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**Samuel Moyn**, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 268. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4394-7.

Review by Nathan Bracher, Texas A & M University.

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Make no mistake about it: Samuel Moyn has written a blockbuster book on one of the most pivotal, yet imperfectly understood and little scrutinized figures of twentieth-century European thought, Emmanuel Levinas. Combining erudition of rare depth and scope with uncommon stylistic elegance, Moyn narrates the formation of Levinas's concept of "the other" as occasioned by the various philosophical, and crucially, theological encounters he made along the way to his mature philosophy of ethics and intersubjectivity. The result is a riveting, highly informative account not only of the intellectual itinerary of Emmanuel Levinas, but also of the principal currents of twentieth-century European thought.

As expressed in *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas's phenomenology of existence focuses on intersubjectivity to assert the primacy of ethics. Levinas's insistence on the ethical as the foundation for the human self hinges largely on the concept of the other, who transcends the self's natural solipsism and penetrates the totality of history through the face, and whose gaze beckons us to realm of the infinite, thus summoning us to follow the imperative of ethics. It is this concept of the other as the central reference for ethics that has become the hallmark of Levinas's philosophy. Now prominent in domains ranging from literary and cultural criticism to sociology and psychoanalysis, few concepts enjoy such intense appeal and wide currency.

Yet as Moyn rightly observes at the outset, even fewer notions are known with greater lack of precision and inattention to their origins. It is therefore these scholarly lacunae that he intends to address by subjecting Levinas to an ambitious exercise of intellectual historicism. The first three chapters, "True Bergsonianism", "The Controversy over Intersubjectivity", and "Nazism and Crisis", retrace Levinas's philosophical journey through the most daunting intellectual territory of early twentieth-century European philosophy as viewed against the backdrop of a cataclysmic world wars and the Russian Revolution. From Bergson's vitalist challenge to neo-Kantian idealism, through Husserl's attempt to overcome the subject-object duality with a neo-Cartesian phenomenology, on to the Heideggerian ontology intended to relegate pre-Hegelian thought to the dustbins of history by ridding philosophy once and for all of its theological underpinnings, Levinas avidly followed the triumphs and frustrations of contemporaneous luminaries as a student at the University of Strasbourg in the 1920s. Having become a French institution only in 1918, observes Moyn, it was a youthful, innovative institution offering exceptional opportunities for interdisciplinary study not unrelated to the multi-confessional sociology of the Alsace region. While predominantly Catholic, the region facilitated an intermingling of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish cultures.

Although according to Moyn Levinas was thoroughly secular in his pursuits at the time, he was first introduced to phenomenology by a Protestant theology professor, Jean Hering. Eager to escape the stuffy confines of the neo-Kantian philosophy that dominated French academia in the Third Republic, the young Levinas's response to first Husserl then Heidegger was nothing short of enthusiastic. Depicting Levinas as a "convert" to phenomenology and a "disciple" of Heidegger, Moyn implicitly suggests a quasi-religious fervor that would later be sublimated and conceptualized in a "crypto-theological" ethics. Flattered by the personal invitation from his teacher, Levinas applauded the putative

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victory of Heidegger's radical ontological finitude over Ernst Cassirer's Kantian humanism at the Davos debate of 1929. The shock and disappointment over Heidegger's enthusiastic adhesion to Nazism was thus all the more devastating, since according to Moyn, Levinas struggled for the rest of his career to overcome the dreadful implications of Heidegger's politics while at the same time coming to terms with the revolutionary insights of *Being and Time*.

Whether or not French phenomenology was, as Moyn contends, theological from its very beginnings, Levinas was by his own admission decisively influenced by the highly original theology elaborated by Franz Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption*. But it was his unavowed debt to the Protestant theologian Karl Barth that Moyn's chapter four, "Totaliter Aliter", identifies as the true origin of the key concept of the other. Indeed, focusing his historicist lenses to their narrowest angle, Moyn goes so far as to claim that is possible "with only slight oversimplification" (p. 132), to date the origins of the other precisely to 4 October 1914. For it was on that day that a number of prominent liberal German theologians added their signature to that of scores of other German intellectuals addressing a letter "An die Kulturwelt" ["To the Civilized World"] in order to defend Germany's cultural heritage and national vocation in these early moments of "the war to end all wars." Outraged by such blatant prostitution of theology to nationalism in the midst of World War I's frightful carnage and destruction, Barth jettisoned wholesale the prevailing historicism and subjectivism, then set out in search of a theology that could not so conveniently accommodate the whims of individual inclination or the caprice of historical circumstance. Borrowing from Kierkegaard the notion of an "infinite qualitative difference" between the human and the divine, Barth thus insisted on the radical qualitative difference between the finite and the finite, between man and God: to the question "*Qualiter?*" ["How much?"] he thus replied "*Totaliter aliter*" ["Totally other"] (p. 137).

Also writing in the thick of World War I's moral and physical devastation, the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig reached strikingly similar conclusions. Deploring as did Barth nineteenth-century liberal theology's preoccupation with philology and subjective emotion, Rosenzweig sought to get beyond the two opposing and equally futile impasses of all-encompassing history and plaintive individualism. He found the solution in a renewed emphasis on divine revelation conceived as breaking through the hegemonic totalization of history as well as through errant solipsism: for Rosenzweig, God's loving gaze awakened the human being to infinity while at the same time providing the impetus for moral action. The root notions of alterity, transcendence, and ethics that Levinas would promote in *Totalité et Infini* thus turn out to have thoroughly theological origins. But in borrowing the key components from Barth and Rosenzweig, alleges Moyn, Levinas obscured their true origins by never mentioning the former, and even "betraying" and "violating" fundamental ideas of the latter. Thus transposing Rosenzweig's asymmetrical dyad of human finitude and divine infinity onto the plane of humanity, Levinas in Moyn's view ultimately expounded a "crypto-theological" ethics under the guise of a pseudo-secular philosophy.

Moyn insists that the "ethical turn" now identified as Levinas's principal contribution would actually only come in the 1950s. During the interwar period and even later, Levinas was still grappling with the highly ambivalent legacy of Husserl and Heidegger, still seeking a way to extract the self from the latter's gloomy ontology of finitude and communitarian bondage without reverting to the former's Cartesian egology. Chapter five, "Levinas's Discovery of the Other in the Making of French Existentialism", stresses that it was in fact Kierkegaard's notion of divine alterity that provided Levinas the conceptual means of subtracting the self from the all-encompassing, all-explaining Hegelian totality of history and immanence.

Chapter six, "The Ethical Turn: Philosophy and Judaism in the Cold War", develops what Moyn considers to be the crucial contextualization of Levinas's turn to ethics in the 1950's: while perceived by

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so many as unique, it was in fact, contends Moyn, part of an entire movement that, although forming only a small minority among the Parisian intelligentsia, emphasized as did Levinas the personal and the ethical against the prevailing strains of Marxism and Hegelianism. Contending that Levinas's preoccupation with ethics stems from the "Cold War belief" that the ethical was to be removed from under the sway of the political, Moyn cites Judith Shklar's *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith* to argue that the "uncritical" return to moralism in the wake of the collectivist bankruptcy is just as mired in the "belief system" of the Cold War as the ideology it rejected. It was furthermore only after the fact, insists Moyn, that Levinas, seeking to reconcile the texts and traditions of Judaism with modern thought, projected the conclusions of his long philosophical quest search back onto Rosenzweig and Judaism while saying nothing of Kierkegaard and Barth.

Moyn's "Epilogue: *Totality and Infinity*," offers a synopsis of the 1961 book that established Levinas as a reference for contemporary European thought. Levinas insisted that his notion of ethics was not contingent upon theological revelation but was accessible through the human experience of the other open to all. For Moyn, however, Levinas only "encrypts" the theological notions he claims to be free of, transposing the human relationship with the divine to the realm of intersubjectivity. Hence the repeated charge of his "betrayal" and "violation" of Rosenzweig: whereas for the latter divine love and revelation were primordial, with ethics proceeding from them, Levinas made ethics and the human primordial, with God accessible only through the experience of the other. Given this considerable, if sometimes poorly visible, theological baggage, Moyn pointedly questions the adequacy of Levinas's thought for either secular philosophy or socio-political ethics.

As stated by the notables in their cover endorsements, Moyn deploys an impressive arsenal of scholarship in mapping out some of the most foreboding terrain of European intellectual history. He moreover narrates this expedition with a clarity and a stylistic vigor that convey the pathos surrounding not only Husserl, Heidegger, Barth and Rosenzweig, but also such figures as Karl Löwith, Hannah Arendt, Les Shestov, and Jean Wahl: their philosophical adventures are skillfully woven into a highly engaging account that indeed often "reads like a novel." Given the linguistic turgidity and conceptual density that most often characterize the primary texts (of which Heidegger is of course the caricature), this is no mean accomplishment.

Moyn's scholarly and stylistic virtuosity do not, however, preclude vigorous debate over his conclusions and the means by which he reaches them. One could begin by contesting the disclaimers articulated at the outset where Moyn states that, as an historian, he does not aim to determine the truth or untruth, validity or invalidity of Levinas's thought, but only retrace and contextualize it. Yet Moyn's own assessment of Levinas is evident throughout the book. Depicting Levinas as a "convert" to phenomenology (p. 2), a "disciple" of Husserl (p. 3), "fawning" (p. 50) in his admiration for Heidegger, an "orthodox Heideggerian and an ardent disciple of the great German philosopher" (p. 92, emphasis mine) who like his friend and colleague Jean Wahl studied "at the feet" (p. 177) of Husserl and Heidegger and partook of "Kierkegaard enthusiasm", Moyn portrays Levinas as fundamentally irrational and/or religious, and goes on to suggest that Levinas has strayed much too far beyond the realms of the secular and the historical.

Moreover, some of the particular instances of contextualization in *Origins of the Other* are highly problematical. The most questionable case is found in chapter five concerning "The Ethical Turn" of the 1950s. First, Levinas's concept of ethics as fundamental to the self and intersubjectivity is reduced to a caricature when Moyn associates it with a "moralist movement" and Gabriel Marcel. Then Moyn cites at length and uncritically the value judgments issued by Judith Shklar, who peremptorily dismisses ethical preoccupations as mushy-headed, egocentric, and even "mystical" solipsism. It is of course totally within prerogative of the historian to transpose or appropriate the perspectives and assessments of

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others. But there is no reason to confer any sort of historiographical privilege to Shklar, whose personal opinions are moreover just as “dated” and “mired in the Cold War” as those of her ideological adversaries. In any case, she hardly provides any sort of objective contextual measure. One could extend such criticism to several other instances in the book where Moyn first presents Levinas as an avatar of some general movement, then proceeds to discredit either the movement or some minor member of it, leaving us to conclude that Levinas is doomed by the same judgment.

Such contextualization leads to issues of a more theoretical nature. For by positing that philosophies can only be elaborated in function of the languages available at a given moment, one risks predetermining one’s findings and restricting analysis to intertextuality. In such a perspective, philosophy can appear as nothing more than an assembly, a collage, a “ready-made” of pre-existent, fixed, and inert intellectual components; the whole, perhaps illusory in itself, is considered as merely the sum of the parts, each of which can be attributed to anecdotal circumstance. And since such a construction could be elucidated only by means of an archeology of terms and concepts, such an approach implicitly posits historicism and historicists as the eminent repositories of truth. At the end of the day, then, one could argue that, far from reconnecting thought systems with the events and lived experiences of their times, intellectual historicism can come dangerously close to actually disconnecting philosophy from Hegel’s “prose of the world” by reducing it to its textual origins and conceptual components.[1] In that light, I would submit that Moyn wrongly discounts the crucial connection between Levinas’s thought and the collective historical trauma of World War I, World War II, and the Holocaust, without which the intense focus on the self, the other, the face, and the infinite could indeed appear as lyrical escapism. Nor does Moyn account for the importance of the themes of absence and intellectual non-violence that Derrida’s essay “Violence et métaphysique” has shown to be absolutely central and utterly removed from sentimental solipsism.[2]

Indeed, Moyn’s attempt to dismiss Levinas’s ethics as “cold war” escapism is flatly contradicted by “Le Moi et la Totalité”, a key article that Levinas published in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1951.[3] There he insists that the ethical is a summons to justice, that it must be embodied in society, that it is never a matter of sentiment and intention outstripped by the web of economic relations. Levinas clearly and repeatedly states that the realm of lovers and family is not really the realm of the ethical, for interpersonal wrongs can be righted and or pardoned reciprocally on the basis of mutual will and sentiment. Not so in society and history, where injustice must be addressed through laws and institutions not accessible from the realm of intimacy.

It is furthermore ironic for Moyn to deride Levinas’s notion of ethics as confined to the realm of comfortable thoughts and sentiments totally isolated from the harsh realities of society, politics, and history, and then to insist that philosophy, to be worth of the term, must adhere to Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s determination to rid philosophical reflection of all ahistorical, “otherworldly” theological vestiges. One is entitled to ask just where this imperative has led not only them but also Sartre and the Parisian cohorts who supposedly were so attuned to history.[4] Their political legacies and affinities, ranging from Nietzsche’s latent anti-Semitism, elitism, self-aggrandizement and Social Darwinism, to what we now know to be Heidegger’s enthusiastic and persistently unapologetic Nazism,[5] to Sartre’s blinkered Stalinism and knee-jerk endorsement of any and all anti-establishment violence,[6] are dubious at best, and in any case clearly inadequate for confronting the urgent and vexing issues of the twenty-first century.

It is true, of course, that such debates extend far beyond the confines of the present review. Yet they are precisely the kinds of intense discussions that are sure to be generated on many levels by Moyn’s powerful narrative of this crucial chapter of twentieth-century intellectual history. As Moyn has demonstrated in his October 2005 book *A Holocaust Controversy: The Treblinka Affair in Postwar France*:

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“*Habent sua fata libelli.*” [“Books have a life of their own.”] As a scholarly *tour de force*, *Origins of the Other* is sure to leave no one indifferent, to make an indelible mark on the reception of Levinas, and perhaps even orient Levinas’s ongoing intellectual legacy in an unforeseeable direction.

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## NOTES

[1] Tzvetan Todorov has argued that at the end of the day primary texts have much more to offer than critical theory and that critical analysis is more fruitfully pursued as an avenue of ingression into the author’s work than as an abstract repository of ultimate truth. See his *Devoirs et délices: une vie de passeur* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), pp. 113-131.

[2] Originally published in *L’Écriture et la différence* (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 1967), Derrida’s striking introduction to Levinas can be read in American translation as “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 79-153.

[3] This pivotal text can now be found in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous: essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Grasset Le Livre de Poche, 1991), pp. 22-48.

[4] For an uncompromising analysis of the ideology of History, see Alain Finkielkraut, “L’Ironie de l’Histoire” in his *L’Humanité perdue* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), pp. 91-115) as well as his “L’Age de la radicalité” in *Nous autres, modernes* (Paris: Ellipses/École Polytechnique, 2005), pp. 225-236.

[5] See Emmanuel Faye’s implacable assessment in his *Heidegger; l’introduction du nazisme dans la philosophie; autour des séminaires inédits de 1933-1935* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005).

[6] See Tzvetan Todorov, *Devoirs et délices*, pp. 139-145, and “The Achievement of David Rousset” in his *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 2003), pp. 148-158.

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