with a third party. Consequently, I cannot live in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone. There is no calculation in this responsibility: there is no pre-responsible knowledge. The face carries everything, so in my view it is in the relationship to a third party that knowledge comes.

I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest - all the exotic - is dance.

So responsibility, which is not blind, asks: 'What is there between men?' And all the politics of the Greeks - I'll take this idea right through - emerges. Through this pity, there is a relationship of pity, we enter into knowledge, judgement and justice: I always say that justice is the primary violence.

RM: Speaking of knowledge, could I jump here to the myth of Adam and Eve. The Fall was also the acquisition of knowledge: in certain Jewish interpretations of the tale the Fall was seen as a rise, a gaining of stature for humanity, in that human beings acquired knowledge.

EL: Oh I think that the Jewish reading of it also treats it as a Fall, but there is another meaning to your question, which is the sense given to it by Maimonides. He asks how it is that knowledge, which is such a fine thing, has sprung from an error or imperfection. He says that it was *approximate* knowledge which came from the Fall, and that the first knowledge was ethical, and that it was also flawless *(laughter):* he literally says that. You can put it differently and

say that it's a type of knowledge which leads to the atomic bomb, and that this knowledge came from the Fall.

Sometimes I wonder why I'm always going on about faces, if, in the end, instead of listening to God through the faces of people, you look into the heart, inspect the entrails so to speak. . . well, you reach a just society, and this just society has judges, and this society with judges has an army, and so on. And so we reach the liberal state, the state which always asks itself whether its own justice really *is* justice. This particular quality of the liberal state might appear to be a political contingency, nothing to do with metaphysics, but it is a metaphysical moment of the human phenomenon. That's very important.

RM: A moment in the progress of *Dasein?*

EL: Heidegger's *Dasein? Dasein* never wonders whether, by being *da,* 'there', it's taking somebody else's place! As we know, Germany has always had its *Dasein (laughter).* No, to return to the thing I was saying, the liberal state, with a free press. . . you know the prophets of the Bible, they come and say to the king that his method of dispensing justice is wrong. The prophet doesn't do this in a clandestine way: he comes before the king and he tells him. In the liberal state, it's the press, the poets, the writers who fulfil this role. And in second place, once justice has been applied, there is still some charity which remains. Let me tell you a story drawn from Jewish wisdom: one biblical text says: 'You shall not look at the face of the person on whom you are passing judgement.' In this context the face refers to the rank, the social class, or any particular distinction of the person being judged: you judge without regard to the person. But other texts say: 'The Eternal turns his face towards you.' Now if the Eternal turns his face towards you, he looks into your face. Which is right? He doesn't look into your face - that's before the judgement. He looks into your face - that's after the judgement *(laughter).* That's how it's solved.

RM: Why does he look afterwards?

EL: Because, once justice has been rendered, there is in fact a moment of personal contact which can soften the penalty, or the pain of it: it can soften the cruel, or the hard side of justice.

RM: So there's a kind of relationship established between the punisher and the punished.

I'd like to go now to the relationship between Judaism and philosophy: what relationship can there be between Judaism and philosophy? There have always been problems between religion and philosophy, and, in Christianity for example, the growth of Protestantism could in some ways be regarded as the rejection of philosophy within the Christian tradition. I've always been fascinated by the fact that in antiquity you have one Jewish philosopher - philosopher in the Greek mode - namely Philo, and, after him, nothing until the medieval period. Why this thousand-year void? Was Philo judged to be too adulterated from the intellectual point of view? Too Greek perhaps?

EL: The question is a little ambiguous, because by philosophy you mean a certain well-defined tradition, whose leaders we could name, the great men who established it, but which is wholly concerned with knowledge. The culmination of this sort of philosophy lies in contemplation, as in the tenth book of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics,* in contemplation of pure essence. Transcending the otherness of the world, and its alien character, through a kind of knowledge which makes it accessible to human thought. Happiness itself, the aspiration of man, is thought to lie in understanding and the peace of truth. I don't know whether the word 'truth' has the same meaning in Judaism: it's biblical of course. It's common to Judaism and Christianity, the presence itself of God and association with him. His *proximity* is the concern. Maimonides and people like him talk about understanding God but they also mean association with him, proximity to him. So there is a problem about how to relate this proximity and the transcending of the otherness of material reality. It doesn't take place through knowledge, but through a relationship with the other, in love of the other. This irreducible love of the other cannot be contained in terms which are expressible in philosophy. The Jewish contribution in the history of philosophy always comes with the appearance of the ethical as being of prime importance. This is not really an explanation, but it is an attempt to grasp the sense, the *Sinn* of philosophy as sociality.

RM: Sociality?

EL: Yes, sociality. Being in society is often seen as being inferior to being one, alone. In western philosophy, sociality

is regarded almost as a coincidence, which is a failure. A coincidence which failed to realize its potential: and there's a whole theme of western philosophy, and western literature as well, which is devoted to disappointment in love. Lovers misunderstand each other. They don't coincide, they are alien to each other. In my view sociality should be regarded as the excellence of the human species: sociality is worth more than solitude. And of course this idea is not my own, there are others in the history of the twentieth century who have dealt with the I/thou relationship.

RM: Buber?

EL: Yes, Buber: and Gabriel Marcel in France. And the thought of Merleau-Ponty, the idea of a rupture in the cognitive relationship with the object as being the essential for the subject. He looks always to the subject as incorporated, so to speak, in its entry into the flesh. So this subject is not solely accomplished within knowledge: that's how this biblical theme can become a philosophical one. But we can't always be sure of the 'happy ending' when we follow this line. After living through Auschwitz. . . but we must still take account of the other man. Even if taking account of him is not recompensed. There are many levels of religion . . . . But I want to say that this business of Auschwitz did not interrupt the history of holiness. God did not reply, but he has taught that love of the other person, without reciprocity, is a perfection in itself.

RM: The fact of Auschwitz is one of the most important facts of the twentieth century: do you think there is anything exceptional in it, over and above the ordinary context of European anti-Semitism?

EL: Yes, it was not a question of the number of people, it was the way, the way. . .

RM: But it's never only a question of numbers. . .

EL: Well, the number there were plenty of numbers as well: but the flesh . . . of the murdered people transported on the lorries. . . it was referred to in neutral terms - *die Scheiss* - they weren't human bodies. That was what was exceptional. It was murder carried out in contempt, more than in hatred. . .

RM: Returning to the question of Judaism and philosophy; sometimes the question is asked whether there was a Jewish science. There was a Greek science and a Greek philosophy,

and among the Jews the Bible at the same time. Then a kind of encounter took place with Philo . . . is there something in the purely Jewish intellectual tradition which could be considered anti-scientific? The same question has been asked of Christianity of course.

EL: It's a question for the whole history of philosophy, but I would say this, that Greek science, its metaphysics, its logic, these are things which are compatible with Judaism, but you can't look for science in the Bible. Philo looked in the Bible for Greek metaphysics.

RM: What I mean is that there is an inaccessibility about the Talmud: it is complicated, it requires skill and training, and of course there are touches of humour. . .

EL: Oh yes, there's a lot of humour. . .

RM: . . . but you practically need to be within a tradition to appreciate it, whereas Greek science has something of the universal about it; it's a logos which is common to all.

EL: I should say this, that with the teacher I had, whose equal I have never met since, I only just penetrated the midrash, the haggadic part which tells symbolic tales. You need a great deal of imagination to read it; without that it would send you off to sleep. My teacher always used to say: 'You have to wait on your imagination.' Whatever I've written on the Talmud is based on the Haggadah, not on the *Halakha,* which is much more difficult …

RM: Aren't these traditions really a way of connecting the sacred text to the present?

EL: Yes. . . take for example the law of the eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. That can be interpreted in the light of monetary compensation: the commentator says that compensation must be given for the lost eye. The eye has to be understood as an asset in the market-place: if an eye has been lost, the loss of work must be paid for, treatment must be paid for, the uglification, so to speak, has to be paid for. There is a whole series of things which can be settled with money. So I asked my teacher why it says 'an eye for an eye', a thing for a thing. Money existed after all - there could have been a monetary recompense. He said: 'If it didn't say that, Rothschild would have cornered the eye market.'

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Theories de ['intuition dans la phenomenologie de Husserl (Paris: Vrin 1930); English version: *The Theory of Intuition in Husser['s Phenomenology,* trans. Andre Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1985).

De l'existence à l' existant (Paris: V rin 1947); English version: *Existence and Existents,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff 1978).

En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger (Paris: Vrin 1949).

Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité (The Hague: Nijhoff 1969); English version: *Totality and Infinity,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff 1980).

Difficile Liberté (Paris: Albin-Michel 1963).

Quatre lectures talmudiques (Paris: Minuit 1968).

Autrement qu'être, ou au-de/à de l'essence (The Hague: Nijhoff 1974); English version: *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff 1981).

Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques (Paris: Minuit 1977).

De Dieu qui vient à l'idée (Paris: Vrin 1982).