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Hope as a Strategy: Messianism in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Abstract

This essay is an explication of the role of messianism, often expressed as hope, in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's single philosophical project from 1933 until his passing in 1996 was to establish ethics as first philosophy. This effort was in opposition to the primacy of ontology in the work of Martin Heidegger. Levinas uses a phenomenological method similar to Heidegger's to establish messianic hope as a fundamental human motivation. Throughout Levinas's work, he borrows a religious vocabulary from his Jewish heritage that he resets into a philosophical domain. He takes a religious concept of messianism, specifically Jewish formulations of messianism, and associates it with the human affect of hope. Messianic hope becomes a persistent theme in all of Levinas's work. This essay will explore the origins of this terminology, the role of temporality, and how he uses messianic hope throughout his work to further his philosophical aims.

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the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Gary R. Sunshine

June 2019

Advisor: Carl Raschke

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Introduction

Hope is Not a Strategy was the title of a popular business book from a few years ago. Practically, hope is not a cognitive state but more of a wish. It is not a plan or an activity and does not provide a way forward. While hope probably does not make a good strategy for the aspiring entrepreneur, it is a critical part of the strategy of Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical project. The ambition of his project is considerable and fundamental – to establish ethics as first philosophy. That is to put ethics before ontology, epistemology, and, certainly, aesthetics. That is to make ethics the foundation on which all other philosophy will then rest. It is not to establish a system of justice or morality, but simply to put ethics first among all other considerations. This essay will not address the success or failure of this project but will look at one key element of Levinas's method, that is his use of certain religiously charged terms. These terms are clustered around the idea of a Messiah, specifically a messianic era and eschatology. In some of his work, these concepts are front and center, and other times they are only implicit. The messianic ideal threads its way through the entire course of his work. This essay will show how Emmanuel Levinas situates his messianism, derived from his Jewish background, as the driving force of his philosophy.

Like many other thinkers from the twentieth century, Levinas is very critical of the Western philosophical tradition. A tremendous amount of effort during this period

focuses on rethinking and redefining fundamental issues of philosophy. In this mode of thought, when Levinas uses the term “ethics” in announcing his project as, “establishing ethics as first philosophy,” he uses the term in a very specific sense. He is not talking about setting up a set of principles to guide the specifics of human behavior. Philosophies of morality, justice and politics provide the proper discourse for establishing the specific rules and algorithms for these issues. His project is more primary, deriving ethics from the self and speaks “...to the anarchical, interruptive grounding of self as self-for-another, the ground of self in a pre-cognitive, unknowable, uncontainable, infinite mystery – an occluded self-disclosure.”¹ This is ethics arising from the self in relationship with another. Levinas’s effort consistently presents itself as, “an attempt to replace all accounts of the human condition that fail to appreciate our essential social existence with one that does so.”² Levinas is trying to make clear that the responsibilities of intersubjective relationships are the most primary of human existence.

A fundamental presupposition of Levinas’s work is that, “philosophy and religion exist in a relation of mutuality.”³ The interactions between Greek philosophy and the religion of the Hebrew bible are evident throughout Levinas’s writings. “Levinas employs terms such as ‘prophetic’ and ‘messianic’ in relation to ‘eschatological’ not to

¹ Sarah Pessin, “From Mystery to Laughter to Trembling Generosity: Agono-Pluralistic Ethics in Connolly v. Levinas (and the Possibilities for Atheist Theist Respect)”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 24:5 (Nov. 2016) 617, DOI: 10.1080/09672559.2016.1248128

² Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3.

³ Leora Batnitzky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Politics of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.

provide reactive tropes with which to counter philosophy but to express the uneasy and intertwined relationship between Jerusalem and Athens.”⁴ Levinas understands and values the intersecting discourses of Judaism and philosophy, but “...at no moment did the Western philosophical tradition in my eyes lose its right to the last word; everything must, indeed, be expressed in its tongue.”⁵ Simply, Levinas feels that certain religious terms are better expressions of the philosophical concepts he attempts to analyze.

A second presupposition is that time is the fundamental condition. This is not original with Levinas but has a long history stretching back to the ancients. Questions of temporality are consequently integral to establishing messianic hope as the motivation of his ethical project. Time and temporality will necessarily be a theme throughout this essay.

This explanation will begin with the background and context of Jewish messianism. In addition to providing definitions of the critical terms, it will also look at their origins and motivations. It points to the relevant biblical period texts and, where necessary, differentiates Jewish messianism from other traditions. It points to the resources that Levinas will draw from.

⁴ Brian Schroeder, "Apocalypse, Eschatology, and the Death of God." In *Nietzsche and Levinas: 'After the Death of a Certain God'*, ed. Bettina Bergo and Jill Stauffer, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 172

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas and Phillippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 24.

Chapter three of this thesis describes the structure of Levinas's philosophical messianism. It includes a discussion of its phenomenological development as well as how his philosophical messianism emerges from this effort.

The fourth chapter looks at three different readers of Levinas and how they tried to come to terms with his messianic ideal. It explores both Levinas's chronological development and the utility of the messianic concept.

This is followed by a short conclusion.

Sources of Levinas's Jewish Messianism

A. What is Messianism?

To make sense of terms such as: 'messianism', 'messianic hope', 'messianic era', and 'eschatology', it makes sense to first define the term 'Messiah'. Matthew V. Novenson provides a sample of more than 15 definitions from prominent historians and exegetes, and his list is by no means exhaustive.⁶ The word 'Messiah' is derived from the Hebrew word 'meshiach' (משיח), literally, the anointed one. To anoint someone or something is a rite of consecration by dousing with oil. Novenson's examples point to a man, usually, but not necessarily, a priest, king, or warrior. He is expected to arrive or become manifest at some undefined point in the future that will mark the beginning of the eschaton, the eschaton being the final event in the divine plan, or simply the end of the world.

There is no unifying myth regarding the Messiah that is common across all the varying faiths and, at least within Judaism, there is no unifying myth at all.⁷ While there is no central or guiding myth within the Jewish canon and commentary, a popular view

⁶ Matthew V. Novenson, *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Political Idiom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27-8.

⁷ Jacob Neusner, *Messiah in Context: Israel's History and Destiny in Formative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), ix-xi.

can be derived from the various sources. Messianic narratives call for an apocalyptic conflict in which the forces of evil are finally destroyed, history is suspended, and a non-temporal world of goodness and justice is established. This utopian world is ruled by a political figure descended from King David and populated by all the righteous people from history. The motivating and emotional core of messianism is the hope or desire for a better and more just world. Patiently awaiting the Messiah is traditionally seen as a virtue. There is no urgency in its expectation, and its mere expectation is accepted as being beneficial for both the individual and the community.⁸

B. Biblical Era

Before the writing of the various works that make up the Hebrew Bible, "...there simply was no discourse about 'messiahs' in ancient literature."⁹ The collapse and original exile of the Judean nation in 586/587 BCE seems to be the initiating event of a messianic narrative. The earliest conceptions of messianism among the Hebrews was centered upon the resurrection of the Davidic line of royalty after the fall of the Judean monarchy.¹⁰ The idea of returning or re-creating an idealized past is an obvious motivating factor. It is a past reimagined and elevated into perfection. The ancient nation of Judea consisted of a people defeated and exiled by the Babylonians, conquered by the Greeks, and dominated by the Romans. Yet they were reminded every time they worshipped that they were the

⁸ Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth and Messianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 62-3.

⁹ Novenson, *Grammar*, 25.

¹⁰ Marcus Bockmuehl and James Carleton Paget, *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hope of Jews and Christians in Antiquity* (London: T&T Clark International), 5.

object of a special love from God and possessors of a distinctive destiny.¹¹ The messianic idea persisted in a direct correlation to the sense of powerlessness of the people. With an all-powerful God, every set-back and every injustice is interpreted as a matter of divine will leading up to an eventual triumph of good over evil.

Any number of citations, starting with Genesis and continuing through the Hebrew Bible, can be used to support the prophecy of a future messianic figure. However, the first prophetic references to a Messiah in the Hebrew Bible may occur in Isaiah and are generally dated to before the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE.¹² This is the origin of the prophecy of a servant of the Lord, a descendent of King David, who restores the chosen people to their rightful place.

There are many messianic references within non-canonical Jewish literature from the Second Temple and early rabbinic period. There are sustained prophecies of a Messiah and messianic eras following an apocalypse in both books of Enoch, Fourth Ezra, the Baruch Apocalypses, the Testaments of the Twelve Prophets, and the Psalms of Solomon. Essene texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls are another source of messianic references, including commentaries on Isaiah, Habbakuk, as well as the Damascus Document, and the War Scroll.

Messianism is a prophecy that entails a deep disruption of the course of history. From the first hints of the messianic idea, a future utopian world where justice reigns is

¹¹ Neusner, *Context*, 78.

¹² See, for instance, Isaiah 2:2-4, 4:2-6, 9:1-6, 11. A priority case can be made for Amos 9:11-15. Amos and First Isaiah are dated from approximately the same era, but the references in Isaiah are more numerous and explicit.

consistently interwoven with a close connection to apocalypticism. Ezekiel prophesizes an apocalyptic war between Gog and Magog followed by a restoration of the Temple in Jerusalem without an explicit reference to a Messiah. Ezekiel was a prophet from the early part of the Babylonian exile, circa 550 BCE, but many scholars think the later chapters (38-48) were inserted afterwards.¹³ As Gershom Scholem has pointed out, these two parts (the apocalyptic and the utopian) of the messianic era, "...stand in antithetical relationship: ... the reign of darkness and the reign of light."¹⁴ These two periods are back-to-back in quick succession. First, the apocalypse involving the violent annihilation and death of the current political order, followed by the birth of an ideal, second period of peace and justice. The initial period of political collapse is often accompanied with antinomianism and universal moral turpitude. There is a common understanding that this two-step process of catastrophe followed by salvation flowed into Christianity where it flourished but was entirely dropped within the Jewish tradition. Gershom Scholem dismisses this idea.¹⁵ A mythic trope of an apocalypse followed by utopia is common among both Jews and Christians. (This strain of two-part prophecies [Ezekiel is not the only example], never becomes part of Levinas's hope for the future. Experiencing the horror of the holocaust first-hand apparently immunized him to its attractions.)

¹³ Marvin A. Sweeney, "Ezekiel." In *Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1042-5.

¹⁴ Gershom Scholem, "Toward and Understanding of the Messianic Ideal in Judaism." In *The Messianic Ideal In Judaism*, By Gershom Scholem, trans. Michael A. Meyer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 6.

¹⁵ Ibid. 10.

C. Rabbinic Judaism and the Talmud

“Judaism is not the Bible; it is the Bible seen through the Talmud, through the rabbinic wisdom, interrogation, and religious life.”¹⁶ The Talmud is more than 3,000 folio pages recording the discussions of the early rabbis (approx. 200-500 CE), along with later commentaries, as they consider what often may seem like the most arcane and random of religious regulations. The rabbis’ individual opinions are recorded in detail. “There is, thus, no set of principles by which all cases are measured symmetrically or equally; instead we find the constant subordination of the general rule to the particular case.”¹⁷ The Talmud makes clear that it is not possible to define Jewish messianism. It is only possible to partially enumerate the features of the various conceptions. There are no ‘ten commandments’ or guiding principles of Jewish messianism, there are only various collections of opinions. There are literally dozens of discussions regarding the Messiah and the messianic age within the Talmud. In just a few pages of the Tractate *Sanhedrin*, the following questions are discussed:¹⁸

Who is the Messiah? Most frequently, he is a descendent of King David –
Messiah ben David. Although there could be two Messiahs: Messiah ben Joseph, who

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 76.

¹⁷ Oona Aizenstat, *Driven Back to the Text*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 55.

¹⁸ A reader may want to refer to: Tractate Sanhedrin, 97b-99a, also see associated commentaries on these pages. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 59-96. For other Levinas Talmudic commentaries regarding messianism see *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 13-33, 53 -67, 177-87. Also see *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 92-108.

oversees the apocalypse, and Messiah ben David, who presides after the messianic world.¹⁹ Because there are no accurate genealogical tables going back to 950 BCE, anyone might be the Messiah. There is a rabbinic argument that the messianic age will be brought on by the collective action of all humanity, in which case, everyone or anyone could be the Messiah.

Who is the Messiah for? Some rabbis of a particularistic nature insist the Messiah is only for the Jews. Rabbis of a more universalist bent think that the Messiah is for everyone. Some rabbinic voices speculate that the Messiah is for everyone but the Jews.²⁰

What characterizes the messianic age? The oldest construct considers it a time when the Hebrew nation will be free of either the threat of or actual foreign domination. One popular conception is of a world where there is no political violence or war. A variation of this conception calls for a single world government. The most optimistic version envisions a world free of all political and social violence.²¹

How long will the messianic age last? A half dozen learned opinions range from 40 to 7,000 years.²²

Is the coming of the Messiah conditional or unconditional? God promised a messianic age, and it will come no matter what happens in the world; thus, it would be unconditional. One conditional opinion is that the Messiah will arrive when the people of

¹⁹ Neusner, *Context*, 187.

²⁰ Sanhedrin 98b, "There is no Messiah coming for the Jewish people"

²¹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 60-62.

²² Sanhedrin, 99a.

the world have proved themselves worthy through repentance and just behavior. Another conditional opinion states the Messiah will arrive only when the Jews have proven themselves worthy. A popular opinion is conditioned upon the existence of 36 righteous individuals in the world. Another conditional opinion makes the coming of the Messiah dependent upon the antinomian behavior of all mankind.²³

There is clearly no single conception of traditional Jewish messianism. When speaking of the Messiah or referring to the messianic age, any combination of these and other traits may be intended.

Within Judaism, the messianic era and the “world to come” are sometimes mistakenly treated as synonyms, but Talmudic scholars (and Levinas) draw careful distinctions between the two concepts. Both ideas are examples of social imaginaries, that is, a socially shared conception that some communities imagine that they will attain and in which they will live. These conceptions of a moral order do not necessarily carry an expectation of their actual fulfillment.²⁴ They are both exemplars of ideal future possibilities, but with different attributes and roles within messianic thought. The messianic era exists in time, it could or will occur at a specific point in history and history will continue after it has arrived. It is proposed as a concrete possibility in the future. The

²³ Ibid. 98b. “During the generation that the son of David comes, the hall of the assembly of the Sages will be designated for prostitution, and the Galilee will be destroyed, and the Gavlan, i.e., Bashan, will be desolate, and the residents of the border who flee the neighboring gentiles will circulate from city to city and will receive no sympathy. The wisdom of scholars will diminish, and sin-fearing people will be despised. And the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog in its impudence and shamelessness.”

²⁴ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 6.

“world to come” is atemporal; if or when it arrives, history stops, time stands still, and the recording of history ceases. The “world to come” is not of this world. It is an ideal, mystical, or religious concept. It is an existence where no one ages, there is no conflict, and everyone happily contemplates the divine intellect. The messianic era is a future historical period experienced by the entire community and within which that community benefits. The “world to come” is a personal experience enjoyed by a righteous few. Within the messianic era, the possibility of political conflict and state-sponsored violence exists but is avoided by the just intervention of the messianic king. Social conflict and inequality may remain as concrete problems, but violence is unnecessary for the just resolution of these situations. In the “world to come,” there is not even the possibility of political or social injustice. It is the fulfillment of all religious promises.²⁵

D. Maimonides

Maimonides (1135-1204) was both a physician and the acknowledged leader of his Jewish community. His most widely read work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, reflects a deep respect for both the power of natural philosophy and the profound utility of religious practice. Unlike his other works, which are models of clarity and organization, *The Guide* is deliberately indirect as it wrestles with issues at the crossroads of religion and philosophy. He addresses issues like the infinite, temporality and the essence of the divine with a literary style that juxtaposes the vocabulary of one domain with that of the other.

²⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990), 59-67.

According to Maimonides, the belief in the coming of the Messiah is a central tenet of Judaism. He lists it as one of the 13 basic principles of Judaism, “We are to believe as fact that the Messiah will come and not consider him late.”²⁶ For Maimonides the eschatological world, while it is always in the future, is not a period or place of miracles and perfection. As a rationalist and Aristotelian, Maimonides begins a secularization of the messianic idea. He writes that the messianic era, “...will be realized in this world; which will continue in its normal course except that independent sovereignty will be returned to Israel.”²⁷ For him, “The messianic age has nothing of the supernatural to it and is marked by no miraculous transformations of nature. It portends no apocalyptic war and does not bring time to an end.”²⁸

E. Volozhiner and Kabbalah (Jewish Mysticism)

Levinas cites, among his Jewish sources, Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner (1749-1821) and, particularly, his posthumously published book *Nefesh ha'Hayyim*. Levinas adopted and adapted several concepts of Kabbalistic mysticism from this source. Levinas is not a mystic. He uses the same standards that he applies to his study of the Talmud that, “...remains consonant with a Hellenic model.”²⁹ He appropriates various images and symbols of the Kabbalistic tradition that highlight the special relationship that man has

²⁶ Maimonides, *A Maimonides Reader*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House Publishing, 1972), 422.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 83.

²⁸ Michael Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 95.

²⁹ Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 158.

with the world and reciprocally that man has with the *En Sof* (without end or the infinite) that is divine. A key take-away in the messianic context is the concept of *Tikkun* and the importance of ethical human behavior. Richard Cohen writes that, for Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, "...the divine realm itself depends on human ethical behavior. What is done below establishes the above, for better or worse...moral behavior on the part of humans produces a 'healing' or 'repairing' (*Tikkun*) of the created realm."³⁰ Humanity is partners with God, and the world is perceived as incomplete, damaged, or in need of repair. It is then humanity's mission to complete God's work. This results in a kind of inversion wherein the subjective self acts as though he or she is God; an ethical god responsible for relieving the suffering of the other and, ultimately, for repairing the world.

F. Twentieth Century German-Jewish Messianism

In the first half of the twentieth century, a coterie of German-Jewish intellectuals began rethinking Judaism and the role of Jews in a modern Europe. This was not a group that was insular or any way isolated. It included figures like Walter Benjamin; religious Jews including Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Gershom Scholem; as well as Jews with a Marxist bent such as Ernst Bloch, Erich Fromm, and Georg Lukács.³¹ "The messianic impulse appears in many forms in the Jewish generation of 1914... as a

³⁰ Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 268.

³¹ Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe: German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 30.

tradition that stands opposed to both secular rationalism and what has been called ‘normative Judaism.’”³²

In the years during and immediately following the First World War, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) began to rethink the meaning of religious experience. His work is an attempt to describe what is left over when all the myth, ritual, and metaphysics of both Christianity and Judaism are stripped away. Peter Eli Gordon describes Rosenzweig’s project as “...the question of what kind of ultimacy remains available within the confines of the human experience once the traditional theological model of redemption is abandoned.”³³ A critical reappraisal of temporality is central to this project. “Rosenzweig proposes a continuous understanding of time, for which past, present and future become mutually informative indices within the given moment.”³⁴ Rosenzweig writes about the importance of the messianic impulse:

The future is no future without this anticipation and the inner compulsion for it, without this ‘wish to bring about the Messiah before his time’ and the temptation to ‘coerce the kingdom of God into being’; without these, it is only a past distended endlessly and projected forward.³⁵

Rosenzweig has faith that the messianic era is possible, a goal that can be reached in reality.³⁶

³² Ibid. 29.

³³ Peter Eli Gordon, *Rosenzweig and Heidegger: Between Judaism and German Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 21.

³⁴ Ibid. 196.

³⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 227.

³⁶ Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 192.

It is worth mentioning two others from this group of German Jews: Gershom Scholem and Ernst Bloch. The entire career of Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) was devoted to the study of messianism and Kabbalah. In contrast to Christian ideas of messianism, he maintained that Jewish messianism was “an event which took place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community.”³⁷ For Scholem, the messianic impulse was a phenomena of the condition of exile consisting of the dynamic forces of conservation of what is, restoration of what was, and utopian hope for the future.³⁸ Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) was a Marxist who had escaped the Nazis to take a teaching position in the United States. He emigrated back to East Germany in 1955 to teach philosophy at the University of Leipzig. “History for Bloch is predicated on a future oriented knowledge that transcends the empirical order of things...[it] is directed beyond the existing world toward a yet unrealized ‘messianic goal.’”³⁹ His major works, *The Spirit of Utopia* and *The Principle of Hope*, define messianism in a secular manner while at the same time postulating an ideal and transcendent existence.

³⁷ Scholem, *Toward*, 1.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 2-3.

³⁹ Rabinbach, *Shadow*, 44.

Temporality and the Intersubjective Origins of Levinasian Messianism

A. Phenomenological Ethics

In 1928, after completing his undergraduate work at the University of Strasbourg, Levinas traveled to Freiburg Germany to study philosophy and, particularly, phenomenology with Edmund Husserl (1859 -1938). Husserl advocates for a rigorous method of phenomenological analysis:

Husserlian phenomenology involves the methodical analysis of lived experience from which can be derived the necessary and universal truths of all experience... Rather than proceed by abstract deduction or dialectic, the phenomenological method enables consciousness to become reflexive, to recognize...[what] allows an object to emerge as meaningful. The lack of presuppositions in such a method reveals the relation between logical judgement and perceptual experience. Truth and meaning are shown to be generated.⁴⁰

Levinas uses a similar method, differing in a major respect. He wants to consider the meaning of something that cannot appear at all, namely, the infinite. Levinas uses his form of phenomenology in a project to counter the ontological primacy of the philosophy of Heidegger, with whom he also met and studied. Levinas begins his project of

⁴⁰ Hand, Sean, "Introduction," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 1989), 2.

establishing ethics as first philosophy by abandoning all the presuppositions of sociality and then examining an original social encounter.

To examine the intersubjective relationship, Levinas first considers the situation of an individual independent of all social relations. He began this effort as early as 1935 in his essay, *On Escape*, and more fully in his immediate post-war writings. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas explicitly rejects Heidegger's conception of solitude "...in the midst of a prior relationship with the other."⁴¹ He posits an individual separated from and prior to all social relations. Separating the subject from the social allows Levinas to examine the solitary individual in relation to existence.⁴² He admits that while this is anthropologically contestable, this most primal hypothetical condition allows for a more revealing ontological analysis. This resulting solitary subject is in a situation that is tragic and nauseating. A condition that reveals "... the indissoluble unity between the existent and its work of existing."⁴³ This separated being is at once both completely free and utterly imprisoned. In this primal solitude, the subject can do anything except escape from its own finite being. Isolated in a private world, this separated creature experiences time as an endless succession of nows. There is no future and there is no hope. This is a

⁴¹ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 40.

⁴² Eric Severson, *Levinas's Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 93.

⁴³ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 43.

timeless, anonymous existence in which the separated being yearns to escape the enchainment to oneself.⁴⁴

This original creature is imbued with physical sensations and finds herself to be both finite and needy. This sensibility constitutes the separated self. The sensations of hunger and thirst rouse her from passivity and into a cyclical search for satisfaction. She establishes a home to shelter herself from the weather and for a comfortable place to sleep. All of the elements of the world are hers for the taking. These are objects that either bring some kind of satisfaction or are without value. Everything, other than the self, is categorized and then possessed, consumed, or ignored. This first party is a separated being acting on the totality of the universe. The free use of the elements of the world satisfies needs that generate sensations of enjoyment and happiness. This drive for satisfaction is the only limitation on the freedom of the separated being. Everything is available for the use and enjoyment of the same until the same meets the Other.⁴⁵

Having established a separated self, Levinas uses the “face” to exemplify the encounter with the Other – the second party of the intersubjective relationship. He writes, “You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. . . . The relation with the face can surely be

⁴⁴ Ibid. 55.

⁴⁵ “Levinas uses Plato’s term from the Sophist and the Timaeus, the ‘same’ and the ‘other.’ Basically, the same is the self, mind, thought, and reason;” Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, 89. In most translations the French word *autrui* (the personal Other, the you) is translated as “Other” and *autre* is translated as “other.” To remain true to these translations, that is my practice throughout this thesis

dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face cannot be reduced to that.”⁴⁶

This event of the encounter with the Other is unlike any ordinary sensation. The face of the Other reveals an element that cannot be simply classified; it resists being possessed or consumed, and it demands attention. The face is an oppositional force that exceeds epistemology, ontology, and economies of all sorts. It brings into question all previous presuppositions. This event fundamentally changes the separated being and her relationship with the world she inhabits. For Levinas, it is probably not possible to overstate the importance or the constitutive power of this first contact. It is the birth, among other things, of subjectivity.

What is it about the face that is so creatively disruptive? The face is unlike anything else in the world. This Other is absolutely unknowable, excessive, and original. By encountering the face, we are forced to encounter the Other as something more than a uniformed myrmidon.⁴⁷ This is a subject that cannot be properly reduced to just their sex or their race. They exceed the classifications of their social standing or profession. By encountering the face, the same is confronting an utterly unique individual that cannot be properly categorized or fully comprehended. “There is a disproportion between the act...” of being faced with a face “...and that which the act gives access.” We are incapable of truly knowing them; instead, when we encounter the face we become

⁴⁶ Levinas and Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*, 85-6.

⁴⁷ Myrmidon from the Greek Myrmidones. They were the followers of Achilles during the Trojan War. These were men who appeared like ants (Gr. Myrmíni, Μυρμήγκι). The very image of nameless, faceless individuals who are utterly dispensable, indistinguishable and blindly obedient, dedicated to the totality of war.

engaged in a relation – a relation without relation – with a trace of absolute alterity, the ineffable. This is “...the idea of the Infinite, where the *ideatum* of this idea, that is, what the idea aims at, is infinitely greater than the very act that thinks it.”⁴⁸ To encounter the face of the Other is to have access to the trace of the infinite that is divine.⁴⁹ This is a revelation without a vision. It is not a proof. It is a transcendence into an ethical situation and not a theological position. It is the sensation of and a relationship with the radical alterity of the Other. “The first word of the face is the ‘Thou shalt not kill.’ It is an order.”⁵⁰ With this commandment, the guiltless freedom of the self is effectively constrained, a new order of obligation is constituted, and subjectivity arises.

This confrontation with the face of the Other generates a burst of fruitful conceptions, not the least of which is language. Quoting Levinas,

Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse. I have just refused the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response and responsibility which is the authentic relationship.... In discourse I have always distinguished, in fact between the saying and the said.⁵¹

The very presence of the Other demands a response. We meet the Other and we are compelled to say: good day, *bonjour*, *shalom*, *aloha*, *salaam alekhem*, or *guten tag*. We immediately give a blessing to the Other. That compulsion reveals our responsibility to

⁴⁸ Ibid. 91.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 92, “In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God.”

⁵⁰ Ibid. 89.

⁵¹ Ibid. 87-8.

the Other. More than words, the very presence of the Other communicates. The face tells us more than we may want to know. By encountering the face, we confront their vulnerability, poverty, suffering, and helplessness. The excess of the Other conveys more than words can express.

This first encounter with the Other constitutes the subjective self that is “essentially, primarily, and fundamentally” responsible for the Other. In Levinas’s interview with Philippe Nemo, he says, “I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me;” and, “Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having *taken* on the responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility *is incumbent upon me*.”⁵² This responsibility for the Other is imposed upon me by the very fact that I am a human being encountering another human being. It is a responsibility that, even if refused, cannot be avoided. It is a responsibility assumed before, and regardless if, I even understand its full scope. It is taken on without any expectation of reciprocity. “My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me.”⁵³ It is the infinite, unexpectedly revealed in the face of the Other, that obligates me in this non-negotiable responsibility. This is what Levinas means by ethics.

Levinas draws on the religious trope of messianism as a way to engage ethical desire in relation to the encounter with the face of the Other. Engaging with the face of

⁵² Ibid. 95-6. Emphasis in quotes within this essay are always reproduced from the original.

⁵³ Ibid. 100.

the Other is to engage with their vulnerability as well as their transcending priority. The mere presence of the face commands a responsibility. A kind of “inordinate desire”⁵⁴ we find ourselves rushing to try to fulfill, it is a desire that we place before all other considerations. “To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as “You” [“Vous”- the “you” of majesty, in contrast with the “thou” of intimacy] in a dimension of height.”⁵⁵ It is the compulsion to take the bread out of our own mouths to relieve the hunger of the Other. The face of the other reveals an insufficiency in the self. It is “...a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself.”⁵⁶ Messianism points to the goals and activities of reducing suffering and facilitating justice. Levinas uses messianism to express the structure of this ethical desire and command.

So far, Levinas has given an account of the ethical responsibility of the Other as a one-to-one relationship, but we do not live in a world consisting of just two. “How is it that there is justice? ... The interpersonal relationship I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men; there is thus the necessity to moderate this privilege of the Other; from whence comes justice.”⁵⁷ The Other has their own others and those others have theirs. Because we live in a society, the responsibility I have for one I also have for everyone around me and for everyone around them. This primary desire for justice both

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 75.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 179.

⁵⁷ Levinas and Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity* 89-90.

moderates and complicates my responsibilities. It is from this desire that politics and the institutions that make up human society originates. Our effort to establish societal justice results in treating the particular as general categories. Individuals become populations that are then divided into demographic categories. This is the negation of the radical alterity of the Other that is subsumed into the totality. The negative impacts of the totality consequently become a persistent and immanent possibility. The totalitarianism of Hitler and Stalin are always just one expedient step away. Levinas recognizes this problem, “Justice, exercised through institutions, which are inevitable, must always be held in check by the initial interpersonal relationship.”⁵⁸ For there to be justice for everyone, the delivery of that justice needs to be tempered by the mercy of the intersubjective relationship.

B. Temporality and Motivation

Before we can fully explicate the emergence and use of messianism in Levinas’s philosophy, we should take note of two more of his phenomenological observations. First, we will look at how Levinas incorporates the work of Husserl in his conception of time. This is followed by establishing the distinctions between need, desire, and hope. Only then can we begin to investigate what he is trying to describe by messianic hope.

For Levinas, the phenomenological experience of time is very different from any scientific or economic understanding. Typically, we relate time to motion. The Earth rotates on its axis and revolves around the Sun. The completion of these cycles marks our

⁵⁸ Ibid. 90.

days and years, which are further segmented into hours, weeks, and months. This is economic time, “where the instants are equivalent.”⁵⁹ The utility of economic time is undeniable. It enables the possibility of making appointments, setting deadlines, and organizing our economic life. Other than the convenience of its organization, it does very little to describe our sense of the past or our expectations of the future. The spacetime of cosmologists does even less to describe human experience.

The human experience of time is far subtler and more immanent. When we are suffering, time slows to a crawl and we pray for relief. Levinas writes, “The future can bring consolation or compensation to a subject who suffers in the present, but the very suffering of the present remains like a cry whose echo will resound forever in the eternity of spaces.” When we are in pain, only the future can put it aside, but feeling better in the future does not make us feel better now. In the future, we will gradually forget about the acuteness of our current pain. “Pain cannot be redeemed...retribution in the future does not wipe away the pains of the present.” For Levinas, economic time is an inadequate and meaningless explanation of the inescapable temporal nature of human subjectivity including human suffering.⁶⁰

It is not that the more familiar conceptions of economic time are not valid or useful, it is that they are irrelevant to the primal impression of temporality. Both Husserl and Levinas in their respective phenomenologies redefine past, present, and future into

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 95.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 91-3.

modalities of subjectivity, they just do it in very different ways. For Husserl, the present is not some fraction of a second between an eternal past and an endless future. Instead, the present is a period of variable length (a width of presence) in which intuitions arise consisting of several traits. Our experience of the present consists of a retention, a consciousness of what has just been, and a protention, an indefinite expectation of what is about to occur. These are intuitive, non-conscious processes that are dependent upon the occurrent experience. Protention and retention explain surprise and musical judgment. They should not be confused with recollection or expectation that are intentional acts in their own right.⁶¹

Levinas's conception of time is different from Husserl's in that it is rooted in his account of ethics as the intersubjective encounter. As a solitary figure, time is an endless succession of nows, but the confrontation with the face of the Other constitutes a more dynamic condition of time. Michael Morgan describes it as follows: "Our internal time consciousness involves a present that contains, as it were, a present experience of a past that was once present and a present experience of a future that is yet to be present."⁶² Our face-to-face encounter with the Other in the present is grounded in a past that is both historical and immemorial and, at the same time, a future. Levinas writes, "Time is not a succession of instants filing by before an I, but the response to the hope of the present,

⁶¹ Zahavi, Dan, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 80-3.

⁶² Michael L. Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, 174.

which is in the present is the very expression of the 'I,' and is the equivalent to the present."⁶³ Levinas calls this event the "Time of Redemption and the Time of Justice."⁶⁴

We have already touched on the topic of the separated being. The separated being is a needy being. We need nourishment and water. We need shelter and rest. Needs are the requirements of life that can be satisfied at least temporarily. Needs reveal, at least to ourselves, our own corporeal privations. Needs are distinguishable because they are lacunae that can be self-fulfilled. They are the motivation of our instinctive drive to engage and consume the elements of our environment. "We do not eat, drink, or play in order that we may live; these actions *are* living."⁶⁵ Fulfilling our needs is a self-demonstration of our independence and sovereignty. Levinas ties needs to economic time: "The economic world then includes not only our so-called material life, but also all forms of our existence in which the exigency for salvation has been traded in."⁶⁶ The first half of this quote references the materiality and corporeality of human needs. The last half points to a pressing demand (or desire) that is beyond satisfiable needs.

The first topic addressed by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, a text devoted to establishing ethics as first philosophy, is distinguishing metaphysical desire from need. "The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely

⁶³ Levinas, *Existence*, 94.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 91.

⁶⁵ Eric Severson, *Levinas's Philosophy of Time: Gift, Responsibility, Diachrony, Hope* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 44.

⁶⁶ Levinas, *Existence*, 92.

other.”⁶⁷ Metaphysical desire is a longing for a thing forever out of reach. It is an aspirational demand, beyond rational understanding. It grabs hold of us, we respond to it, and it remains unfulfilled. This kind of desire is a relation without an equivalent correlate, a relation without a relation. It is a relation with the infinite. Love, lust, concern, generosity, and sensitivity can all be manifestations of this dynamic drive. Each of these impulses is not only outward facing but directed at an Other. Desire is not cognitive but affective, defying rational reduction. It is a kind of passive striving and yet it remains dynamic.⁶⁸

Unlike need, desire and hope put us in relation with transcendence. Levinas’s first sustained discussion of a hope for the future is in *Existence and Existents*. This book was published in 1947 and developed from his notes compiled from his time in a POW work camp. The terms redemption and salvation, the topics of this section, trace their meanings back to redemption from, or being bought out of, slavery. A life of slavery is one devoid of freedom and filled with suffering. It is a life reduced to its economic and material value. Our engagement with existence is effort, it is not redeemed it is only compensated. However, “The caress of the consoler which comes softly in our pain... does not announce any compensation,” but frees us from our “one-self” and transports us elsewhere to find, “... ‘fresh air,’ a dimension and a future.”⁶⁹ To be redeemed or to be

⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33.

⁶⁸ Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, 93.

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Existence*, 93.

saved is not to be rescued from a life of pain but to be elevated from an economic thing to transcendence. It is to be recognized as not the means to an end but as an end in itself. It signals the ethically constituted subject; this messianic grounding of the self is to what we now turn.

C. An Abridged Genealogy of Messianic Hope

The economic world is about fulfilling needs. Economic time is the master tool of efficiency. In our interactions with merchants, customers, and our coworkers, both parties are reduced to tools for producing more stuff. Economic time is necessary for fulfilling basic needs. “But this compensating time is not enough for hope.” When we encounter the face of the Other, we encounter something fundamentally mysterious and beyond our grasp. We become dislocated from economic time. Instead, we find within ourselves the affect of an unfulfillable ethical desire. This confrontation with the trace of the infinite results in a “*traumatism of astonishment*.”⁷⁰ We are inexplicably commanded by a force deep within us, “Thou shall not kill.” It is at this point that Levinas invokes the overtly religious vocabulary of messianism. He writes, “The true object of hope is the Messiah, or salvation.”⁷¹

Messianism and eschatology are never mentioned in Levinas’s essay from 1947, *Time and the Other*. Nevertheless, temporality and messianic hope are presented within

⁷⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

⁷¹ Levinas, *Existence*, 93.

this work as primary products of the encounter with the Other. Temporality is generated, or originally referenced, in the encounter with the Other. Levinas writes,

The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans, or in history.⁷²

In solitude, the self is entirely bound within the present or the past, and any kind of hope is an impossibility. The flip side of the tragedy of solitude is the eruption of messianic hope that occurs within the event of sociality. “There is not merely an opposition but an antinomy between the despair of solitude,” and the hope for a better society.⁷³ In solitude, the self needs satisfaction of its material needs, while, within the social relation, the self hopes for salvation. These two drives, while appearing contradictory, are on an equal footing.

Levinas expands on the primordial and surprising nature of the ethical impulse in the encounter with the face of the Other in *Totality and Infinity*, for which he was awarded his habilitation in 1961. The only thing that can truly be other to the separated being is another person. “Free beings alone can be strangers to one another.”⁷⁴ Our response to the Other is prior to any thought. Automatically we say, “good morning.” This response reveals our responsibility and our messianic hope. Levinas writes,

The first ‘vision’ of eschatology (hereby distinguished from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology,

⁷² Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 79.

⁷³ Ibid. 58.

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.

that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a signification without a context. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision - it consummates this vision; ethics is an optics. But it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision;⁷⁵

This vision of eschatology is not of the logical, thematized, totalized version. It is not the vision that breaks everything down into its constituent parts and then sorts them into categories. This "signification without context" is a vision without perspective or sense of place. It is an openness that takes in the whole and is receptive to unexpected relationships. It is an intuition that does not require, and cannot abide, rigorous definitions and strict classifications. It is a vision that can 'hear' the truth in a myth and can feel the exhilaration of transcendence. This is an eschatology not of an end but of an eternity. This is messianic salvation without divinity or necessity. Confronted with alterity, we open the door and say, "welcome." We act morally not because it is the logical thing to do but, in an attempt, to fulfill our ethical desire.

In 1974, Levinas published his second master work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In this, his later period, he rarely refers to messianism or eschatology within his so-called philosophical writings. It is not that he has lost interest or abandoned the concept. Messianism comes up frequently in interviews and remains a topic in his Talmudic essays.⁷⁶ Within his philosophical writings, Levinas keeps the concept of

⁷⁵ Ibid. 23.

⁷⁶ For instance, see the Talmudic essays in *Beyond the Verse*, pages 13-33 (1976), and 53-67 (1979) and also within *In the Time of Nations*, pages 92-108 (1986).

messianism vital by subsuming it within the concept of diachrony.⁷⁷ It is beyond the scope of this essay to understand the motivations for this linguistic change. It is enough to note the change and his elaboration of the topic. Levinas borrows the term ‘diachronic’ from linguistics where it is often paired with ‘synchronic.’ In the linguistic context, synchrony describes how words change and take on different meanings between two or more speakers during a specific period. Diachrony refers to how words change and take on different meanings over the course of time. Levinas puts both words, but particularly diachrony, to a different use.

Levinas uses the words ‘diachrony’ and ‘diachronic’ to refer to the disruption that occurs to our sense of time and the sense of ourselves when we encounter the Other. “All human experience does in fact take on a temporal form.”⁷⁸ It takes on a special form when we encounter the face of the Other; time is transformed from an endless succession of presents, a flow of nows, into something grander. “This is a peculiar sort of transcendence; it is the time of the other.”⁷⁹ It is not just that the self is in some way asynchronous with the Other; it is that this encounter transforms, shakes, or indeed constitutes the self. Commanded by the face of the Other in the present, the self is obligated to consider an Other with a mysterious past. “For Levinas, I only awaken to a

⁷⁷ He first uses the term diachrony in 1965 in the essays *Enigma and Phenomenon* and *Intentionality and Sensation*. It appears dozens of times in *Otherwise than Being*. Severson, *Time*, 188.

⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entres Nous: On Thinking of the Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 232.

⁷⁹ Severson, *Time*, 228.

story not my own.”⁸⁰ The presence of the Other makes the self-aware of a non-present that is immemorial, unrepresentable, invisible, and an-archival.⁸¹ Before any word is spoken the Other is present, in the present, before the self. This presence generates and reifies temporality to the self. At the same time, it is a revelation of the priority and alterity of the other to the self. “The transcending diachrony of time indicates that the other’s time is not just separate, but superior.”⁸² This creates a non-reciprocal, asymmetric relationship with the Other, imposing a responsibility on the self for the suffering of the Other. “In this responsibility I am thrown back toward what has never been my thought or deed, toward what has never been in my power or freedom, toward what has never been my presence, and has never come into memory.”⁸³ The past, the future, and the present all cohabit in the experience of the Other, electing and transforming the self even as this confrontation elicits new desires and commands new duties. This is messianic hope by a new name.

This disruption of time and eruption of ethical desire instills Levinas’s messianism with paradoxes and surprises. The messianic era is not in the future but always occurring in the present. It is an eschatology without an eschaton. It is a

⁸⁰ Ibid. 236.

⁸¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 11. Levinas frequently hyphenates words to draw attention to their linguistic origins. Normally, anarchy refers to chaos, in this case Levinas want to draw attention to its original meaning, “without principle.”

⁸² Severson, *Time*, 228.

⁸³ Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 111.

messianism in which everyone is a potential Messiah and at the same time only the self can be the Messiah. Messianic hope is a hope that is unrealizable both in the political collective and in the individual instance, yet we cling to its trace. Michael Morgan explains, “When we respond to these obligations, individually in episodes of kindness and concerns and collectively in practices of justice and generosity, we give our personal and collective temporal and historical lives what meaning they have.”⁸⁴ We might ask, if relieving the suffering of the Other gives my life meaning, then who is the Messiah, the self or the Other?⁸⁵

In 1961, the first topic Levinas addressed in *Totality and Infinity* was desire. The very last thing he wrote for this work was the Preface. In this Preface, he provides a sustained discussion of the philosophical role he gives to eschatology and messianism. In this context, when Levinas speaks of the eschatological, he is not speaking of “the end” of history or a future spiritual era. He is addressing the most prominent events and recollections of history: war and peace. He accepts that the idea that war and peace are mutually conditioned on the possibility of one another. Individuals and states can choose to abandon their morality and they will when they feel threatened. The non-reciprocal obligations incumbent upon the self mean that the self can never rely upon the peaceful intentions of the Other.

⁸⁴ Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, 180.

⁸⁵ There is further discussion regarding the ambiguity of messianic identity in the section on Martin Kavka below.

On one level Levinas's argument is dependent upon two conditions. First, that the present is more than the fraction of a second happening right now. It is really an intuition that the past, the present, and the future are interrelated in the now. This idea has sources in both Edmund Husserl and Franz Rosenzweig. Second, the encounter with the face of the Other is an event of consequence. This event constitutes the subjective self and generates the affect of ethical desire. It should not be a surprise that Levinas resorts to the religious language of messianism to explicate what he means by ethical desire. The metaphysical desire that Levinas invokes is an affect of our human nature that is not amenable to the language of logic or psychology. Maimonides taught that messianic hope is not mysterious or supernatural but is focused on the world in which we live. Our encounter with other commands us to take responsibility for the suffering of the Other and the Other's other. The non-mystical, practical activity of Kabbalah is the individual's responsibility for the world. This event engages or partners the self with the infinite. This simple concept of messianic hope is only simple, if the description includes the language of metaphor, poetry, or religion. This being said, is it useful, or even possible, to use hope to establish ethics as first philosophy? In the next section, three different critics will uncover some possibilities.

Three Approaches to Levinas's Messianism

A. Terrence Holden

Instead of looking at Levinas's work as a whole, Terrence Holden, in his volume *Levinas, Messianism, and Parody*, chooses to concentrate his analysis on the use of the concept of messianism in Levinas's philosophical writings. Holden's concern is principally on the role that messianism plays in contemporary continental philosophy and Levinas's influence on that role. By concentrating on the philosophical works, he attempts to understand the legitimacy of the use of religious motif in a secular philosophical text. His thesis is that there are three distinct forms of messianism represented in the body of Levinas's work. The first form appears in *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*, both originally published in 1947. *Totality and Infinity* is the primary example of the second form, although the form also appears in several essays from the early 1960's. The third form is obliquely represented in *Otherwise than Being* and other essays from the later period of Levinas's life. He argues that these three periods feature unique versions of messianism and that it is misguided to harmonize them.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Terrence Holden, *Levinas, Messianism, and Parody* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2011), 8.

In the first form, the messianic horizon appears or opens up with the presence of the other person. In these earlier works, it is just the acknowledgement or the acceptance of the presence of the Other in proximity to the self that reveals the subjective self to consciousness. This is a profound realization. Holden writes, “The other signifies namely as the concrete embodiment of that which is radically beyond the dimension of the possibility of the monad.... Beyond death or impossibility, the other signifies as the radical future, as the advent of absolute *surprise*.”⁸⁷ The Other signifies something beyond the solitude of the finite self. This radical surprise is the possibility of a type of time that is not economic but experientially eschatological. It is focused on the future. Levinas reprises the theme of escape from his pre-war essay, *On Escape*. Levinas writes, “In weariness we want to escape existence itself.”⁸⁸ To the desire for escape, he adds the yearning for salvation or redemption from our solitude. He writes not only of the “exigency for salvation” but also, “All the acuteness of hope in the midst of despair comes from the exigency that the very instant of despair be redeemed.”⁸⁹ Only because of the presence of the Other does it become possible to foresee the possibility of a better future, a future that is not solitary suffering. Holden asserts, “the messianic figure of alterity par excellence in these early texts is that of the feminine.”⁹⁰ The feminine, along with the erotic relation and the caress, serve to distinguish this form from subsequent

⁸⁷ Ibid. 46-7.

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Existence*, 25.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 94.

⁹⁰ Holden, *Parody*, 47.

ones. He also notes that absence of any direct Jewish references despite plenty of religious references to redemption, resurrection, and salvation. The argument that these are distinguishing characteristics is disputed by others as we will discuss below.

After 1947 and for the next several years, Levinas's focused on the study of Talmud and other Jewish texts with Mordechai Chouchani, a Jewish educator of which little is certain. Levinas's first major master work, *Totality and Infinity*, appears after this period. Holden identifies this as the second principal form of messianism within Levinas's work. Messianism and the "eschatology of peace" are featured in both the Preface and concluding sections of this work. Holden acknowledges that issues surrounding the erotic relation, fecundity, and the feminine are examined in greater detail here, but are "nonetheless subject to demotion." He writes, "The relation with the feminine becomes a partial relaxation of the moral rigour imposed upon the self." Metaphysical desire is downgraded to a form of need.⁹¹ Holden instead highlights the concept of the infinite. He notes, "Levinas appropriates the idea of the infinite from Descartes." Not to prove the existence of the divine but to reveal the possibility of an event that cannot be subsumed by consciousness. He quotes Levinas, "Infinity overflows the thought that thinks it...[and it is] the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other." The infinite signified in the face of the Other establishes the eschatological relation with the self. The relation is reified through the medium of language. He understands this work as targeting any kind of theodicy, "and especially the

⁹¹ Ibid. 81.

Hegelian model of historical teleology, in which present suffering could be sacrificed for the future.” The relation with the infinite, initiated by the face of the Other, transforms the telos of the subjective self. The goal is no longer to escape existence or endure the ontology of war. Instead, something more active is demanded of the self. Eschatological peace demands that the self stand in moral judgement of every moment of history. Holden interprets this fresh presentation as the distinguishing feature of the second form of Levinas’s messianism.⁹²

The thrust of *Otherwise of Being* is toward explicating the self instead of the relation between the self and the Other as it is in *Totality and Infinity*. The phenomenological focus is on how the self is affected by the Other. Messianism is not even mentioned in the later work. The concept is conjured obliquely in the metaphors that Levinas uses to describe the self. Holden writes that the language of messianism goes through “...a passage to the messianism of the self, the subject as ‘suffering servant,’ whose language is that of ‘persecution,’ ‘hostageship,’ ‘obsession,’ ‘substitution,’ ‘expiation,’ ‘martyrdom,’ etc.”⁹³ This change in vocabulary is the most obvious difference between the second and third form according to Holden. Instead of relying on seeing the face to signify alterity of the Other and language to establish relationship, there is an expansion of sensibility. Holden writes that the relation with the Other, “...takes place across the ‘exposure’ and ‘vulnerability’ of the self to the other.”⁹⁴ He interprets

⁹² Ibid. 49-50.

⁹³ Ibid. 155

⁹⁴ Ibid. 153.

this as a furthering and heightening of the sanctification of the “humanity of the human” from the merely human.⁹⁵ This charged description leads to something quite small. Holden writes, “The ‘enormity’ of the relationship with the Other is required as the condition of possibility without which a thing as ‘politeness’ and ‘courtesy’ would be possible.”⁹⁶ The somewhat disconcerting conclusion of Holden’s analysis of *Otherwise than Being* is that it, “...serves in Levinas to articulate the transcendental reduction of politeness.”⁹⁷

When Holden writes, “Levinas’ [sic] philosophy is not essentially messianic...[it] takes on an idiosyncratic character in function of certain exigencies determinative for his work.”⁹⁸ He understands Levinas as specifically using messianism to create a dynamic of sanctification of the human, a kind of humanism. He argues, “The dynamic of the sanctification constitutes...the setting apart of the human from the inhuman, of the ‘creating a fence’ for the human.”⁹⁹ All of this is without question; however, most readers would think that much more is at stake than a deeper understanding of politeness. Further, by neglecting Levinas’s discussions of messianism in writings and interviews after *Otherwise than Being*, dismissing them as religious, he misunderstands how necessary messianism is to Levinas’s thought. Finally, his thesis that three distinct forms

⁹⁵ Ibid. 151.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 192.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 198.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 199.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 203-4.

of messianism are represented in Levinas's philosophical works lacks weight. Without doubt, there is an evolution in the language, but nothing about the earlier versions is negated by the later. Each of Levinas's philosophical essays are meant to fulfill a distinct purpose. To fulfill that purpose, he uses a tool borrowed from his Jewish heritage but stripped of religious particularity. He uses that tool differently in each case. While that tool is used to justify the polite "after you" when entering a door, it also motivates the hope for a world with the possibility of less suffering. A subtler understanding of Levinas's messianic evolution is presented by Martin Kavka.

B. Martin Kavka

Martin Kavka is another close reader of Levinas. Like most scholars of Levinas, he considers all of Levinas's writings, both philosophic and religious, as a single body of work, using one genre to interpret the other. He is a sympathetic critic who sees many of the shortfalls of messianism, but instead of seeing several distinct versions of messianism, he interprets Levinas's messianism as evolving different affective and functional valences over time. Kavka sees a transition from the immediate post-war period through the first master-work, *Totality and Infinity*, and a subtler, more mature version emerging in *Otherwise Than Being* and afterward. The messianic ideal is expressed throughout the post-war period, but Levinas has a different mode of expression and different philosophical and rhetorical purposes. Kavka refers to these variations in his presentation as temperaments. Ultimately, he questions the validity and efficacy of the messianic concept altogether.

Kavka interprets Levinas's discussion of messianism in *Existence and Existents* as a meditation on hope and as a relief from the solitary suffering of existence in the present.

He writes, “Levinas also began to think about whether belief in future messianic arrival, and not just actual messianic arrival, could assuage the sufferer in her suffering.”¹⁰⁰

Neither Kavka nor Levinas believe that unsubstantiated hope may provide true relief to the sufferer. Several times, Kavka refers to this hope as “ridiculous.” And Levinas writes, “retribution in the future does not wipe away the pains of the present.” Nevertheless, there is the acknowledgement that “the sufferer seems to need some kind of recourse now,” and consequently, this hope for salvation “does not seem to us indispensable.” The source of this hope is the central event of Levinas’s account of subjectivity, that is the engagement of the subjective self with the Other. This engagement reminds the sufferer that they are not defined by the suffering in the present. This release comes from the “caress of the consoler” and is “infinitely mysterious.”¹⁰¹ It is deeply rooted in the experience of eros and fecundity. Kavka calls Levinas’s hope for salvation “messianic procreation.”¹⁰²

Kavka suggests that there are two ways to understand the role of messianism in *Totality and Infinity*. The first as a natural intensification or deepening of the idea of messianic procreation. The long sections of this work, discussing paternity and maternity, justify the possibility of “quasi-immortality...that ensures that my journey through time

¹⁰⁰ Martin Kavka, “Levinas’s Accounts of Messianism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Levinas*, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁰¹ Levinas, *Existence*, 93-4.

¹⁰² Kavka, *Accounts*, 5.

and across generations will not come to an end.”¹⁰³ Kavka questions the persuasiveness of this explanation. Procreation does not provide any certainty of the triumph of the good over evil, any kind of quasi-immortality, or immortality by proxy. Because these arguments arise within the body of *Totality and Infinity*, I think these sections concerning fecundity are demonstrative evidence of experiencing the establishment of the ethical self. Maternity is the example of the ethical-self par excellence. Kavka’s second explanation seems to have much more credence. Kavka writes,

...in and through our acts in which we concretize our responsibility to others by giving them life (by ‘not being for death’ and taking ourselves to be under divine judgement), we take each other as free agents. That in and of itself is sufficient to transform our world into one that is peaceful and looks as if it were governed by a messianic ruler.¹⁰⁴

In other words, our responsible actions towards the Other, whether they regard the stranger, the widow, the orphan, or our own children, have messianic weight. As supporting evidence, Kavka points to Levinas’s essay *Messianic Texts*, written contemporaneously with *Totality and Infinity*. It is here that Levinas writes, “...good deeds are efficacious. That is the Messiah.”¹⁰⁵ Levinas brings messianic action into the world of human affairs and excising divine will from the concept in both his philosophical and religious writings.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 6-7.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Levinas, *Difficult*, 69.

As has been noted, Levinas avoids using the word messianic in *Otherwise than Being*. Kavka, along with others,¹⁰⁶ attributes this rhetorical change as a response to the comments of Derrida in his essay *Violence and Metaphysics*. Derrida is all for abolishing political violence but does not believe it can be abolished with violence. Derrida writes, "...an end cannot be stated, eschatology is not possible, except *through violence*."¹⁰⁷ Somehow, people with long histories of subjugation, resentments, and cultures of violence must be brought to the side of peace. If the origin of messianic peace can only be brought about through acts of war, then someone, or some group, will have to be defeated and left resentful. Levinas's solution is to remove God and divine action from the concept messianism and history. Messianism, in his philosophical writings, is removed altogether and replaced with a principle of human action in history. "To be a messianist is to say that our lives and the lives of our descendants can be better in the future. We can engage in certain acts that make us confident, but not certain, that 'later' can be better than 'now.'"¹⁰⁸ In *Otherwise than Being*, the messianic becomes completely subsumed into the transcendence and disruption of diachrony. It is in the diachronic moment, when we accept full responsibility for the suffering of the Other and "...take the bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own

¹⁰⁶ Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction*, 147n28.

¹⁰⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978), 130.

¹⁰⁸ Kavka, *Accounts*, 9.

fasting.”¹⁰⁹ Kavka carefully notes that, just because Levinas does not use the word messianism in his philosophical writings, does not mean he has abandoned the concept. He cites his later Talmudic essays and his interview with Phillippe Nemo where Levinas says “...to be worthy of the messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning, even without the promises of the Messiah.”¹¹⁰

Martin Kavka provides us with a modern history of messianism within Jewish philosophy. Starting with Maimonides he shows that messianism is a philosophy of privation. Privation is not negation, negation is definitional. The statement “men cannot give birth” is a negation, it is not a privation. “Those men are bald” is an example of a privation, they could have hair, but they do not. The pre-messianic is about privation, a world with a missing attribute of the ideal. Jewish messianism is about the possibilities, it is about something that could be but is not yet. The presence of violence in human society points to a privation and is not a defining feature. Kavka writes, “The nature of human being is to be not yet, to be deprived of the stasis of being, to hunger after it, and to work to engender it. This sets the stage for a view of religious life as centered on messianic anticipation.”¹¹¹ For Maimonides, Herman Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, as well as Levinas, this anticipation is fundamental to the human condition. It is more than just being tired and hungry. It is a desire to surpass a finite existence measured by a ticking

¹⁰⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise*, 56.

¹¹⁰ Levinas and Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*, 114.

¹¹¹ Martin Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6.

clock. Levinas writes, “It is not enough that tears be wiped away or death avenged; no tear is to be lost, no death be without a resurrection.”¹¹² Jewish messianism is faith that the human condition is not condemned to violence and injustice, that it is possible to live in a better world. Scholem summarizes “...in Judaism the Messianic idea has compelled *a life lived in deferment*, in which nothing can be done definitely, nothing can be irrevocably accomplished. One may say, perhaps, the Messianic idea is the real anti-existentialist idea.”¹¹³

Kavka is not keen on a life lived in deferment, but Levinas seems to relish its indeterminateness. There is an ambiguity in the intersubjective relationship regarding the identity of the Messiah. Kavka explains, “It is difficult to pin down exactly who the messianic agent is, since redemption – both the other person and of myself – is guaranteed through my own ethical action. In a radical sense, human agency has messianic force.”¹¹⁴ There is an ethically responsible self who both is and awaits the Messiah.¹¹⁵ The relationship between the self and the Other resists any kind of thematization or totalization. The eruption of messianic hope within the diachronic moment constitutes self as both saved and savior. Levinas is aware of this oscillation between two poles and explicitly reveals it in the teacher/student relationship. “To have

¹¹² Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 79.

¹¹³ Scholem, *Ideal*, 35.

¹¹⁴ Kavka, *Jewish Messianism*, 7.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* 158.

meaning is to teach or be taught.”¹¹⁶ Even more explicitly, he writes, “The pupil-teacher relationship, which seemingly remains rigorously intellectual, contains all the riches of a meeting with the Messiah.”¹¹⁷ For Levinas, this equivocation is not a bug but a feature.

Kavka’s strongest criticisms of Levinas’s messianism focus on the very efficacy of messianic hope. He echoes Scholem’s complaint that messianism results in “a life lived in deferment.” Particularly, “...the messianic idea makes impossible a certain kind of philosophical activity,” namely “the determination of a concept’s true and a historical meaning.”¹¹⁸ Messianism is such a loaded term, that has been defined and redefined so many times, and it carries such emotional and historical baggage that its true meaning and value is obscured. It is always and already revolutionary, apocalyptic, and restorative and, at the same time, none of these things. It is neither fish nor fowl. As a concept, it lives on the border of history and non-temporality, neither is it immanent nor is it transcendent.¹¹⁹ Setting definitions aside, he strenuously questions messianism’s usefulness. Kavka writes “What happens, in short, when victory is deferred even further into the future, and time marches on as one failure after another? How does one go on? Was messianic desire simply ever a mode of self-deception?”¹²⁰ He argues that the,

¹¹⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 97.

¹¹⁷ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 85.

¹¹⁸ Martin Kavka, “Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem,” in *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism*, ed. Michael L. Morgan and Steven Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 298.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 79.

¹²⁰ Kavka, *Accounts*, 1.

“...notion of messianism as something that can be ‘achieved’ is overly rosy.” That the actual expression of messianism can only be in the moment and not reside in some unfulfillable hope for the future. Further, that this expression can take one of two forms. First, as a simple act of kindness or justice for the suffering Other. Second, as “...acts of critique, in which we show that certain norms that hold sway in our culture are not necessarily justified.”¹²¹ This allows anyone to participate in messianic acts in either or both a private and a public manner. It does mean, however, that true redemption is hopeless.

C. John D. Caputo

John D. Caputo is more an interpreter of Jacques Derrida than a reader of Levinas. Derrida was both influenced by and an influencer of Levinas. This positions Caputo to provide a clear-eyed view of Levinas’s work. Levinas’s messianism is a concept that Derrida absorbed and transformed into his own. As Caputo explicates and deconstructs Derrida, he thereby reveals his personal position and, by necessity, he does the same with Levinas. As a philosopher in his own right, he orients himself in a space that could just as well describe Levinas’s. Caputo writes, “I describe myself as a philosopher who tries to occupy the distance between philosophy and theology.”¹²² His work allows him to engage in dialogue with both Derrida and Levinas.

¹²¹ Ibid. 17.

¹²² John D. Caputo, “Hoping Against Hope: The Possibility of the Impossible,” in *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 26, No. 2, 92.

Derrida interprets Levinas's messianism as "...one of among several means of expressing the alterity of the other as an otherness not relative to the 'same,' but as pure otherness imposing itself upon the same."¹²³ For Levinas, the other is totally other (*tout autre*) and cannot be absorbed or possessed by the subjective self. The absolutism of this totalizing is problematic. Levinas's presentation of the Other "...cannot be simply and absolutely *tout autre*."¹²⁴ This is Caputo's and Derrida's fundamental criticism of Levinas. To explicate this position, Caputo describes both Levinas and Derrida as heterologists, scholars of difference but with two different Nietzschean orientations. Levinas is a heteronomist. Heteronomists are pious, grave, responsive, responsible, and respectful of the law. Caputo (and Derrida) are heteromorphists. Heteromorphists are impious, insouciant, Dionysiac, and lovers of novelty.¹²⁵ Levinas's project, his messianism, has only one hope, a world without war and mass murder. Caputo is suspicious of any human program with a singular proscription. It is not that he is against the hope, he loves the hope, but he is critical of the method. Caputo writes,

For Levinas, it is not politics that is first philosophy but ethics; politics on the other hand is war. (That is not a deconstruction of politics, I think, but a riding roughshod over it that will not do because it does not take account of the fact that we are always inside/outside political totalities.)¹²⁶

¹²³ Holden, *Parody*, 77.

¹²⁴ John D. Caputo and Carl Raschke, "Loosening Philosophy's Tongue: A Conversation with Jack Caputo," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 3.2, (2002) 19.

¹²⁵ John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 61.

¹²⁶ John D. Caputo, "Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth and Politics," *Research in Phenomenology* 21, (1991) 11.

By desacralizing everything but the human and thus making the one commandment, “thou shall not kill,” absolute, Levinas is totalizing the infinite. Any attempt to use the finite resources of language to contain the infinite is resorting to a kind of violence. For Caputo, the impossibility of Levinas’s project is made manifest in his attempt to articulate it.

Caputo understands Levinas as engaged in a kind of prophetic hyperbole. “The work of Levinas comes over us today like the voice of an Old Testament prophet, like the cry of Amos demanding that justice flow over the land like water.” By bringing messianism to philosophy, Levinas is not trying to create some new philosophical category. Instead, he is trying to orient ethical thought toward an ideal that makes the effort worthwhile. Caputo thinks that Levinas should be exempt from some scientific standard of empirical truth. “We do not believe the stories that prophets tell, and it is a degradation and a distortion of prophetic discourse to treat it as a record of eyewitness events.”¹²⁷ There is a tension here. While Caputo is comfortable with relativizing of the prophetic, he sees a problem in the sanctification of the human, the project of “creating a fence.” Holden, in contrast, does not see this as problematic and it may be its strength.¹²⁸ Levinas is a prophet, but not a seer. He is not predicting a future and certainly not a future with an eschaton. Caputo writes,

The messianic idea turns on a certain structural openness, undecidability, unaccomplishment, non-occurrence, noneventuality, which sees to it that, in contrast to the way things transpire in ordinary time, things are never

¹²⁷ Caputo, *Against*, 13.

¹²⁸ Holden, *Parody*, 63.

finished, that the last word is never spoken. Were the messiah ever to show up, that indiscretion would ruin the whole idea of the messianic.¹²⁹

The impossibility of Levinas's vision is precisely what makes it worthy of consideration.

This impossibility of Levinas's impossible aspiration is the feature that Caputo finds the most attractive. Messianic hope for Caputo is rooted (if rooted is the right word) in faith. The reason 'rooted' might not be the right word is because both hope and faith, like messianism and God, are transcendent terms without grounds. Caputo does not have synchronous definitions of faith and hope but, instead, has a relationship with their concepts. Any firm definitions would not do them justice, because they overflow the concepts they represent. Instead, they are experiences that should be taken on their own terms that is to be lived.

Once one understands messianic hope as the affirmative repetition of *oui, oui*, as the passion for the impossible and as the *l'invention de l'autre*, one discovers that hope has been a consistent, albeit not explicitly-named theme, throughout Caputo's philosophy of religion.¹³⁰

Both Levinas and Caputo desire the disruption of a messianic hope. However, they understand their messianic hope in different ways. "For Caputo, hope and faith correlate precisely at the point where each expresses the necessity for individuals to anticipate the future."¹³¹ The faith of religion, in Caputo's case, is the hope of a messianic future.

¹²⁹ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 78.

¹³⁰ B. Keith Putt, "Faith, Hope and Love: Radical Hermeneutics as a Pauline Philosophy of Religion," in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: State University of New York, 2003), 246.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* 246.

Levinas understands his messianic hope not being tied to faith but as a primal part of the phenomena of being human. Hoping for a better future, hoping for a future with less suffering, is an affective part of our encounter with the Other. While the conception of messianism has an origin in Judaism, Levinas is not calling on any Jewish myth or text to justify his messianic hope within his philosophical texts. His eschatology is not dependent upon the divine in any way. Levinas is not hoping for God to send a Messiah. For Levinas, the Messiah has “always already” been here with us when we acknowledge the presence of the Other. The messianic era is not the end of time but the end of actuality of war. The hope for a world of peace is not faith but the project of every human being, most especially, philosophers. He writes, “Of peace there can be only an eschatology. But this does not mean that when affirmed objectively it is believed by faith instead of being known by knowledge.”¹³²

By the time Levinas writes *Otherwise than Being*, at least in part as a response to Derrida, he has largely dropped messianic terms from his philosophical writings. Instead, he focuses all his messianic energy on the future. And not on, “. . . a past that cannot be remembered, recollected, brought to mind, an ‘immemorable’ past, ‘more’ past than any memorable or recuperable past.”¹³³ Neither Levinas nor Caputo is interested in restoring some idealized era in history. Their messianism is articulated in the hope for a future free of war. They would both agree that, “The very openness of the future calls upon us,

¹³² Ibid. 24.

¹³³ Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1993), 100.

solicits us, invites us to open ourselves to an unexpected visitation. Hope is not caused by a being or founded on a ground of being, but motivated by an otherwise-than-being, a not-yet-being.”¹³⁴ They both see a distant future, in which they will take no part, as still being of the highest importance and motivation for themselves.

It is worth noting that both Caputo and Levinas consider themselves religious practitioners. Caputo situates himself in that space of the Venn diagram over which both philosophy and religion coexist but have many issues exclusively their own. For Levinas religion and philosophy largely occupy the same space, each bring unique tools to the analysis of the experience of human life. He asserts, “Religion’s recourse to philosophy need indicate neither servility nor lack of understanding on the part of religion.”¹³⁵ He adds elsewhere, “This indicates that there is communication between faith and philosophy and not the notorious conflict.”¹³⁶ For both, messianic hope cannot be disqualified as a philosophical term just because it lacks grounds, has a biblical origin, or is a transcendent term. Messianic hope is a fundamental feature of the human experience. To eliminate it from philosophical discourse would be the same as suggesting terms such as love, justice, the good, and the infinite are not valid philosophical terms because they lack empirical foundations.

¹³⁴ Caputo, “Hoping,” 98.

¹³⁵ Levinas, *Righteous*, 245.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* 243.

Conclusion

Levinas's messianism is drawn from a family of ideas with a deep Jewish tradition stretching back 2,500 years. He alters it in some key respects. It is never dependent upon God or a god but, instead, calls to some trace of the infinite. This appeal, interrogation, or relationship is of a cognitive concept that exceeds the cognitive ability of any thinker. The infinite is a placeholder without a place in the work of mathematicians and physicists as well as, within the work of Descartes, Maimonides, and among the Kabbalists. Levinas's messianic ideal relies on an altered experience of temporality. Instead of an endless succession of nows, the present, the past, and the future are experienced in relationship with one another in a way that would be, at least, understandable to Rosenzweig or an orthodox phenomenologist. The self is at the same time, elevated to a full partner of the divine and lowered to the destitution of a persecuted hostage. The Messiah fluctuates between the poles of the subjective self and any other Other. The messianic era is simultaneously always in the future and already in the present, lasting for only a moment and forever. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other is the well of hope, equally at home in both Athens and Jerusalem.

Is this kind of hope a satisfactory philosophical strategy? It is an intersubjective call.

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