Symbolic Structure in Ethics, Language and Revelation

Orit Shimoni

A Thesis

In

The Department

Of

Theological Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts (Theological Studies) at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

March 2008

ABSTRACT

Symbolic Structure in Ethics, Language and Revelation

Orit Shimoni

The linguistic articulation of ethical knowledge has been problematised in both philosophical and theological discourse: Not only are the claims of knowledge-possession that propositional language asserts illogical, they are manifestly dangerous. The totalitarian or authoritarian models that such claims stem from have been partially replaced in both fields by a new paradigmatic emphasis on the impossibility of full ethical knowledge. The realm of the unknown, or the 'other,' as it is referred to in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, signifies that beyond the ontological that is within our grasp, there is the realm outside of our subjectivity. In the truly ethical encounter, one is awakened to this realm.

Rather than reject religion as an authoritative institution, the aim of this dissertation is to show that within the tenets of divine revelation, in both Jewish and Christian understandings, there is the encouragement to embrace the realm of the unknown, that is, mystery. Theologically this is achieved through a structural emphasis on the symbolic, rather than the propositional. The symbolic mediates between the finitude of the subject and the vastness of the infinite.

Symbolic or metaphoric investigations of revelation have been made in order to answer to the problem of truth as authoritarian. This paper aims to uncover, through an analysis of ethics of the 'other', why and how such understanding and articulation of

revelation are indeed more ethical. With this in mind, a symbolic approach to scripture as a source of ethics is recommended.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Any mission of love, any quest for the human good, is complex. Where do the responsibility, motivation, methods and definitions come from? Is the answer to be found in an external objective reality? Is it inherent somehow, in human consciousness? To be sure, believing in the good does not inherently produce goodness. The path to hell, as the saying goes, is paved with good intentions. History has shown, as the present still shows, there is indeed a catastrophic margin of error.

Can we ever really know if we are doing the good, if we know the good, if we *are* good? It is of prime importance, and far less dangerous, to profess from the start that we cannot know for sure, for even if we are attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible,[1] there is always new information that sheds new light for consideration. This new information is often the result of great struggle.

The world of ideas has concerned itself with this question of "can we know the good?" most specifically and explicitly in critical theory, with contributions from and implications for virtually every field of study. Theological study is of particular interest perhaps because it spans across time with remarkable longevity, self-pronounces itself 'the good' by positing an ultimate, benevolent being that exceeds the grasp of human knowledge, and claims it reveals itself in a fantastic array of microcosm and macrocosm, in the realms of personal human relationship, social and national structures, and even the cosmological.

---

[1] Bernard Lonergan names these as the four operatives in knowing. B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology,* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971.

But if at the root of the theological pursuit is the belief in a myth of origin that explains and calls us to the good, the critical theorist must also consider the danger:

> A myth of origin inevitably creates a division in humanity between "us" and "them," insiders and outsiders, brothers and enemies. The same myth, moreover, tends to create a division within the community of origin between "higher" and "lower," chiefs and followers, princes and subjects – and . . . men and women. . . . To make the myth of origin the sole guide of a society's political orientation will therefore generate hostility to outsiders and lead to war, and within the society itself, produce inequality, injustice, and eventually oppression.[2]

For this and other reasons, "the concept of revelation as a permanently valid body of truths communicated by God in biblical times, preserved and commented on . . . [has been] widely questioned in the twentieth century." In a section entitled "Contemporary Difficulties Against Revelation," Avery Dulles summarizes some of the objections from eight different fields of thought:

1)   *Philosophical agnosticism,* already widespread in the nineteenth century, continues to question the capacity of human reason to go beyond the phenomena of worldly experience. God, even if he exists, is held to be utterly incomprehensible, with the result that all statements about God and his actions are devoid of cognitive value.

2)   [In] *Linguistic Analysis.* . . many analytical philosophers question whether language about the divine can have a definite cognitive content such as was implied by the classical doctrine of revelation.

3)   [In] *modern epistemology* . . . the idea that the human mind could passively receive information by some kind of transfusion from the divine mind is widely rejected. As a product of the knower's own powers, all human knowledge must in some sense be "acquired" and must be subject to the conditions of the human subject. This realization, where accepted, puts an emphatic question mark against the divine authority usually attributed to revelation.

4)   *Empirical psychology* has destroyed any naïve confidence that visions and auditions, purportedly received by seers and prophets, can be credited as coming from on high. Ecstatic states can be induced by hypnosis and drugs. Involuntary hallucinations are frequently attributable to pathological states of mind . . .

5)   *Biblical criticism* has exposed the difficulty of attributing particular words and deeds to the divine agency. . . Attempted proofs of revelation from biblical miracles and prophecies have been abandoned by many scholars, who regard the accounts of such divine interventions as historically unreliable.

6)   *The history of Christian doctrine* demonstrates that many beliefs formerly viewed as divinely revealed truths have been reclassified as human and even fallacious opinions. . . . The question therefore arises whether doctrines still taught as divinely revealed . . . may not in time be set aside . . . If the dividing line between revealed and nonrevealed is in flux, the category of revelation itself appears questionable.

---

[2] G. Baum, "Paul Tillich's Ethic of Nationalism" in *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics,* McGill University Press, 2001.

7)   *Comparative religion* requires Christianity to relate itself to other religions which in some cases claim contrary revelations and in other cases recognize no such thing as divine revelation. Can biblical religion . . . credibly announce itself as the revealed religion, thus setting itself on a lonely peak above all others? . . .

8)   *Critical sociology* has exposed the ideological component characteristic of belief systems. In many cases appeal to divine authority can be a hidden way of obtaining conformity and of suppressing doubt and dissent . . .[3]

It is the suspicion of this author, however, that the critical thinker must not altogether negate the claim of God's creation and revelation because of its obvious record of an oppressive, if not unwarranted claim on truth. It is quite the contrary. "Theology has a critical task to expose deficiencies in past and present formulations, and a creative task in seeking better ways of expressing the ancient revelation for a new age."[4] This task is unfinishable by nature, but worthy.

The intent of this paper is to show that in certain understandings of Judeo-Christian revelation, there is not only the inspiration, but also the model and methodology for how to overcome these challenges. It is in the way revelation points to the very structure of language, and through language, that this is revealed. This paper will integrate the critical concerns summarized above by Dulles, with a philosophical and critical theological investigation of the role language plays in the ethical task. It will be evident throughout that a strict separation of philosophy from theology is virtually impossible.[5]

This dissertation in no way claims thorough scholarship of any one of the researched philosophers and theologians, but rather attempts to locate and demonstrate a structural parallel between them. This structure, I will show, is the same structure of symbol (or in linguistic terms, metaphor), understood as the primary mode of ethical

---

[3] A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation,* New York: Doubleday & Company, 1992, pp.7-8.
[4] Ibid. p.51.
[5] See Lonergan, p.24 on the integration of all fields through transcendental method.

communication. Revelation, I will show, possesses, and in essence reveals, this structure. This paper is a request and an invitation to participate in the meaning and wonder of ethical communication.

An important distinction must be made. Revelation in the context of theology can mean two things. For the Christian theologian, it means the manifestation of God's word through Jesus Christ. For the Jewish theologian, however, the Word means God's revelation at Mt. Sinai, and the meaning held in the Torah.

From the perspective of critical sociology, mentioned by Dulles, this poses a paradox for both Judaism and Christianity.[6] If, in Judaism, the common fund is a socially delimited group of people, then the sense of 'ownership' of revelation, hand in hand with the sense of righteousness, does not allow for the non-Jewish 'other'. This has meant those of other or no religion, as well as Jews who do not 'follow the rules.'

Therefore for the Jewish theologian, the paradox is how a propositional understanding of the Torah that names a specific people, ie. the children of Israel, can be ethical to the others outside of this delimited group. In claiming its authority, it undoes its ethical claim. [7] For the Christian, the equivalent question must be whether only Jesus is salvific. Cook asks, "Can we say that all human life is revelatory, so that, properly speaking, there is no such thing as "Christian revelation?" Or must we hold, as is the case especially in many fundamentalist forms of Christain faith, that the only *true* revelation of God is to be found in Christianity, so that all human life must be measured against this

---

[6] Due to scope, this paper deals with aspects of Judaism and Christianity only. It is undoubted that further investigations into other belief systems would be fruitful.

[7] Schorsch notes the same question in Heschel: "If, in fact, the true nature of the Oral Torah renders impossible any attempt to codify, systematize and, thereby exhaust the meaning of the Oral tradtion, how are we to write authoritatively about rabbinic theology?" See Schorsch, "The Hermeneutics of Heschel in Torah min Hashamayim," *Judaism,* 2001, pp.301-308, p.301.

one absolute unique revelation?"[8] To the religious mind, this is not a philosophical

inquiry. In an eschatological framework, the question of possession of the good is

ultimately a question of salvation.

What is the Word then? If it is Christ, then we must see how Christ teaches

openness to the other. If it is Torah, we must see how it teaches us the same. We must

see what each says about language. How the Jewish and Christian Word relate to ethics

and language may differ but, in my opinion, they offer complementary visions. In the

spirit of dialogue, I shall look here at both in order to better understand how these two

interact, and how they contribute to the notion of a language of revealed ethics that does

not follow an authoritarian model. It is a given that there are other religions with

differing understandings and narratives of revelation, however, given the scope of this

paper, I am limited to discussing the Jewish and the Christian. It is also worth pointing

out that within both of these headings, "Jewish" and "Christian," there is much debate

over definitions.

The tension between the Jewish and Christian religions has come from a

hesitation of acceptance and a reductive understanding of the other. Heschel writes that

"Jewish thought is not guided by abstract ideas, by a generalized morality. At Sinai we

have learned that spiritual values are not only aspirations in us but a response to a

transcendental appeal addressed to us."[9] This is relevant on two counts. The

transcendental appeal necessitates an openness to those who do not 'follow the rules'

within the spectrum of Jewish pluralism, but also, the distinction often made between the

---

[8] M. Cook, "Revelation as Metaphoric Process," *Theological Studies,* 4:3, pp.388-411, 1986, p.388. Cook refers here to Gabriel Moran, *The Present Revelation* , New York: Seabury, 1972, (see pp.253-255).
[9] A.J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man – a Philosophy of Judaism,* New York: Harper and Row, 1955, p.197.

Jewish 'God of Law' as opposed to the Christian "God of Love" is offensive in its reductive understanding of Jewish theology. It is far too much of an oversimplification to relegate the Jewish understanding of the Word to a purely authoritarian model.

Furthermore, hermeneutical analysis often neglects Jewish contributions to the field. In his book *Truth and Method,* for instance, Gadamer, skips entirely over a Jewish perspective of the Word, which is absolutely necessary to integrate, not only for pluralistic purposes, but because it is directly foundational to Christian understanding. This is hardly debated over anymore – that Christianity is a hermeneutics of Judaism is pointed to again and again, primarily in the use of Old Testament in the New Testament.

What Gadamer does contribute is a theological understanding of linguistic capacity. When Gadamer discusses the Word as Jesus Christ, he does so in order to show how this concept of revelation answered to the criticism of language as reductive, by showing a model in which, although there is a divine origin, there is nothing lost in the incarnation into man. Gadamer writes that in the case of Jesus the uniqueness lies in the fact that the manifestation (ie. the incarnation) does not deplete the ultimate meaning. For one to understand this account and its meaning, for one to weigh it for its ethical evocativeness, indeed for one to ascertain whether and how there may be divinity within one-self, one necessarily turns to and grapples with language. The concern over whether language has a capacity to convey the ultimate truth of ethics runs throughout this paper.

I do not disagree with Gadamer that the Christ event reveals an ethical capacity in language, but only suggest that this is problematic and the benefit of revelation is already present in the Jewish model. I limit my discussion of Jewish understanding of revelation to the work of Abraham Joshua Heschel, which entails both what he calls, 'the paradox of

Mt. Sinai," and prophetic revelation in general. My discussion of the Christian

understandings of 'the Word' is limited to those which adhere to the symbolic model to

be discussed herein.

CHAPTER 1: ETHICAL TRUTH IS NOT ONTOLOGICAL

THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHICAL TRUTH – NEITHER AUTHORITY NOR SUBJECTIVITY

The "democratic ethos" of western, post-industrial modernity, has had at its root "the Enlightenment principle." It states that, "the intellectual foundation of political modernization . . . affirms that, "human reason empowers people to free themselves from the distorting and self-limiting myths of the past."[10] In other words, human reason can uncover the cultural egoism existent in institutions that have handed down knowledge as a matter of authority, irreverent of the transcendental nature of true value. Certainly, the Catholic Church has been accused of this irreverence.

Critical theory, "in the pursuit of emancipation," [11] has aligned claimed possession of the virtue of truth by motivating resistance to power, which, according to its claims, by necessity limits or veils truth in order to govern itself. This resistance to power takes the form of new versus old: "This 'radical rupture' with traditional ideas . . . [viewed] as historically complicit with the exercise of power . . . has been the hallmark of the critical theory project since the Communist Manifesto."[12] Michel Foucault has referred to this veiling of truth by power as the 'repressive hypothesis'.[13]

Thus, tradition, institution, and authority must be reawakened or rebelled against in the name of newness. Taken to an extreme, history itself, then, is seen as enemy. In

---

[10] G. Baum and J. Vaillancourt, "The Church and Modernization," in *Religion and the Social Order,* " Vol. 2, JAI Press, 1991. p.21.

[11] T. Wandel, "The Power of Discourse: Michel Foucault and Critical Theory, *Cultural Values,* 5:3, 2001, pp.368-382, p.371.

[12] Ibid. p.368.

[13] Ibid.

modern philosophy, the rejection of knowledge as handed down was replaced with an emphasis on the subject's ability to grasp her own knowledge.[14] Because the subject is always new in relation to history, her agency as knower becomes the opposing factor to the passive acceptance of authority.

But when it came to ethics, there is a problem, for even within subjective autonomy, a value-system based on knowledge that is grasped is necessarily ontological, meaning, it relegates anything and everything that a subject comes into contact with into the realm of the 'known'. An individual subject, like an institution, is limited in scope by its own temporality and sociality. Ultimate knowledge of the good cannot possibly be limited by time and space. Thus both subjective and authoritative knowledge of value are a contradiction in terms. Value is not a known.

TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE AND THE GOOD – BERNARD LONERGAN'S TRANSCENDENTAL METHOD

"What is good," writes Bernard Lonergan, "is always concrete. But definitions are abstract. Hence, if one attempts to define the good, one runs the risk of misleading one's readers."[15] The issue which is at the heart of this dissertation is how to approach the truth of what is good, why the risk of misleading is an ethical issue, and how one might resolve this issue through a theological understanding of revealed ethics.

Foundational to this discussion is the understanding that the good, truth and knowledge are not fixed. Goodness, in fact, is more like the reluctance to accept fixedness. "The drive to truth compels rationality to assent when evidence is sufficient

---

[14] The subject is defined by Bernard Lonergan as "the operator" of knowledge, and is also the subject in "the psychological sense that he operates consciously." Lonergan, p.7.
[15] Lonergan, p.27.

but refuses assent and demands doubt whenever evidence is insufficient."[16] Necessary is

an internalization of this fact, an acceptance of our finitude, and vigilant questioning.

"[B]y deliberation, evaluation, action, we can know and do, not just what pleases us, but

what truly is good, worth while. Then we can be principles of benevolence and

beneficence."[17]

Lonergan suggests what he calls a transcendental methodology. By

transcendental he means that with any results of knowledge-seeking, there is emphasis on

openness to new questions.[18] Transcendental method, according to Lonergan, "fulfils a

heuristic function."[19] In other words, there is something in this openness that lends itself

to furthering both the understanding of the human good and its manifestation.

At the crux of his methodology is the emphasis on questions, rather than answers.

This mode of questioning, he calls intending:

> [T]ranscendentals are contained in questions prior to the answers. They are the radical
> intending that moves us from ignorance to knowledge. . . They are unrestricted because
> answers are never complete and so only give rise to still further questions. They are
> comprehensive because they intend the unknown whole of totality of which our answers
> reveal only part.[20]

In the context of ethics, the question of knowing values is of fundamental

importance. Claiming to know a value with certainty is problematic in that it does not

respect the transcendental objective, which highlights the incompleteness of our

knowledge. Lonergan suggests that value itself must be understood as a transcendental

notion. "It is what is intended in questions for deliberation. . . Such intending is not

knowing . . So when I ask whether this is truly and not merely apparently good, whether

---

[16] Ibid, p.35.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid. pp.13-14.
[19] Ibid. p.22.
[20] Ibid. p.11.

that is or is not worth while, I do not yet know value but am intending value."[21] So too is the human relation to divine ethical knowledge.

Lonergan implies that the quest for knowledge of the good (of value) always falls short of any ultimate and unchallenged claim, yet it forever seeks it. "[T]he transcendental notion of the good so invites, presses, harries us, that we could rest only in an encounter with a goodness completely beyond its powers of criticism."[22]

In both subjective and authoritative structures of knowledge, ethics does not actually relate to these 'others', because it does not admit the unknowability that these others pose. If ethics is by its nature relational, meaning that outside of the knowing subject and the known object there is always an "other", pure ontology does not indicate this.

With similar reasoning, in *Hermeneutics Religion And Ethics* , Hans-Georg Gadamer gives a predominantly historical survey of the philosophical developments regarding ethics. In Chapter 4: "The Ontological Problem of Value," he writes: "What is at issue is not just the question of how normative propositions and value judgments can have a logical legitimacy on a par with that of theoretical propositions, but whether a normative claim like that ascribed to "value" is legitimate – that is, whether it possesses a binding, obligatory "being" independent of the valuer."[23] In other words, the question that arises is whether value can be discussed in terms of being at all, the value never independent of the valuer and the valued.

---

[21] Ibid. p.34.
[22] Ibid. p.36.
[23] Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, pp.58-59. This chapter is dated 1971.

The assertion of particular values as 'true', even when done in reaction to older authorities, has often proven equally oppressive and limiting. Wandel highlights how Foucault admits that in the search for truth, as new structures of knowledge are asserted, the search for ethics is often lost. This last statement is of significance, for it shows that a strict dichotomy between institution and critical theorist is false. The concern for the human good pervades both, and in both, the danger of eluding it also lurks.

The problem with ethics, therefore, is not old knowledge versus new knowledge, but knowledge itself. Neither truth as traditional authority, nor truth reached through 'enlightened' subjectivity, are sufficient. A new strategy that is aware of its own limitation and relationality is necessary. Truth must be the serpent eating its tale. It must constantly 'sting itself awake,'[24] for progress of knowledge requires that the process of coming to know repeat itself endlessly. Lonergan explains this in his discussion of progress:

> Progress proceeds from originating value, from subjects. . . observing the transcendental precepts, Be attentive, Be intelligent, Be reasonable, Be responsible. Being attentive includes attention to human affairs. Being intelligent includes a grasp of hitherto unnoticed or unrealized possibilities. Being reasonable includes the rejection of what probably would not work but also the acknowledgment of what probably would. Being responsible includes basing one's decisions and choices on an unbiased evaluation of short-term and long-term costs and benefits to oneself, to one's group, to *other* groups. [my emphasis]
> Progress, of course, is not some single improvement but a continuous flow of them. But the transcendental precepts are permanent. Attention, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility are to be exercised not only with respect to the existing situation, but also with respect to the subsequent, changed situation . . . So change begets further change and the sustained observance of the transcendental precepts makes these cumulative changes an instance of progress.[25]

Truth must become, rather than the static possession of knowledge, the state of being-in-question. "Rather than countering homogenizing and normalizing truth claims with new truth claims, the strategy is now not only a refusal to defer to . . . truer truths,

---

[24] From the Dylan Thomas poem 'Incarnate Devil' in *Collected Poems 1934-1952,* London: J.Bent & Sons Limited, 1952.
[25] Lonergan, p.53.

but a resolve to bombard the power of the Same with the difference of the Other."[26]

Implied in this distinction is truth that is considered acquired becomes absorbed within

one's ontological horizon. The difference of the other is what forces us to acknowledge

what lies beyond it. Truth is the dynamic structure that shows the relationships between

these horizons. In his suggestion that the transcendental precepts are permanent,

Lonergan implies that there is stability in the manner in which truth is sought. The

stability lies in the relational dynamic of self to 'other,' a dynamic I will show is present

in Judeo-Christian revelation. It is ethics based on the notion of the other that brings us

to Emmanuel Levinas.

LEVINAS – ETHICS OF THE OTHER

"Since its infancy, philosophy has been filled with a horror of the other that

remains other, with an insurmountable allergy. This revulsion toward the other

ultimately leads to a totalitarianism of the same."[27] There is a crucial element in what

Levinas says that pertains deeply to this dissertation. According to Emmanuel Levinas,

because of the inherent relationality of a subject to someone who is outside of herself,

ethics cannot, by its very nature, belong to a category of intentional, subjective

knowledge. The ethical relationship is "irreducible to consciousness and

thematization."[28] Levinas claims that which is within our moral horizon is not ethics

itself. Rather, ethics is the perpetual questioning of our moral horizons, a questioning

---

[26] Wandel, p.380.

[27] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1986), p.346. quoted by Jung H. Lee, pp.250-251. in "Neither Totality or Infinity: Suffering the Other," *The Journal of Religion* 1999, pp.250-251.

[28] Levinas, "Substitution," *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Boston and London: Martinus Nijhof Publishers, 1981.p.89.

that is initiated by our encounter with the Other. It is "allowing the Other to disrupt the 'at homeness'[29] of our own horizon [that] is ethics."[30]

For Levinas, the ethical relation, namely, the human encounter, must replace ontology as "the enactment that makes possible philosophical and theological discourse."[31] The root or basis for this discourse must be the human encounter, which is always new and always begins outside of our selves.[32] Thus, ethics cannot be only subjectively intended, nor handed down authoritatively, for neither can account for this 'newness.'

The argument comes in reaction both to phenomenological philosophy and to the harsh events of Levinas's time. Marie Baird claims that the primary objection raised by Emmanuel Levinas regarding Heidegger's onto-theo-logy is that it "perpetuate[s] consciousness [and the] thematic exposition of being, knowing. Such thinking, Levinas argues, "relegate[s] ethics to a secondary, and thus, derivative position."[33] This is not only logically problematic, but dangerous in its manifestation. This is similar to Foucault's argument. The problem is that "such relegation has the effect of perpetuating the subservience of the individual to the potential for violence intrinsic to any ontologically based conceptual system that would totalize being at the expense of individual inviolability."[34]

---

[29] In other texts, Levinas also refers to this 'at homeness' as 'the same.'
[30] G. Drazenovich, "toward a Levinasian understanding of Christian ethics – Emmanuel Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Other," *Cross Currents* 54:4 (2005), pp.36-45, p.38.
[31] M. Baird, "Revisioning Christian theology in light of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of responsibility," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* 36:3/4 (1999), p.4. *cf.* Lonergan, who says the good is always concrete. *Method in Theology,* p.49.
[32] The word 'new' seems to imply that it is not a traditional source that has already been rendered in description. This is important in the theological context, and will be looked at further.
[33] E. Levinas, "substitution."

Emmanuel Levinas's criticism of Heideggerian onto-theo-logy can thus be said to be double-pronged. On one level, it is a theoretical argument laid out in philosophical claims. But in an inextricably linked practical level, it is both observation and warning of the danger of onto-theo-logy in very concrete terms. It cries out against what damage ontological thinking can *do*. Drazenovich agrees that "the dogmatism and fundamentalism that has developed periodically . . . is a reactive movement against being open to the presence of the Other and has resulted in violence, wars and a mistrust of plurality."[35]

Subjective and authoritative models of ethical knowledge are inadequate in their capacity to reveal Truth as it unfolds. Consequently, knowledge of value, of the good, is deemed incomplete. Subjective and authoritative knowledge cannot account for new knowledge to be revealed by the infinite other human one may or not encounter. There cannot therefore be a possession of whole knowledge of anything. It is always in relation to what is not yet known.

The Judeo-Christian tradition regarding human knowledge bears a parallel problematic. Human articulation of knowledge is incomplete, ever relational to the infinite knowledge of the divine. Ultimate knowledge of ultimate goodness belongs to the divine alone, and will only be revealed, it is said, in the eschaton.

In both of these analyses, the future is the space of the not-yet-known, and therefore in both philosophical and theological evaluation, the sociality and temporality of human beings has been perceived as a limitation of total ethical knowledge – a boundary. For this reason, in both philosophy and theology, language as the vehicle for ethical meaning has been problematized. Heschel writes, "the spirit of God is set in

---

[35] Drazenovich, p.39.

the language of man, and who is to judge what is content and what is frame?"[36] From a critical perspective, the situatedness of language within a socially and temporally dependent boundary negates its ability to reveal the infinite sum of ethical knowledge.

THE QUESTION OF LANGUAGE

The relationship in question is that of language to truth. This is a key aspect of Greek philosophy.[37] Put simply "Language often seems ill suited to express what we feel. In the face of . . . overwhelming presence . . . the task of expressing in words . . . seems like an *infinite* and hopeless undertaking." [my emphasis] [38] There is an excess in experience, it seems, that is irreducible to language. This is equivalent in structure to the ethical relationship named by Levinas, as it is equivalent in structure to the relationship of human to divine knowledge. The role of subjective knowledge in each is insufficient. There is always an excess.

Such a sense of linguistic limitation is due to a partial view of language, which sees it as a system of signs where words refer to objects and as such signify only what is already perceived. "The sign is always inferior to that which it signifies,"[39] and therefore as a medium, language is inadequate. But an understanding of language as a system of signs sees only its reductive tendencies, and not its transcendent qualities.[40] Words in this model are reductive because they do not account for the yet to be known. They are reductive of any truth that is 'new,' 'other,' and therefore cannot convey the transcendent in the truly ethical relationship.

---

[36] Heschel, p.259.
[37] For an extensive survey, see Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* London: Sheed and Ward, 1975
[38] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.402.
[39] D. Jeffrey, *People of the Book,* Cambridge: Wm.B. Eedermans, 1996, p.xvi.
[40] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.413.

The question is how language takes into account the other-ness that makes ethics ethics – relational beyond its 'known.' Long before this question was raised in the struggles of postmodernism, it was already a concern of theology. For what is the notion of the divine word, and how can we possibly claim to know it, let alone speak it?

THE WORD

The Word somehow denotes the event of transfer from divine to human ethical knowledge. It is not unconnected that revelation is often referred to as the Word. A distinction is made in theology, between the Divine word and the human word, that is, human language. The inadequacy of human language is emphasized again and again in relation to the Divine word, often with a tone of lamentation, much in the way propositional language is deemed inadequate in conveying ethical truth: "Only one 'Word' transcends the mere conventionality and asymptotic liability of all other words, and that word is manifestly not of human utterance."[41] The Divine Word is understood as something that is preverbal, unified, whole in its meaning. Human language corrupts it.

"For the Hebrew poet," writes David Lyle Jeffrey in *People of the Book,*

> no single human word can begin to capture what is suggested by these many attempts to speak about the revealed Word; all human language, even that by which Torah is translated, is asymptotic, earnestly reaching toward its goal of perfect signification, but repeatedly falling short of its object. . . . [L]anguage, even when communicating the divine Word, is simultaneously both revelatory and distorting.[42]

Gadamer notes the same difficulty:

> Whereas God completely expresses his nature and substance in the Word in pure immediacy, every thought that we think (and therefore every word in which the thought expresses itself) is a mere accident of the mind. The word of human thought is directed toward the thing, but it cannot contain it as whole within itself. Thus thought constantly

---

[41] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,*1.13, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr.. New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1963. See also Dulles, pp.48-52.
[42] Jeffrey, p.16.

proceeds to new conceptions and is fundamentally incapable of being wholly realized in any.[43]

Gadamer's concern is parallel in structure to Levinas's concern with ethics as ontology. The subject cannot contain the other as a whole. Human language cannot contain the divine Word.

How we relate to words has been a deeply theological question. A concern runs throughout Jewish and Christian deliberation with both the imperfection of human language to convey divine ethical meaning, and the warning of staying bound to the words themselves, instead of the ethical spirit that is meant to be carried through them. For Saint Augustine, for instance, "since meaning resides not in the word abstracted, but in those entities and actions which words can serve, retreat to questions of language for their own sake is a form of intellectual debilitation . . . Only one 'Word' transcends the mere conventionality and asymptotic liability of all other words, and that word is manifestly not of human utterance."[44] Any attempt to assert through language a claim of certainty, is deemed both foolhardy and dangerous.

THE DANGERS OF ONTOLOGICAL THEOLOGY

The problem with religious discourse that is ontologically based is twofold: like Levinas's criticism of ontology, applying critical theory to religious discourse involves a concern with the 'faulty logic' of a religious truth-claim from a philosophical perspective, but also with the oppressive results of such logic, from a socio-historical vantage-point. Where text comes in, for instance, the danger is in allowing what is revealed therein to be understood as static, and this is what happens when it is read as propositional only. One

---

[43] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.424.
[44] Jeffrey, p.6.

need only observe the degree to which fundamentally literalist readings of scripture are dangerous to the very notion of ethics of the other, and its oppressive potential has been manifest in culture, gender, ethnicity, belief.

That fundamentalist declarations of religious truth are dangerous is a point that has already been made, but the concern here is the philosophical reason for this. Religious truth-claims, as all truth claims, do not emphasise the primacy of ethics-which-is-not-being. Furthermore, they purport knowledge-possession of what is by definition beyond human knowledge. If it were within human grasp, it would not be divine. Success with the "criterion of empirical verifiability . . . could only mean defeat for its transcendent claim."[45]

If ethical truth lies, as theologians will have it, in God's self-revelation, there is indeed a problem, for, logically, it then lies forever beyond our ability to articulate. Religious language has either been criticized and disregarded for its incompatibility with reality, or deemed unnecessary as a pursuit. Theologians contend with this issue and have taken several different approaches. "Religion," say some, "belongs to the realm of the unutterable."[46] Louis Dupre writes that "Logical positivists have . . . concluded that religious language is meaningless and misleading in its reality claims," while Wittgenstein writes: "There are things that cannot be put into words: they make themselves manifest: they are what is mystical."[47] Thus, "the ultimate problem is . . . whether a . . .[religious] language is able to deal with reality and, most importantly, with

---

[45] L. Dupre, *Symbols of the Sacred,* Michigan, Wm. B. Eedermans, 2000, p.47.
[46] T. McPherson, "Religion as the Inexpressible," *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, p.101, (quoted by Dupre, *Symbols of the Sacred* p.48.
[47] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus,* 6.522, (quoted by Dupre, p.50).

reality as it transcends the empirical world."[48] Can language convey the transcendent

aspect of ethics? Can language convey what is beyond ontology?

According to Heschel, in revelation, "God does not reveal Himself" he only

reveals His way. Judaism does not speak of self-revelation, but of the revelation of His

teaching for man."[49] Unlike the divine Word, which is one, human language requires

multiplicity. "The human word is not one, like the divine word, but must necessarily be

many words."[50] That is to say, "humans do not authorize any "absolute word."[51]

The emphasis on multiplicity of human words is similar to the idea of the

existence of other human beings in Levinas's analysis. Other human beings in their very

existence indicate the inadequacy of our knowledge in relation to total knowledge. So

too this highlights an inadequacy in the language which reflects their knowledge. This is

significant, for it highlights the way in which the theological question of our limitation

manifests itself in the human ethical realm.[52] The awareness of other people is like a

prerequisite in striving for divine ethical knowledge. When reverence to the otherness of

neighbor and divine is lacking, it is a sign of overly ontological theology.

Levinas is skeptical of theology for precisely its frequent irreverence. Purcell

explains:

> Levinas . . . mistrusts theology, and does so on three counts. Firstly, theology, as Levinas
> understands it, not only tends to value *theoria* over *praxis,* but also imposes theoretical
> frameworks to circumscribe and delimit practice. Secondly, theology attempts to circumscribe
> God, and thus offends and does violence to God's absolute transcendence. Thirdly, in its attention

---

[48] J. Macquarrie, *God Talk,* New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p.61 (quoted by Dupre, p.51).
[49] Heschel, p.261.
[50] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.424.
[51] Mikhail Bahktin, "epos I roman," *Voprosy literatury I estetiki: Issledovanija raznyk let* (Moscow: Xudoz, 1975), pp.447-483, quoted by Jeffrey, p.7.
[52] In a sense, this says that the human-divine relationship acts as a symbol for the inter-human relationship. Symbol will be a key feature of this dissertation.

to itself and the God whose mystery it endeavours to prove, it has – unlike the God whom it seeks to understand – been inattentive to the neighbor to whom God always inclines an ear[53]

The realm of religious discourse has certainly been criticized for its ontological emphasis. Writes Purcell, "Theology can often be undisciplined; it can seek to legitimize itself and take refuge in uncritical notions of revelation, in mystical encounter, or in various forms of fideism, all of which bypass the ethical encounter with the other person."[54]

It is because of the multiplicity of others that theology must take heed. Lonergan emphasizes that human knowledge, of the good and otherwise, "is not some individual possession but rather a common fund, from which each may draw by believing, to which each may contribute in the measure that he performs his cognitional operations properly and reports their results accurately."[55] In other words, one must contribute to a common ethical fund with responsible subjectivity – a subjectivity that is cognizant of the other.

This is of utmost importance, for what do we consider the common fund? Who is included in this word, 'common'? "It is the function of culture," Lonergan writes, "to discover, express, validate, criticize, correct, develop, improve . . meaning and value."[56] But our very definition of culture, that is to say, who belongs to it, is a primary concern of ethics. If egoism is indeed "in conflict with the good of order,"[57] Lonergan is quick to point out that "besides the egoism of the individual there is the egoism of the group. . . [and] group egoism not merely directs development to its own aggrandizement but also provides a market for opinions, doctrines, theories that will justify its ways and, at the

---

[53] M. Purcell, "Notes and Comments, 'Levinas and Theology'? The Scope and Limits of Doing Theology with Levinas," *Heythrop Journal* XLIV, 2003, pp.468-479, p.468.
[54] Purcell, p.473.
[55] Lonergan, p.43.
[56] Ibid. p.32.
[57] Ibid. p.54.

same time, reveal the misfortunes of other groups to be due to their depravity."[58] Any

group that is in power is in danger of promoting its own agenda in this way, of not being

open to the voices of others. It is the task of critical thinker to be on guard for this, for

any group that does this is not truly intending value.

Language itself is complicit in this kind of egoism. When Foucault expresses

concern over the limitation of language to signify ethics, it is because of an emphasis of

the ontological in language. It is as if he is saying that in historical actuality, language is

not used with this reverence of intending. Power, (in Levinas's terms, ontology), in a

sense, subjective truth turned institution, reveals itself through discourse. Foucault

therefore understands discourse as a tool of power that does not take the infinite (the

Other) into account. It functions without reverence to its finitude.

With this analysis, the critical theorist is trapped by the fact that any new

assertion made by human reason inevitably generates a new structure of power to further

itself, and because of both the reliance on the known, and the creation of a new known,

language itself is complicit. By making something new true through language, we create

a new ontology that is itself true only by a kind of closure, a seal. Language, then is not

truly open to what lies beyond its realm. Thus, language itself is dangerous.

This inevitability is outlined in Foucault's work in which he terms power both

'negative' in its repressive tendency, and 'positive' in its generation of further power

structures. In his article "The Power of Discourse: Michel Foucault and Critical Theory,"

Torbjorn Wandel writes:

> One of the extraordinary qualities of Foucault's work is the demonstration that the intellectual efforts
> that have often proclaimed themselves allies to critical theory . . . psychiatry . . . indeed the human
> sciences *tout court* – have often been complicitous with the structures of domination and mechanisms

---

[58] Ibid.

of power they have critiqued. . . "New" truth quickly becomes "an alibi for the exercise of power. . . [Knowledge itself] finds itself in a "*perpetuum mobile* of power-generating truth claims.[59]

It is through analyzing this discourse that its resisters unmask it. But the resisters have only discourse at hand, and, in resorting to it, they reveal their own dependence on these institutions. Bound by language they have only the words that have already been said, and if there is innovation, it is clouded by the complex web of meanings that their words already contain. "The pursuit of truth is not exempt from the discursive, social and economic context in which it is undertaken."[60] "So it is," writes Bernard Lonergan, "that conscious intentionality develops in and is moulded by its mother tongue."[61] Thus, language cannot be ethics if it only accounts for the old, and when it is new, it immediately and inevitably creates an oppressive power structure, a new ontology.

---

[59] Wandel, pp.371-.375.

[60] *Ibid.*, p.374. Take for instance, the field of biblical criticism. Its mission, so to speak, is to unmask the theological institutions that have claimed possession of scriptural meaning. With critical analysis similar to that of Foucault, they are aware that this 'truth' has been clouded by the temporal and geographical contexts in which its composers dwelled. However, with Wandel's point in mind, if one searches for a point of origin before there was the institution, it is futile, for one is always searching within the framework of language. And even as these contexts are "uncovered," it is from these scholars' own lenses, and there is constantly more being uncovered. Thus, the biblical scholars who have unmasked a given theological understanding as false by investigating the "original" meanings through the study of the 'limiting' geographical and temporal contexts of the "original authors" are inevitably just as foolhardy. That is not to say, of course that the work of biblical scholarship has no ethical value. For by 'uncovering' they problematize 'truth' and if such critical theory is applied, it makes us question our own contemporary certainties. It is the belief of this author that Bernard Lonergan's explanation of historical consciousness alludes to this.

[61] Lonergan, p.71. Lonergan does offer another view of language, which I shall return to later on.

CHAPTER 2: ETHICAL MEANING – CRISIS OR RECONCILIATION?

LOSS OF MEANING

We may agree that subjective perpetuation of a moral ground can have dangerous results, and counter the transcendent objective of true ethics. Yet the subject cannot be annihilated altogether by the disruption of the other, for then how do we account for moral reasoning, for subjective agency in moral action? Indeed, the problem perceived with regard to this model of 'neither-authority-nor-knowing subject' is that of a loss of grounding altogether. From a philosophical perspective, Kepnes explains this concern. "The radical critique of the rational self together with the infinite demands of the other could easily render that self and reason thoroughly passive. This, I would call the crisis of postmodernism."[62] This concern can be compared to that of deconstruction of language altogether, as described by Jeffrey. Jeffrey quotes Harold Bloom who notes a thoroughgoing linguistic nihilism. . . . called Deconstruction, such as that of Derrida, in which there is the" dearth of meaning and absolute randomness."[63]

If positive linguistic assertions of ethical knowledge are not in fact ethical in their use and structure, if language itself is complicit in the perpetuation of oppressiveness, what then is left of religious meaning? Certainly, the problem with asserting singularly true revelation through either Judaism or Christianity is problematic in its lack of openness to others, ie. non-Jews or non-Christians. But if Christ is not 'exclusive' and the

---

[62] Steven Kepnes, "Ethics After Levinas: Robert Gibbs's Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities," *Modern Theology* 19:1, 2003, pp.103-115, p.106.

[63] Derrida, Paul de Man, Geoffery Hartman *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York" Seabury, 1979), cited by Jeffrey, p.1.

Laws of the Torah not authoritatively prescribed to a specific people, is there a loss of ethical meaning? Revelation is not just a tag for a group of people; it proposes allegedly ethical content. For both Jews and Christians this content has been a source of ethical inspiration and direction.

This need not be understood only as a religious crisis. Indeed, Nietzsche's death of God comes alongside a philosophical panic over loss of meaning altogether such as can be seen in existentialism and deconstruction. Indeed, Levinas's ethics of the other has been criticised for annihilating the subject altogether. It is a misconception, however, to think that Levinas does not "offer a strong and compelling conception of the subject's moral agency and that his ethics, properly understood, does not entail self-abnegation."[64]

In Levinas' reconstruction (rather than deconstruction) of the subject who is awakened to the radical alterity of the Other, is that the very notion of the good must then become always in question. It is the Other who puts the I in question: "Instead of destroying the I, the putting in question binds it to the Other in an incomparable, unique manner."[65] Levinas's view of the Other in *Otherwise than Being*, is the "formation of a concept of selfhood defined by its openness and its capacity for discovery."[66] And it is "in [this] me . . . that communication opens."[67] What results from the encounter with the other is "the impossibility to come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself."[68]

---

[64] Ferreira, M.J., "Total altruism in Levinas's "ethics of the welcome," Journal of Religious Ethics, 29.3 pp. 443-70, 2001

[65] Levinas, *Proper Names*, Trans. Michael B. Smith. Stanford, calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996. (in Ferreira, 2001).

[66] Ricouer, 1992 (in Ferreira, 2001)

[67] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: or, Beyond Essence*. Transl. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991. (in Ferreira, 2001).

[68] Ibid. Though as previously stated, the subject can still momentarily forget the suffering of the other by being in enjoyment. (See earlier footnote).

Thus, subjectivity is not lost, it is suspended, then re-evaluated and forced to continue re-evaluating in response to subsequent encounters with other Others. What one has, then, is "a totally new understanding of the Self. It can neither encompass itself by an adequate (ap)prehension or concept nor rule over itself in sovereign freedom . . .Human corporeality is animated by the relation of responsibility."[69]

Is there a linguistic model that accounts for these elements? Between a system of language that points to a known, and a system of language that has no meaning at all, there needs to be a linguistic model that accounts for both the passivity of the subject and its active agency, if ethical meaning is to exist in any communicable way. Transcendence needs to be met with content.

Certain philosophers, including Levinas, have indeed pointed to an ethical structure in language that differentiates between its transcendent and subjective attributes, thereby liberating it from total culpability in evading ethics. It should be noted that religious overtones are hard to miss in their depictions. These overtones help emphasise the appropriateness of allusion to divine revelation, when examining language for its paradoxical tension and ethical energy.

ETHICAL STRUCTURE IN LANGUAGE

Bruns writes: "We think of language as a system for framing representations, for thematizing the world, reducing the world to our propositions. But language remains excessive with respect to our uses of it . . . It does not, Heidegger says, 'exhaust itself in signifying'. . . Like the thing and the work of art, language remains outside the world: it

---

[69] A. Peperzak, *To the Other*, Indiana: Purdue UP. 1993, (as quoted by Rosenthal, 2003.)

withholds itself." [70] In other words, there is an unaccounted for in language that resists our grasp. This, I would say, is the 'beyond' or the 'concealed.' [71] Like revelation, it pulls us out of ourselves and toward the other.

The transcendental appeal of revelation noted by Heschel is understood in linguistic terms by Levinas, in that he calls the transcendental appeal a *saying*. "For Levinas, the other signifies the 'holiness of the holy,' the trace of the Infinite. . . The ethical Saying signifies, even before setting forth a said, a 'pure testimony' of infinite responsibility in which the subject opens itself to the Other in a "supreme passivity of exposure." [72] Our turn to language involves a prelinguistic responsibility that is referred to in the relational structure of language itself. Revelation reveals this.

This, Lee explains as a religiosity in Levinas's philosophy: "For Levinas, then, the ethical relation is always "out of place" in the world, *other* than the "ways of the world." . . . It is in this sense that Levinasian ethics takes on a religious sensibility or, more accurately, collapses the distinction between ethics and religion." [73]

KNOWLEDGE AND THE TRANSCENDENT IN LANGUAGE

"The epistemological sensibility of much of Western philosophy suggests, at least to Levinas, that the correlation between knowledge and being is one in which understanding *(Auffassen)* is always a gripping *(Fassen)*, an activity which *appropriates*

---

[70] M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe,* Vol. 5, *Holzwege* Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 1977, p.310, quoted by Bruns, "Blanchot/Levinas: Interruption (On the Conflict of Alterities), p.132.
[71] The theme of revealment and concealment is deeply rabbinical, and reverberates in linguistic and literary discourse. Heschel refers to this tradition in *God in Search of Man.*
[72] Levinas, *Otherwise* p.47. (quoted by Lee, "Neither Totality or Infinity: Suffering the Other," *The Journal of Religion* 1999) p.270.
[73] Lee, p.254.

and thereby *frees* the otherness of the Other."[74] In other words, knowledge has been seen

as a possession. This understanding finds language inadequate as an expression of any

ultimate knowledge of 'the good', inadequate as the way in which to oppose ontology. As

a system of signs, language from authoritarian to critical seems to offer no escape from

the limiting of ethical truth by way of ontology and power. Wandel claims that Foucault

was not able to overcome this linguistic pessimism, and offer "a formulation of an

alternate notion of power."[75]

Yet, if we return to Levinas, we can see an analysis of language that finds its

transcendent and quality, its relational and ethical structure. Levinas argues that "the gap

that safeguards the alterity of the other (as human or God), locates the ethical

anterior/exterior to every thesis and position, free from dependence on the Logos. This

'excess signifies as a Saying *(le Dire)* which opens the subject to the other before saying

what is said *(le Dit).*'[76] In other words, there is something in language that exists before

the power seeking and oppressive nature of the 'said'.

If Foucault does not confidently assert an alternate model to language as a system

of signs, he does at least, hint at a reconsideration of it that is similar to Levinas. What he

hints at is that beneath language there is "order in its primary state . . . a middle region

[that] can be posited as the most fundamental level of all: anterior to words, perceptions,

and gestures . . . Thus in every culture . . . there is the pure experience of order and its

---

[74] Ibid.
[75] Wandel, p.377.
[76] Ibid. p.253.

modes of being."[77] This pure experience is not objectivity imposed as authoritative truth, but an underlying notion about the objectivity, so to speak, of human subjectivity.[78]

This underlying notion involves mystery, a kind of silence. "Behind the visible façade of the system," Foucault writes, "one posits the rich uncertainty of disorder; and beneath the thin surface of discourse' and 'the study of discursive formations,' there is a 'largely silent development (devenir[79]) . . . a 'prediscursive' that belongs to an essential silence."[80]

In the relationship of silence, chaos and discourse, there is a structure that hints at universality in the human relationship with language. Regardless of culture or time, we all turn to language with those same steps. Gadamer claims that this universality implies an objective world of concepts of human experience, for if this were not so, translation would not be possible.[81]

But this universality does not manifest in a totality, and this is key, for totality is counter to ethics. Human experience, even if universal, can only be expressed in a particular language.[82] This constant of experience-before-language is, in fact, not constant in singularity, but is characterized by diversity ("every culture.")

In Levinas's philosophy, "vis-à-vis the world, language undergoes its customary reduction to propositional form. . . However, . . . the ethical relation entails a plurality of

---

[77] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* Trans. Anonymous. New York: Random House, 1973. (quoted in Wandel, p.377) Wandel adds: "Nevertheless it is crucial to recognize that Foucault does not profess to have discovered essences or absolutes, but that this 'order in its primary state' is subject to change." p.377.
[78] *cf.* Lonergan's "intersubjectivity" which he refers to as a "prior we," p.57.
[79] Compare with Levinas's the – 'il y a', before the 'I am' (see Levinas, "Dialgoue with Emmanuel Levinas," trans. Richard Kearney, in *Face to Face with Levinas,* ed. Richard A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY press, 1986).
[80] M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* p.76. (quoted in Wandel, p.378).
[81] This is discussed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method.*
[82] The theological allusiveness and significance here will be elaborated upon within.

languages."[83] "Language is not reducible to a system of signs doubling up beings and

relations. . . that is, Saying *(Dire)* - speaking a language – is irreducible to the Said *(le*

Dit)"[84]

That language can be talked about reveals something about its transcendent

capacity.[85] Says Bruns, "it is worth stressing that language here is not made of words. . .

language is a word for, 'the relationship of proximity,' or rather this relationship is 'the

original language, a language without words, propositions, pure communication."[86]

Blanchot would call this "the possibility of entering into a relationship independently of

every system of signs common to the interlocutors. . . it is the power to break through the

limits of culture, body, and race." [87]

RELIGIOUS OVERTONES

This we can compare to the Divine Logos. Bruns explains: "What is it to hear

language speaking? The sense of this question is obscured somewhat by English

translation, which evokes the spectre of language as a Supersubject or stand-in for the

Being of beings, whose God-like voice pursues us across some supersensible space."[88]

Indeed, it is difficult to avoid religious understandings of this phenomenon:

Bruns writes, "an experience with language has all the features of a prophetic

event in which something transcendental breaks in on us. . . In fact. . . Heidegger cites

the story of Pentecost and the tongues of future as an example. . .the point of the citation

---

[83] Bruns, p.142.
[84] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being,* p.35, (quoted by Bruns, p.142.) The parallel between this notion and the relationship between the divine and human word will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters of this work.
[85] Lonergan writes about the theoretical linguistic realm in his chapter on meaning, in *Method,* pp.70-73.
[86] Bruns, p.138.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid. p.134.

is that speaking does not originate with subjectivity but is first of all a mode of

responsibility."[89]

Language, like ethics, is an event.[90] It is, says Bruns, "an experience with

language [that] means an interruption of subjectivity in which we find ourselves face-to-

face with whatever is otherwise."[91] Heidegger characterizes discourse as a call. "The call

does not originate with the subject, rather the subject is exposed to the call. . . .The caller

is absolutely other. . . . Discourse here is not propositional but, let us say, invasive:

prophetic-like it breaks in from the outside."[92]

Purcell compares Levinas's phenomenology to Rahner's theology. According to

Purcell, Rahner points to the subject as the 'hearer of the word,' an "analysis of our

capacity for hearing God's revelation."[93] What we hear, truly, is through linguistic

accounts by many hearing subjects. Rahner "is keen to stress that human religiosity is a

part of human life which betokens a certain openness to what is other."[94]

For Heidegger it seems that language is the very manifestation of ethics:

> The transcendence of words means that words do not originate here, with me, are not mine or part
> of me; they are always outside of me, raining down on me. . . Words are the presence of
> exteriority, the infinite, the elsewhere, the otherwise or non-identical as such. So the otherness of
> the other person is only brought home to me in the word that breaks in on me. . . Language does
> not unite us, as if it were a bond or a whole that contained us both; rather it separates us because it
> is itself uncontainable within any totality. It is the interruption of every union.[95]

In his later writing, Heidegger understands language as "an experience [which is]

a reversal in which language is no longer an instrument under our control." This is not a

failure, but an event in which "the truth of language overwhelms and transforms us . . . as

---

[89] Ibid. The event of the Pentecost will be the focus of the third chapter.
[90] See Levinas, "Dialgoue." Gadamer too, calls language an event. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method.*
[91] Bruns, p.134.
[92] Ibid., p.134-137.
[93] K. Rahner, *Hearer of the Word,* New York: Continuum, 1994, p.2, quoted by Purcell, p.476.
[94] Purcell, p.476.
[95] Ibid. p.137.

a loss of subjectivity or, better, as an invasion of the subject that deprives it of its self-possession and self-identity."[96]

"The relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me. In other words, language is spoken where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting . . . It takes place in this transcendence. Discourse is thus the experience of something absolutely foreign." [97]

Heidegger talks of language as a listening: "Speaking is listening to the language which we speak . . . a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking" [98].

> An experience with language is an interruption; it is prophetic in its structure, except that nothing is revealed. It is rather that our relation with language . . . is no longer one of cognition and command. It is now a relation of proximity in which, although nothing is revealed, neither can be evaded. Heidegger speaks of the relation of poetry and thinking in terms of a movement into the proximity of language, where proximity means being face-to-face with others and with things. Think of language as the event in which this proximity occurs.[99]

The Saying is the 'space' in which the original call for responsibility lies. There is, says Levinas, an "originary relation, which he calls an "untotalizable diachrony,"[100] Notions of autonomous freedom are "anteceded by the *primordial call* of the other," [my emphasis]. . . Ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronomous responsibility, in contrast to autonomous freedom."[101] The primordial call, be it theological, is an awakening to the heteronomous nature of the other. In this heteronomy is the framework for human understanding, and from within this framework one gleans the responsibility toward the other.

---

[96] Ibid. p.133. (he references here Martin Heidegger, *Untwrwegs zur Sprache,* Pfullingen: Gunther Neske, 1959.)
[97] Levinas, *Totalite et Infini: Essaie sure l'exteriorite,* La Haye : M. Nijhoff, 1961., quoted by Bruns, 138.
[98] Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache,* p.254, quoted by Bruns, p.134
[99] Ibid.
[100] Levinas, "Dialgoue with Emmanuel Levinas," p.21, quoted by Lee, p.251.
[101] Ibid. p.27, quoted by Lee, p.252.

How this inspires ethics, is explained by Levinas: "The presence of the Other (*Autre*) is a presence that teaches us something; this is why the word, as a form of education, amounts to more than the experience of reality . . ."[102] In other words, language accounts for more than our subjectivity.

We are not just hearers of the word; we are also speakers of it. "We do not merely speak *the* language – we speak *by way* of it."[103] Through the heteronomy of language we communicate. "Levinas reconstructs an *ethical* subjectivity predicated on *a-priori* heteronomy in which the subject constitutes through its being-for-the-Other."[104] Language is identified as being for the other, and thus must be linked with responsibility. In other words, as we assemble ourselves into speech, we are ever-responsible to others.

"With entry of another person, the relations of signifying utterly change. A sign cannot be restricted to only one other person but intrinsically wanders and is directed toward other others."[105] The third (and fourth and fifth persons) change the ethical dynamic from the height of authority granted to the other to *a requirement for semantic agreement* so that disputes, obligations, and responsibilities can be abjudicated." (my emphasis). This, Levinas calls Justice.[106] Justice, according to Levinas, is what must be in *the said,* or in other words, "our thematization and conceptualization of *the said* must include justice.[107]

---

[102] Levinas, *Hors Sujet.* Cognac: Fata Morgana, 1987, p.220, quoted by Bruns, p.138.
[103] Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache,* p.254, quoted by Bruns, p.134.
[104] Lee, p.252.
[105] Gibbs, "Ethics After Levinas," quoting Levinas from *Otherwise Than Being*, p.136.
[106] Kepnes, p.109. *cf.* Gadamer, "Language is the medium in which substansive understanding and agreement between take place between two people." In *Truth and Method,* p.385.
[107] Nuyen, p.427. Nuyen understands evil as part of the *Saying,* and makes sense of it by understanding it as a call to each unique person to respond to it, thus coming to terms with God as the author of evil, and inspired to goodness by the *saying* of evil.

This is important, for the said, the words themselves, are still of great importance. This is crucial for ethical theological discourse. Foucault asserts, "the prediscursive is still discursive. . . . One remains within the dimension of discourse." Language is necessary and inevitable especially in the occurrence of other others.

Thus, there is both infinity and finitude in language, this dynamic simply needs to be illuminated and reconciled.

RECONCILING FINITUDE AND TRANSCENDENCE – REVELATION AND LANGUAGE

How then, is one to approach the discussion of truth and ethics, and how is one to promote them? This is certainly an objective of theology. What is a sound way of *discussing* revealed ethical knowledge? Is ethical religious assertion possible, or is it always guilty of binding and oppressing the truth? If we are bound by language, how do we use what we consider to be 'revealed ethics' in an ethically sound way? The complicity of language is a necessary point of analysis for genuinely ethical interfaith dialogue and education.

For ethical sources to become revitalized and usable, and for our interpretations of them to be authentic and heuristic, the understanding of our finitude with regards to ethical knowledge and language must be regarded in some light as positive. Woloski rightly claims, "ethics must propose specific content as well," and ". . . Each moral finitude must have positive responsibility for each other finitude."[108]

Implied is that the specific content of ethics is the call to responsibility for the right for existence and expression by the other, and that this is done by explicitly

---

[108] S. Woloski, "Moral Finitude and the Ethics of Language," *Common Knowledge* 9:3, Duke University Press, 2003, pp.406-423.

accepting transcendence. In other words, ethical content itself is not a particular rule or dogma, a particular delineation of a righteous group, but is instead the revelation of the relationship between finitude and transcendence. For the sake of ethical meaning, in this content, "there would be the commitment to basic conditions ensuring each one's access and agency to act, speak, negotiate, and participate in the society that safeguards and makes possible just this access and these norms. The model, then, is implicitly political as well as ethical."[109] "And also linguistic," she adds. "The rejection of metaphysical linguistic 'truth' does not entail the defeat of all notions of truth."[110] Language is necessary if ethics is to be safeguarded.

It is the belief of this author that both the Jewish and Christian paradigms of revelation have much to offer the question of whether any ultimate ethical meaning can be articulated in human language. More precisely, the ultimate ethical meaning proposed in this dissertation is a self-awareness of finitude in relation to the transcendent, which, I will show, is revealed in both paradigms, as it is revealed in language. Furthermore, I suggest that it is in both 'narratives' of revelation, that there is the suggested approach to human language that reconciles the concerns of its inadequacy.

This reconciliation has to do with what the manner and content of divine revelation, which is directed at human beings, symbolically says about the relationship of human beings to one another. Where finitude and transcendence are the dynamic in the human to divine relationship, so too is it the dynamic between human being to human being. This is revealed in and through the metaphoric capacity of language.

---

[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid. p.412.

The foundational theological dynamic[111] of divine versus human knowledge highlights an inherently metaphorical/ symbolic capacity in human language, and answers the ethical concern of this dissertation. It accounts for mystery and diversity, for the 'other.' With this mystery, a subject must approach the other on two counts, if she is to participate in ethical meaning. The 'other-ness' of other people, and the 'other-ness' of the divine. The unutterability of the otherness of the divine is mirrored in form in inter-subjective communication.

Revelation, both Jewish and Christian not only alludes to this by its very structure, it explicitly deals with language. Both form and content are "pregnant with meaning." [112] Heschel, for instance, emphasizes form over content, particularly to negate any ontological understanding of revealed knowledge: "The substance of . . . revelation, in Heschel's opinion, is infinite, bespeaking its expression in form alone, since it cannot be contained as substantive content."[113] And "the substance of what is uncovered . . . is less significant than that one be involved in the process of continually uncovering."[114]

Thus before we even consider what we say, we are called to consider why and how we say. These considerations form the dynamic relationality behind ethical truth. Safeguarding this dynamic kind of truth is the theological imperative and requires an investigation into how to preserve the transcendent quality of language to counter or balance its ontological nature, for language indeed its only medium for its communication. In other words, how *do* we use language ethically?

---

[111] or for the secular or agnostic, symbol
[112] Schorsch, p.304.
[113] Ibid. p.301.
[114] Ibid. p.304.

Preserving the dynamism of ethical truth requires great responsibility in language. It is my purpose here to show that there is not a loss of meaning, not in language and not in theological truth. Instead there is an approach to both that accounts for the subjectively finite as well as the transcendent. Theology, through the very notion of revelation and in the exploration of its manner of expression, calls for both openness and participation. This fact of revelation shows that there is something in language that reveals a limitation and a transcendent intention in its own self. In this self-awareness there is reverence for the other, the awakening to responsibility in light of the other.

Ethically and linguistically, a balance must occur between subjective knowledge and what lies beyond it, if ethics is to have any meaning. "Self-transcendence," writes Lonergan, "is the achievement of conscious intentionality,"[115] thus a model of ethical language must take into account both the other that we cannot know, as well as that which we do know, if ethical communication is to be possible at all.

In Shira Woloski's understanding, the embrace of not-knowing, what she terms 'moral finitude,' is not a loss of subjecthood. What takes us beyond this crisis is what Woloski calls a positive approach: "Disclaiming access to the absolute may be said to render impossible any moral position at all. Conversely, it might seem that the commitment to moral finitude may render impossible any sort of joint action . . . I would suggest that the notion of moral finitude be regarded as self-regulating."[116] The self-regulation she refers to is the new self-awareness of the subject, which understands its knowledge as ever incomplete, and as such, vigilantly checks its own horizons against the myriad of new voices that arise outside of itself. This is not unlike Bernard Lonergan's

---

[115] Lonergan, p.35.
[116] Woloski, p.410.

transcendental method, which understands knowledge as dynamic rather than static, and

after every moral judgment must renew itself with continued attentiveness to new

information.

Linguistically, then, we are in search of a model of language that is open to

renewal. In this way, the subject approaches ethical meaning with an awareness both of

her desire for ethics and her humility before the moral knowledge of the other. This

approach lends itself to truer ethical negotiation. Thus, according to Woloski, one sees

an "ethics of negotiation and consensus rather than one of immutable principles that

speak identically to all."[117] She explains:

> Morality has often been thought to be grounded in some access to an ultimate truth, an infinite
> experience, a sublime authority with which the individual identifies and that the individual is able
> to draw upon or claim. Instead I would like to suggest that a moral position may be one that
> disclaims any such identification. Instead of grounding a moral stance in access to the absolute,
> we might define it as a *positive acceptance* of one's own finitude, limitation, circumscription. [my
> emphasis] [118] What characterizes a moral position may not be identification with, or claims to
> speak from or for, any absolute authority or infinite understanding, but rather the denial of just
> such claims or possibility. It may be in our self-retraction – in our recognition of human fallibility
> and lack of total understanding – that morality resides[119]

This human fallibility is defined by what cannot be grasped. What we truly know

in ethics is that we cannot know. But, Woloski explains, "finitude is not a defect that

requires recovery or rescue: it is, rather, a proper and appropriate condition to be

acknowledged and embraced. . . . Transcendence . . is not a realm or state one can enter.

Instead, transcendence stands for what cannot be entered, what remains ever beyond

---

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid. p.406. "positive acceptance" is here emphasised because it is through theology that I believe this
positive acceptance can be found. This shall be expanded on in the subsequent chapters.
[119] Ibid.

one's own finitude."[120]   Transcendence cannot be controlled by a subject. It is precisely

defined by that which is out of its grasp.

It is in this acknowledgment of the nature of transcendence that the argument for

moral finitude takes on a religious understanding. Woloski sees this connection: "The

idea of moral finitude may perhaps be extended toward a corollary notion of religious

finitude. . . unconditional claims to authority transgress what is defining in religious

commitment: the awe before a transcendence that one can never command or possess and

in terms of which the self emerges as a finite person unable to – indeed forbidden from –

asserting command and possession."[121]

This is certainly emphasized in the Jewish account of God's revelation at Mount

Sinai: "The content of the Decalogue is utterly plain. . . Yet the manner in which these

words were proclaimed is shrouded in mystery . . . These words the lord spoke . . . out of

the midst. . . of cloud. . . . Whatever specific fact it may denote, it unequivocally conveys

to the mind the fundamental truth that God was concealed even when He revealed and

even while his voice became manifest, His essence remained hidden."[122]

In Woloski's words, "the reason to believe in God is to remember that you are not

yourself God, that you cannot claim to see or know as He does, and above all that you

cannot venture to enact for God or in His name what you imagine He wills or intends,

especially if doing so would impose on others."[123] It is in being responsible for the other,

not in determinately seeking God that one manages to find Him. This is in accordance to

Levinas's thinking. As he puts it, "the word of the prophet (Isaiah 65:1) . . expresses this

---

[120] Ibid. p.409.
[121] Ibid. 408.
[122] Heschel, p.192.
[123] Woloski, p.409. *cf.* Lonergan, p.55.

admirably. 'I am sought of them that asked not for me, I am found of he that sought me not'"[124]

Lonergan expresses the same sentiment: "[W]e note that a religion that promotes self-transcendence to the point, not merely of justice, but of self-sacrificing love, will have a redemptive role in human society inasmuch as such love can undo the mischief of decline and restore the cumulative process of progress."[125] Therefore even and especially in a religious context, this finitude is not to be understood negatively. Heschel proposes that, "the clear unambiguous will of God is not lower but higher than the mystery. There is meaning beyond the mystery. That is our reason for ultimate rejoicing."[126]

A THEOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC RECOVERY

Levinas's ethical metaphysics, argues Kosky, 'offers a way to think and speak about religion within the contemporary horizon of thought.'"[127] Kosky writes:

> Levinas's phenomenology opens the possibility of a religiosity that lives on in a postmodern or postmetaphysical age . . . [A] possible religiosity opens at the end of metaphysics insofar as the phenomenology of subjectivity describes its genesis in responsibility. There is no religion without responsibility . . . and Levinas's phenomenology, by uncovering the responsibility that undoes modern metaphysical thought, thereby saves religiosity for the postmetaphysical or postmodern age.[128]

And further:

> Levinas's analysis of responsibility can be seen as a discourse on religion that, at least in its intentions, holds forth without recourse to the authority of any faith or religious tradition. . . [T]he

---

[124] Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* trans. Bettina Bergo. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p.51, quoted by Nuyen, p.441.
[125] Lonergan, p.55.
[126] Heschel, p.194.
[127] Purcell, p.474.
[128] Kosky, p.149, (quoted by Purcell, p.474.)

religiosity met in Levinas's phenomenology of responsibility is not an actual religion but the possibility of nonnoematic meaning of religion.[129]

Indeed in his later writing, Levinas attempts to 'recover' theological themes. He does this by insisting that divine revelation is made manifest in the encounter with other people.[130] For this reason, Levinas's primary image for the 'other' is the human face. He writes: "That glimpse of holiness is revealed in the other person, through whom alone one can gain access to God. In other words, ethics is 'first theology.' [131]

Purcell suggests that the study of Levinas can have positive influence on theology, "by offering the possibility of an ethical redemption of the ontological which is so prevalent in theological thinking."[132] He quotes Wright:

> Neither *Totality and Infinity* nor *Otherwise Than Being* should be interpreted as theological texts. On the contrary, these texts are explicitly critical of the theology of 'positive religions,' and frequently emphasize that the Infinite is refractory to the thematizing discourse in theology. The apparently theological claims in *Totality and Infinity* can be understood phenomenologically as belonging to the description of the relationship between the self and a transcendent other.[133]

Purcell insists that Levinas's ethics is "first theology.'[134] Levinas's philosophy, then, is not only the possibility of an ethics-based theology, but "a new and iterative way of asking theological questions. . . which involves a visiting and revisiting of what has already been said in order to unsay it and to say it again."[135] This revisiting can be compared to Lonergan's transcendental methodology. The prime objective is not the

---

[129] Kosky, p.xxi, (quoted by Purcell, p.,475.)

[130] In the face of the Other it is 'written', "Thou shalt not kill," See Levinas, "Dialogue," p.89.

[131] Purcell, p.471.

[132] M. Purcell, *Mystery and Method,* Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1998, p.xv, quoted by Purcell, p.469.

[133] Tamra Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy,* Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999, p.71. (quoted by Purcell, p.472.)

[134] Purcell, "Notes," p.472.

[135] Ibid. p.469. Note the similarity to Lonergan's transcendental method, the emphasis on question and intending which he advocates for the study of theology.

grasping of divine knowledge, but the intention of value and the responsibility toward the other.

Indeed, these questions we may ask in reference to an ungraspable divine knowledge, but our only method and recourse is human dialogue. Thus we must ask what divine revelation says about such dialogue, and we must ask what such dialogue says about divinity.

Jeffrey writes that "for the typical Christian "theorist" from St. John the Divine and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews to T.S. Eliot, its mediation between presence and absence[136], time and eternity, makes the word aptly suggestive of the relationship of God to the world, Being to being."[137] He continues, "what centers Christian discourse is . . . a profoundly mediated theory of the "meaning of persons," to which language is subordinate."[138] Such a reverent understanding respects the primacy of the personal other over the totalizing force of ontology.

The parameters of language have helped us see that propositional language (language as a system of signs) falls short of the transcendental objective on two counts. The first is that if words refer only to already existing concepts, this jeopardizes the element of mystery that the unknown (God, in the case of theology) is supposed to possess. If the concern is with the articulation of evolving ethical meaning, which cannot be ontological, then language from this perspective fails. The other failure is that propositional language fixes a meaning without conceiving alternate meanings that other people, or the future, may hold. It reveals only its own cultural matrix, which is only identifiable with respect to that culture's past. In other words, propositional language is

---

[136] *cf* subjective knowledge and the radical other
[137] Jeffrey, p.7.
[138] Ibid. p.9.

reductive of the true dynamic of ethical meaning because it does not account for the relationality of the speaking subject to the future and to other subjects with different cultural matrixes, that from the limited horizon of the subject, only the future can reveal. Propositional language therefore, is reductive of ethics.

BEYOND PROPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE – FROM SIGN TO SYMBOL

Theologically, we see this concern in the work of Augustine. For him, "a theory of signs is . . . ultimately based on considerations of intention and the ordering of value." That is, he does not believe it is possible to elaborate a theory of signs, without first taking into account the sphere of the ethical (hence, a positive justification). Love for this system of signs should be love for the thing beyond "the channel into which the whole current of love flows."[139]

When love doesn't flow beyond the words, when the mind doesn't rise to the infinite, the result is idolotrous, a worship of the text instead of the God who speaks through it. This is a concern in both Judaism and Christianity. Jeffery continues: "A self-centered or self-serving (self-referential) use of signs cannot maintain an ordered relationship of means to end. It is bound rather to pervert and distort, and in so doing hinder the development of love."[140]

Augustine differentiates between two types of sign relationships, one that sees just the sign and the signified, and one, more ethical, that sees beyond. Other scholars have seen this distinction as that between sign and symbol. In symbol's self-reference is the explicit invitation to see the mysterious beyond. Symbolic structure and its invitation

---

[139] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrone,* 1.22.21, quoted by Jeffrey, p.83.
[140] Jeffrey, p.83. *cf* Gadamer *Truth and Method,* p.413.

account for and allude to the unknown. "A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence."[141] In other words, symbol points to what lies beyond it, and therefore accounts for the unknown that the other signifies. "A symbol opens up levels of reality which otherwise are closed to us."[142] Unlike the ontological in prepositional language, a symbol suggests more than one can articulate. It hints at otherness. "Symbol introduces us into realms of awareness not normally accessible to discursive thought.[143] Therefore, only symbols are adequate in conveying the unknowable.

The symbolic offers relief from the paradigm of language as a system of signs, accounting for mystery and transcendence, or in religious terms, love. "The word of God, as described by dialectical theologians, has a structure similar to that which we have attributed to symbol. As the self-expression of the revealing God who addresses his creature by means of it, the word works mysteriously on human consciousness so as to suggest more than it can describe or define. It points beyond itself to the mystery which makes it present."[144]

If love is the goal of ethics, the use of language must have the 'other' in its purpose. For ethical discourse to be ethical in achievement, it cannot claim possession of meaning. Symbols challenge such ontological possession by hinting at an original 'maker' of the symbol, and by highlighting the mysteriousness this conveys. In Louis Dupre's analysis of symbols, he highlights a structural self-awareness. He writes, "A sign points to a signified, whereas a symbol points outward and inward simultaneously. . . A sign does not explain itself, whereas as a symbol shows the signified in its own

---

[141] W.B. Yeats, "William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy," *Collected Works* vol. 6, Stratford on Avon: Shakespeare Head press, 1908, p.138, (quoted by Dulles, p.131.)
[142] P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, New York: Harper, 1957, p.42, quoted by Dulles, p.137.
[143] Dupre, p.4
[144] Dulles, p.151.

structure."[145] Underlining this capacity, Dulles refers to Polyani, who also distinguishes symbols from signs. Signs are "mere indicators that point to something "focally known" whereas symbols point to themselves as well."[146] Symbols imply self-awareness.

If in the very concept of revelation lies an optimistic stance regarding human language, I suggest it is in the way that revelation models symbolic communication. It is the purpose of this dissertation to illuminate the parallel created by the event (or symbol) of God's communication to humankind to that of symbolic language and ethics. Because it is believed by Judeo-Christian communities that this communication was of both ethical intent and content, it serves the perfect paradigm to discover how ethical human communication should be theologically inspired, if heurism is the goal.

Divine revelation seems to hold a metaphoric key, so to speak, that points to relationality. What is revealed is the relationship of finitude and transcendence, of origin outside of subjectivity that is irreducible to subjective knowledge, a challenge to ontology. Gadamer writes that the "human word is only as a counterpart to the theological problem of the Word . . . but the important thing for us is precisely that the mystery of this unity is reflected in the phenomenon of language."[147]

It is my intention here to show that both Jewish and Christian understandings of the revelation of Divine Word involve mystery as well as concrete human experience, and this is what, in essence, characterizes symbols. Both revelation into a written Torah, and revelation into flesh, (ie. Jesus), are symbols *par excellence*, of the ethical dynamic. This, as we shall see, is the necessary orientation if one is to relate to and responsibly use

---

[145] Dupre, pp.1-2.

[146] M. Polyani and H. Prosch. *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) pp. 69-75. (quoted by Dulles, p.132.)

[147] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.419.

the expansive ethical tradition available in the Judeo-Christian literary canon and beyond, as hermeneutics would propose we do. It is my intention here to show that symbol itself is revealing of the ethical structure, but whether religiosity begets this understanding, or symbolic awareness begets religiosity, I do not claim to determine.

The symbolic realm is indeed perhaps the only understanding of language that is guarded against the limitation of particular truths, and therefore the most ethical manner in which to convey the ethical. I do not mean here that only intentionally symbolic language, such as poetry, is ethical. But that the manner in which the inherently symbolic in language functions (metaphoric capacity) can shed light on the ethical relationship. This in turn can provide us with an ethical methodology for how to approach a linguistic tradition, keeping it from freezing into oppressively ontological 'truths.' The biblical tradition encourages this:

"Theory of language in the biblical tradition transvalues above all else the personal . . . What poetic language can do, and ought to do, . . . is metaphorically to "incarnate," give verbal flesh to personal realities. . . In both ancient and modern Christian poets what remains at the center is not the word but the person's words are but a *means* of centering, philology but a love of words transcended by a higher love."[148]

This higher love is the call of ethics and responsibility. Where propositional language clouds the very intention of it, symbolic language does not. Its meaning embraces the mystery of what is totally other, and yet is drawn from the very core of the subject's being. It is from an originary point of faith in revelation, I believe, that a communal, foundational understanding of ethics is based, and from which an approach to

---

[148] Jeffrey, p.17.

language that protects the transcendent is developed.[149] With this basis properly

understood, I suggest, the problem of a linguistic articulation of ethical meaning is at

least partially resolved.

---

[149] In several passages *People of the Book,* Jeffrey alludes to the idea that the currents of literary criticism stem from theological debates about the Word. The Word, Scripture, and poetry will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

CHAPTER 3: REVELATION AND SYMBOL

REVELATION AND RELATIONALITY

Revelation is in a sense the revelation of relationality. Revelation encourages and

challenges us to acknowledge what lies beyond the ontological in knowledge and in

language. As a method, it specifically encourages us to embrace the symbolic as an

ethical orientation. Symbol celebrates, so to speak, the polyvalent nature of its

interpretations, which respects the otherness of other subjects who face the same symbol.

Thus symbols highlight both relationalities, between subject and divine, and between

subject and other subjects.

The only way in which Jewish and Christian revelation can be *discussed* in terms

of human experience, is if "the Christian [or Jewish] claim is not intended to be limited to

specifically Christian [or Jewish] experience, interpretation, and language."[150] This can

only occur if it has a symbolic self-understanding. Such an understanding encourages

the awareness of other symbol structures. With a symbolic self understanding, what

constitutes revelation is not "the imagery but the structural relationships represented as

obtaining between the revealer, the recipient, and the means of revelation."[151] This bears

a truth of its own that is pertinent to ethics.

SYMBOL AND TRUTH

Though the meaning of symbol cannot be precisely nailed down in terms of

categorical thought and language, the symbol is not without value for the serious quest

---

[150] Cook, p.388.
[151] Dulles, p.33, (quoted by Cook, p.389.)

for truth.[152] This has certainly been debated, though I suggest as a result of a false, or at least overly strict dichotomy between truth and fiction, and a relegation of symbol into the latter. "There are empirically-minded instrumentalists," writes Dulles, "who contend that the symbolic language of religion is nothing but a useful fiction intended to evoke distinctive ethical attitudes. The serious pursuit of truth, on either of these theories, would demand an abandonment of symbolic language in favor of direct speech concerning the realities to which the symbols refer."[153]

I would argue that where direct speech needs to be deferred to is perhaps not in the serious pursuit of truth but in the immediate pursuit of ethical action. But beyond the directives needed in an immediate situation, I intend to show that symbolic self-awareness protects the transcendental methodology and the intention of justice that is behind the pursuit of ethical truth. After each action, as transcendental method would intend, one needs to continue to ask questions.

It is ironic and unfortunate that the evocation of distinctive ethical attitudes should be deemed a failing in any sense. It is the belief of this author that this is the theological imperative above all else. If truth is to be equated with heurism in any way, then symbolic language is a perfectly legitimate tool for the communication of it. The distinctive mark of the symbol is not the absence of meaning but the surplus of meaning.[154] Therefore, to reject symbol as fiction as opposed to truth misses the point. It is in the surplus of meaning that the 'other' of dynamic truth lies.

For the criticism of symbol as reductive to make sense, one must understand truth as static and fixed. This, we have seen, compromises ethics. Ethical evocation is the

---

[152] See Dulles, 131-134.
[153] Ibid. p.141.
[154] Dulles, p.142.

prime objective, not a secondary byproduct, and the *ultimate* truth of revelation highlighted in this dissertation is the very dynamic of relationality that allows for ethical evocation to occur. Thus, a paradigm shift that regards truth as an open-ended entity needs to be supported, with heurism as both the focal point of interest philosophically, and the goal socially. If postmodernism has obliterated a clear dichotomy between symbolic reality and propositional truth, and if globalization and social awareness have made it clear to anyone who is in the least attentive, that one authoritative voice of truth can only be held onto through totalitarian and authoritarian methods, what is left is symbolic reality as mediator. This is not to be lamented; this is to be celebrated.

Though both symbols and their interpretations will vary, what does lie constant is the structure of symbol – this structure itself is revelatory and heuristic. It is within the tenets of theological tradition that I find support for these claims. In the theological context, despite criticisms of reductiveness, symbolic understandings of revelation have been explored in depth for their ability to answer to the question of truth as dynamic and transcendent. It is in the dynamic of revealment and concealment, found in symbol and highlighted in revelation, that we are guarded against a claim of ultimate knowledge.

Symbol and revelation both invite others to participate in meaning, striking a balance between finitude and transcendence. Regardless of the content, by their challenge to fixed meaning, symbol and revelation orient us toward a search for a 'proper' interpretation.

When interpretation of symbol is met with a newfound relational self-awareness, ethical intention is heightened, the sense of responsibility of interpretation is elevated by the understanding that the contribution of each subject to a collective and evolving

communal meaning is to be met by other contributions. As Lonergan writes, "objectivity is . . . the consequence of authentic subjectivity."[155] A symbolic awareness sharpens this sensibility. It accounts for the revealed subjectivity of each contribution, and the concealed subjectivities of yet-to-be revealed. The mysterious in both symbol and revelation, by our ethical measure, is this radically other that cannot be integrated into ontological consciousness.

Our efforts to both understand ethics and articulate it, come from the desire for ethics, and can only manifest their worth in our responsiveness to others. It is in the relationship between consciousness rooted in the self and this 'ought to' that is directed toward the other, that we come to the ethical.

Authentic self-hood is that which juggles both. "The sincere pursuit of truth – that actuality presumed to be universal, accessible, and outside the self – is the activity proper to a virtuous mind. That does not mean that integrity is not itself a virtue, and certainly not that it has not centrally to do with the self. What it does mean is that the route to authentic selfhood, however counterintuitive it might seem to a modernist perspective, is the way of self-transcendence."[156] Language suggests that this is a common experience, expressed diversely.

SYMBOL AND THE DIVINE WORD AS PRE-LINGUISTIC

Gadamer explains that "despite the multiplicity of ways of speech, we are trying to keep in mind the indissoluble unity of thought and language as we encounter it in the

---

[155] Lonergan, p.265.
[156] Jeffrey, p.173.

hermeneutical phenomenon, namely as the unity of understanding and interpretation."[157]

This unity in the phenomenon of linguistic relationality.

"Symbolic experience that comes to metaphorical expression is the primordial

way of being human. . . . We live within symbol as the prelinguistic bonding of ourselves

to the cosmos."[158] Symbol, like the Word event, holds in unity meaning that is

preverbal, before the particulars of a given tongue are concretized linguistically, as well

as specific verbal incarnations. "God's self-communication," writes Cook, "is always

mediated through language, the Word, for human beings, because of their embodied

nature and historical rootedness, are symbol-making animals."[159] Unlike prepositional

language, the need for mediation is, in symbol, explicit. Thus there is a link between

symbol and the divine word in its necessitation of ethical participation in meaning.

THE SYMBOLIC MODEL – AN ETHICAL MANNER OF COMMUNICATION

In order for symbols to evoke ethics, they must maintain the respect to diversity

that their structure intended. Symbol does just this - encourages, rather than oppresses

diversity. "The plasticity of symbol gives it a power to speak to people of different

sociocultural situations and to assure that relevance is not lost." Dulles explains. "Since

there can be a measure of equivalence or complementarity among diverse symbol

systems, the symbolic mode of communication is favorable to interfaith dialogue."[160]

The symbolic model in theology postulates a preference over the symbolic realm

and is lauded by Dulles in his book *Models of Revelation*. According to Dulles, not only

---

[157] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.404.
[158] McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language,* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, pp. 119-22, commenting on the insights of Paul Ricoeur, (quoted by Cook, p.392.)
[159] Cook, p.392.
[160]Dulles, p.153.

is symbol more philosophically appropriate a medium to discuss divinely revealed ethics, it lends itself to a more practically ethical theological discourse between differing thinkers. That is to say that the symbolic model is preferable in articulating what is divinely revealed, as well as a preferable mode for inter-subjective understanding.

I add to Dulles's analysis of symbolic theological discourse by showing what it reveals about the nature of human dialogue, grounding his claim for symbolic mediation both ethically and theologically. By uncovering that revelation by its structure is a symbol of symbol par excellence, and second, by highlighting that this structure is a match for Levinas's and Lonergan's transcendental demand of ethics, I intend to show how language itself is redeemed through symbolic understanding, and how one should therefore approach linguistic sources.

The symbol functions ethically in several ways that parallels our relationship to divinely revealed ethical content and reveal the ethical demand inherent in language. Symbol, like language, grounds the perceiver of symbol in its subjectivity, while it intends and reveals transcendence. The symbol, like language, involves singularity and multiplicity, temporality and infinity, the known and the unknown. In all of these manners, symbols, like language, reveal relationality.

An approach to language that identifies symbolic structure relieves the sense of linguistic inadequacy vis-à-vis ethics. "Language is polysemous simply as the human imagination is various at the practical level – yet polysemeity functions in relation to an intermediate *totum integrum*."[161] Jeffrey refers to Augustine, who claims that "Meaning

---

[161] Jeffrey, p.10.

is dependent upon truth, and perception of truth is at once enhanced by the diversity of individual[s] . . . and yet entirely limited by the *consensus gentium.*[162]

There is relationality between an individual understanding and a collective (unified) one. If this consensus and unity is understood in terms of community (as Jeffrey sees it), I suggest that it must also understand itself as temporally limited. In other words, the *totum integrum* cannot see itself as complete, as its true unity, certainly in religious terms, is only achievable eschatologically. The *Totum integrum* must see itself as a thing in flux if it is to avoid the dangers of group ego.

Thus, linguistically agreed upon understandings, even if achieved through authentic subjectivity and compiled through diversity and dialectic, are still finite in relation to those who have been excluded from participating in meaning, as they are finite in relation to future understandings.

LANGUAGE AS MEDIATING BETWEEN FINITUDE AND TRANSCENCDENCE

The intention of communication reveals an ethical relationship even before the infusion of particular content.[163] But particular content is still necessary for meaning to occur. What must remain clear is that common verbal content does not eradicate otherness.[164] If group egoism can be avoided with a symbolic self-understanding the symbolic capacity of language must be investigated.

---

[162] Augutine *On Christian Doctrine* 3.27.38, (quoted by Jeffrey, p.10.)

[163] Where Levinas is criticized for lacking concern for the particular, for concrete reality, he responsds, :"I am neither a preacher nor the son of a preacher, and it is not my purpose to moralize or to improve the conduct of our generation." See Levinas, "Dialogue" p.32, (quoted by Lee, p.254).

[164] *cf.* Gadamer: "It belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says." In, *Truth and Method,* p.387.

Between a first set of terms such as knowledge, essence, and identity, (modernism) and a second set of *terms* such as unknowability, rupture and difference, Gibbs suggests "a third set of terms, a mediating set of terms. The mediating third is not meant as some kind of Hegelian synthesis into yet another comprehensive totality; but the third is characterized by the act of mediating itself . . . into dialogue. . And the vehicle of this mediation is the very tool of mediation and that is language."[165] The act of mediation through language is an act of responsibility for the other.

Like Woloski, "Gibb's turn to language is . . . a way of understanding those responsibilities as intricately caught up in and communicated through the web of human signifcations. Therefore, Gibbs begins with Levinas on speech and language in *Totality and Infinity*: "The relation of being spoken to, of attending to the other comes through words, but also shows me a speaker. And while the words may be familiar to me . . . the other speaker retains their fundamental foreignness."[166]

"Insofar as my commerce . . . is conducted in language, I already realize that my fellow human beings possess an alterity that cannot be absorbed into the totality of my being. I realize that the meanings of my utterances depend not just on me but also on my interlocutors."[167] In Levinas's words, "the relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the revelation of the other to me."[168]

This understanding of the relationship of language, which holds religious overtones, is parallel in structure and function to symbol. Discourse involves a universal if not eternal state of being in an ordered system of relations. It involves, too, the

---

[165] Kepnes., p.106.
[166] Ibid. pp.106-107.
[167] Nuyen, p.437.
[168] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 1961, Translated by Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburght, Pa." Duqense University Press, p.73, (quoted by Nuyen, p.437).

disorder and mystery of the presystematic. But, fundamentally, there are the words themselves in their specific time and place.

Gadamer writes: "The external word – is tied to a particular tongue (lingua).[169] The fact that the verbum is spoken differently in different languages, however, means only that it cannot reveal itself through the human tongue in its true being."[170] In other words, the particularity of different human languages proves the inadequacy of each to reveal ultimate truth. But the fact that this particularity is relational to the infinite is a positive one. "It is the marvel of the voice [of God]," writes Heschel, "to speak to man according to his capacity. It is the marvel of the voice to split up into seventy voices, into seventy languages, so that all the nations could understand."[171]

Gadamer explains that "the multiplicity in which the human mind unfolds itself is not a mere fall from true unity and not a loss of its home. Rather, there has to be a positive justification for the finitude of the human mind, however much this finitude remains related to the infinite unity of absolute being."[172] The "essential inexactness" found in the human variety of human words, "can be overcome only if the mind rises to the infinite."[173] Thus language must be understood as containing both the particular and alluding to the infinite. In this tension is the ethical energy that is found in symbols.

ETHICAL ENERGY AND THE ROLE OF SUBJECTIVITY

Other than the fact that symbols account for the unaccountable, and unfold in a dynamic manner much like the way in which Levinasian ethics of the other does, and much in the way Lonergan's dynamic structure of knowledge does too, the symbol is

---

[169] Augutine, *De Trinitate* XV 10-15, (cited by Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.420).
[170] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.420.
[171] Heschel, p.261.
[172] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.433.
[173] Ibid. p.435.

further lauded for its capacity to evoke ethical action. It does so by revealing our socio-

historical context and its limitation with regard to the infinite other. Both are necessary,

for ethical action demands subjective involvement in determining meaning, but also

appeals to what is most eternally human in the subject in order to do this:

> Symbolic representation includes totally irrational elements which refuse to obey the laws of
> logical thinking . . . since this resolution is of primary importance in the actualization of the self,
> the symbol wields an enormous power in the 'psychic development of the self. . . the symbol
> indicates for consciousness *what ought to become.*[174] [my emphasis]

"Symbolism has a powerful influence on commitments and behaviour . . . It stirs

the imagination, releases hidden energies in the soul, gives strength and stability to the

personality and arouses the will to consistent and committed action."[175] I emphasise here

that it is not simply a matter of inspiring content, but is content in the context of relational

structure. There is what I would call ethical energy in the symbolic capacity that exists in

language that shapes the notion of the 'ought to.'

The symbol reveals a structure parallel to that of Levinasian ethics, which

emphasizes a disruption of the subject's horizon. A subject vis-à-vis a symbol, is altered.

This does not, however, leave the subject thoroughly passive. There is passivity in the

sense that one first perceives a symbol, as one first hears language, and must contend

with it before assembling a sense of meaning. This passivity, however, must be followed

by a gathering of the subject's selfhood into action or speech. For this agency to be

ethical, it must acknowledges the finitude of its knowledge and of the other's radical

alterity, the other being both the symbol itself, and its full potential meaning as to be

---

[174] Dupre p.9, referring to the work of Carl Jung.
[175] Dulles, pp.136-137.

revealed by others. If such agency were not possible, ethical action would never arise from this disruption.

Indeed, symbols and revelation demand our involvement. "To enter the world of meaning opened up by the symbol we must give ourselves; we must not be detached observers but engaged participants."[176] Symbols impose "demands on the subject to pursue [their] meaning as a clue to the nature of reality."[177]

But how does this ethical meaning actually come through in dialogue? How do subjects enter into conversation when there is such stark realisation of the other? The same loss of meaning that is feared in the move away from ontology is feared if the symbol is rendered meaningless by its over-determination.

Dulles writes, "The word as analyzed by many dialectic theologians can leave God completely uninvolved in human history and experience, while faith as interpreted by some . . . can seem to subordinate the divine initiative in revelation to the human experience of expansion of consciousness."[178] The notion of the intender of symbol, like the notion of divine initiative, is another clue that we are not dealing with ontological knowledge. But it is also a clue that our participation in meaning is necessary.

God's initiative is alluded to frequently in Heschel's writing. For instance, "Revelation means that the thick of silence which fills the endless distance between God and the human mind was pierced, and man was told that God is concerned with the

---

[176] Ibid. p.133.
[177] Ibid. p.153.
[178] Cook, p.398. See also John H. Wright, "Divine Knowledge and Human Freedom The God Who Dialogues," *TS* 38, 1977, pp.45-477.

affairs of man; that not only does man need God, God is also in need of man. . . the word of God entered the world of man."[179]

PARTICIPATION IN ETHICAL MEANING

Revelation according to Heschel was an event to God and an event for man.[180] In order for this revelation to have meaning for man, it has to enter into the realms of man, namely, language and history. The interplay between 'other-worldy' knowledge, language and history is highlighted both by Heshcel regarding revelation, and in our symbolic understanding.

Heschel writes that in the fact of revelation, "truth is not timeless and detached from the world but a way of living and involved in all acts of God and man. The word of God is not an object of contemplation. The word of God must become history. Thus, the word of God entered the world of man; not a . . . concession of the mind, but a perpetual event, a demand of God . . ."[181]

With this in mind, history is no longer an enemy of ethics, but a partner. The historicity of moments, or at least the articulation thereof, does not just trap and bind segments of truth within a context that is necessarily deemed limited in scope by future critics. A more metaphorical understanding of these historical events can allow for a dynamic, rather than static self-understanding. It is this, I argue, that is the primary imperative that revealed ethics pronounces.

Thus, identity and history need not be shackles if they acquire a symbolic self-awareness. With symbolic self-awareness, identity and history take on the responsibility

---

[179] Heschel, p.196.
[180] Ibid. p.194.
[181] Heschel, p.196.

of being rendered useful for ethical betterment. Acquiring symbolic self-awareness is, in essence, an awakening to creativity. Theologically, this is the divine gift to human kind. Symbols, like revelation, invite participation of the subject in meaning. History and identity are what each subject has to offer to the creative process. Symbolic awareness spans across these offerings. In other words, it highlights the creativity of other subjects, and is therefore the spirit of transcendence.

Ethical creativity binds subjective contribution with the responsibility imposed by the other. Writes Heschel, "the prophet's personality is . . . a unity of inspiration and experience, invasion and response. For every object outside him there is a feeling inside him, for every glimpse of truth he is granted, there is a comprehension he must achieve."[182] This is to say that, like symbol, revelation is not created by us alone, yet it demands our active comprehension.

CONCRETE EXPERIENCE

It is in the particular event of history that any meaning can take shape. Cook agrees: "True universality always appears in intense particularity."[183] The eternal must come into contact with the present moment of human history. History mediates the mystery of the divine. This mystery is an important feature of ethics, for it is mystery that "ultimately lies in God's intention and power, but mediately in human history and experience."[184]

---

[182] Ibid. p. 259.
[183] D. Tracy, "The Particularity and Universality of Christian Universality," in E. +Sccillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel, eds., *Revelation and Experience* (Concillium 113; New York: Seabury, 1979) pp.106-116. (quoted by Cook, p.410.)
[184] See Raymond E. Brown *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968. (cited in Cook, p.391.)

That means that though on the one hand, knowledge of the Good is mysterious and unattainable, its manifestation is always concrete. It is for this reason, I believe, that Levinas insists over and over on the primacy of the face. The face, I believe, is the metaphor for the particular event of a particular ethical challenge. A subject facing a symbol has a similar challenge.

Dupre describes this process:

> The mind must slowly and painfully raise itself out of the ever-flowing stream of sensations. The flux must be halted and certain data must be given a representational function. Before the mind synthesizes impressions into units there is only an inexhaustible totality. It is not a passive association process, but an active grasp. Kant refers to this as the "synthesis of imagination."[185]

Religiously, one can see a parallel. Indeed, God works "from within the creative process (which should be understood as a unitive, dialogic process of divine initiative and human response). But his model cannot stand without giving priority to the divine initiative."[186] The latter part of this statement is crucial because it is the unknowable other of God invading upon us that initiates the process, much like the face in Levinas's analysis.

"A theory of revelation . . must hold in tensive unity absolute transcendence, the gift character of revelation, and complete immanence, the gift as always mediated through human experience and human language."[187] Furthermore, prophetic words are never detached from the concrete, historic situation. Theirs is not a timeless, abstract message; it always refers to an actual situation. The general is given in the particular, and the verification of the abstract is in the concrete."[188]

---

[185] Dupre, p.4.
[186] Cook, p.399.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Heschel, p.204.

Cook continues: "There is no substitute for one's own experience (immediate in the sense of personal appropriation), yet experience is transmitted (mediate in the sense of tradition). The complexity of human experience demands that we keep in tensive unity both concentrated event (concrete, intensive), and unfolding process (universal, extensive)."[189]

Heschel writes:

> Revelation is an event that does not happen all the time but at a particular time, at a unique moment in time. . . The creative man is he who succeeds in capturing the exceptional and instantaneous before it becomes stagnant in his mind. In the language of creative thinking, whatever is alive is unique. And true insight is a moment of perceiving a situation before it freezes into similarity with something else.[190]

That is to say, the emphasis on the concrete event of ethics needs to be permanently engaged in relation to the processional nature of knowledge. Such process transcends the particular moment by invoking both past and future.

TEMPORAL RELATIONALITY

Symbols, like revelation, are an invitation to reinvent or redefine one's subjectivity in response to the given moment, but this is not done without a foundation. "Sacred history," Heschel explains, "may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line of past and present, as an attempt to see the past in the present tense."[191] Without this ability, we cannot put sacred history into contemporary ethical action.

Temporality and sociality here play the role of imbuing symbols with historical meaning. In both the history of symbol making and the history of their interpretations,

---

[189] Cook, pp. 393-394.
[190] Heschel, p.202.
[191] Heschel, p.211.

there lies a fundamental dependence on the existence of a contemporary horizon. This is true of language. Given that these horizons shift, the longevity and universality of certain symbols, like the longevity and universality of a vast array of linguistic concepts, says something in itself about truth.

Heschel writes, "It is, indeed, one of the peculiar features of human existence that the past does not altogether vanish, that some events of hoary antiquity may hold us in the spell to this very day. Events which are dead, things which are gone can neither be sensed nor told. There is a liberation from what is definitely past. On the other hand, there are events which never become past."[192]

"The present "moment," Cook writes, "if isolated from the ongoing movement of experience for the sake of analyses, is an abstraction from the "inherently durational" character of human experience.... [T]here is a continuing dialectic between past, present, and future. The future is not so much a matter of prediction as it is of new possibilities that are opened up through a deeper appropriation of what is most authentic in the heritage of the past."[193]

How we determine whether a particular symbol is 'dead' or whether it is viable in the present and future must be done with the utmost respect to the ethical other. "A vital religious faith must find expression in the world in which modern man must live. To rest religion on events which cannot be repeated means to isolate it from the daily experience of man today."[194] Heschel's approach to Torah is similar: "The Torah can never become

---

[192] Ibid.
[193] Cook, p.394.
[194] G.B. Smith, *Religious Thoughts in the Last Quarter-Century*, Chicago, 1927, p.103f.), quoted by Heschel, p.208

past; that day {it was received} is this day, every day. The Torah, whenever we study it, must be to us "as if it were given us today."[195]

Contemporary reality involves such a plurality of voices, that for religious ethical expression to remain vital it must be communicated in a non-exclusionary manner. It is, I suggest, the symbolic realm of language that allows for religious vitality to transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. If divine revelation is an example of a surviving and vital symbol, it maintains its duration by its ability to engage new subjects in meaning. This gift is both initiated from outside of the subject, and comes to meaning through the engaging mind of the situated subject. Revelation is not of the past alone. "The journey with God includes both memory that preserves past identity (and so can be "dangerous") and imagination that opens up new and unforeseen possibilities for the future. It is narrative in form, but each story has universal import."[196] The import is the evocation of mystery and the ethical dynamic this highlights.

Cook writes:

> Symbol has the power to evoke mystery because it addresses itself to the whole person – to the imagination, the will, and the emotions, as well as to the intellect, and because it is deeply rooted in human experience and human history. One cannot simply invent true symbols. They emerge from the depths of human consciousness, both individual and collective, and they last as living symbols as long as they continue to evoke those depths.[197]

METAPHOR AS TEMPORALLY RELATIONAL

For revelation to survive, to continue to evoke those depths, it must understand itself symbolically. First, each time it encounters a new interpreter, it must allow for the

---

[195] *Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, II, 76; *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 11:13; *Berachot*, 63; Rashi to Exodus 19:1, Deuteronomy 11:13 and 26:16), in Heschel, p.215.
[196] Cook, p.409.
[197] Ibid. p.392.

new meaning that stems from the interpreter's temporal context. Perrin discusses

metaphor, that is, verbal symbol, as a "dynamic structure of experience," and investigates

"the functional role of metaphor in achieving coherence between an individual's

mnemonic heritage (the available remnants of a lived history) and the current disposition

of a developing occasion as they engage as complementary constituents of

experience."[198] This is key for it comes in opposition to a model of language that only

reveals the historical (the signified), without leaving room for the new. Thus, when

revelation is understood in light of metaphor, the derivation of meaning is dependent on

the present as it is dependent on the past.

Dupre highlights the evocative nature of symbol, its innovativeness, its ability to

account for the new. "A symbol never simply refers to a pre-existing reality; it opens up

a new one. . ., the original reality undergoes a fundamental transmutation."[199] Perrin

explains: "Metaphor is examined from an experiential perspective and its structure is

metaphorically revealed [my emphasis] to consist of (a) a verbal vehicle signifying an

abstract mnemonic perspective, (b) a verbal tenor referring to a concrete existential

phenomenon, (c) an ongoing sense of occasion, and (d) an immediate context of possible

stimulation."[200]

We may take metaphor to mean, "a fundamental organizmic strategy by which

individuals are empowered to construe a world at large beyond the phenomena of

---

[198] Perrin, p.253.

[199] Dupre, p.2.

[200] S. Perrin, "Metaphorical Revelations: A Description of Metaphor as the Reciprocal Engagement of Abstract Perspectives and Concrete Phenomena in Experience," In *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity,* 2, pp.251-280, 1987. Different thinkers from different fields describe and even argue at length on the particular meaning of both of these words. For the purposes of this dissertation, these words will be used interchangeably. Louis Dupre's defininiton of symbol, and Perrin's discussion of metaphor as an intended verbal symbol will be explored.

experience."[201] Schon distinguishes a tradition in metaphor research that shows metaphor

as "a revelation of a . . . fundamental process of mind organizing reality according to a

certain perspective. . . generating new ways of seeing an old world. . . This is

accomplished by transferring or carrying over (*meta-pherein*) a perspective appropriate

to one province of experience to another in which its use is unconventional. In this sense,

metaphor becomes an instrument of interpretation by which we employ familiar means to

constitute meaning in an unfamiliar setting."[202]

"Metaphor is born in experience."[203] Metaphor, "emerges out of the tension

between conventional expectations and actual configurations of phenomena, as a re-

visioning by which phenomena and schematic perspectives are rendered more fitting to

one another as complementary aspects of experiential possibility. If perception "gives a

past to the present," metaphor is a special kind of perception that supplies not a

conventional or impersonal past, but a highly original significance to a problematic

moment of existence."[204]

Metaphor is a "circumstantially relevant effort to make sense under pressure, a

venture of meaning in a trying situation. This suggests that poets . . . and other

perpetrators of metaphor live unconventional and stressful lives . . . are a troubled lot,

dissatisfied with conventional answers to traditional issues in their field. They see

problems where others do not, and take the risk of posing new metaphors as a creative

---

[201] Perrin, p.252.
[202] C.O Schon, "Generative metaphor" a perspective on problem setting in social policy. In A. Ortony (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* pp. 254-283, Cambridge, England: Cambrdige University Press, 1979, (quoted by Perrin, p.264.)
[203] Perrin, p.272.
[204] Perrin, p.272, quote within from, M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Humanities Press, 1962.

step toward their solution. Thus metaphor represents the leading edge of experience, its interface with the unknown."[205]

"The function of metaphor is to draw attention to an anomaly in experience in such a way that it becomes an issue, a question for investigation or for further action. . . It . . . serves to define the leading edge of accepted knowledge, providing a kind of whetstone against which to test allegiance to authorized belief. It has a provocative, heretical quality that is always signed and dated . . . by the author in whose experience it first takes form."[206] "Authors of verbal metaphors . . are directly accountable to . . . their unique heritage of ideas."[207]

Metaphor has been identified as "a method for discovering latent possibilities within the given."[208] All of these analyses demonstrate that metaphor involves the situatedness of a subject within a social and temporal reality, as well as the transcendence beyond it. Perrin explains, "[metaphor] originates as an appropriate response to an episode of stress within one individual's stream of experience and, once expressed in symbolic terms, serves to challenge the credulity of a larger community."[209]

"Metaphor is a ramification of tension between expectation and fulfillment."[210] In the expectation of fulfillment, lies the mystery of the other. Thus, a metaphor opens up a new reality in that it makes one aware of a reality beyond its own. It forces the admission of incomplete understanding, and in this gap there is room for the suggestion of others. Symbols "draw life from multiplicity of associations, subtly and for the most

---

[205] Ibid. This dissatisfaction is akin to critical theory.
[206] Ibid. p.274.
[207] Ibid.
[208] R.D. Romanyshyn, "Metaphors and Human Behavior," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 5, pp.441-460, p.457), quoted in Perrin, p.273.
[209] Perrin, p.273.
[210] Ibid. p.271.

part subconsciously interrelated . . . and tap into a *vast potential* of semantic energy. [my emphasis]"[211] The vast potential, is essentially the 'Other.' Its meaning is irreducible to ontological knowledge. It is both a question of the other as neighbour, and the other as the future, that must make us humble before the notion of ultimate meaning, yet active participants in an ethical articulation.

Perrin continues, "[T]he practitioners of a specific discipline bear responsibility for monitoring the effects their beliefs and activities have on those who do not possess a similar set of metaphorical ways of construing reality. . . . The alternative is to declare one system of metaphor prime. . . The course of human history can be seen as a sequence of just such clashes of perspective . . . We are not progressing toward some fixed asymptote of truth and virtue. In every empire, in every age, all we discover is a limited range of views. . . We will wend our way into the 21st century, as always, condemned to our perspectives, but by them also challenged to explore the range and implications of our most favored metaphors."[212] He continues, "Metaphor is . . . a practical calculus by which . . . we attempt to arrive at a meaningful sense of our situation and its direction. And when it has done its job we . . .move on, marshalling our possibilities by a method of successive approximation, trying to see through our symbols to a world beyond."[213]

If the makers of metaphor, those who use language creatively, are relentless in their challenge to ontology it is because they are applying transcendental methodology to their discourse, the heart of which is inquiry, and the motto of which is subjective finitude. They create a question whilst leaving their distinct socio-temporal mark. It is

---

[211] P. Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962, p.94, (quoted by Dulles, p.132.)
[212] Perrin, pp.270-271.
[213] Ibid. p.273.

upon these inquiry-inspiring encounters that their task takes the shape of ethics. Perhaps for this reason metaphor, like revelation, has been identified as a "deliberately heuristic proposition of world order."[214]

Indeed, as stated earlier, ethics demands that the *totum integrum* of revelatory meaning be seen both as social as well as temporal. This *consensus* is itself relational to an untotalizable truth, which is, the divine and eschatalogical, or some philosophical notion of a culmination of the future. Indeed, temporality here is key, for if language is an account of both limited subjectivity and the absolute unknown subjectivity of others, its meaning is dependent on time and the speaking of new others, in order for its meaning to reach any fullness. If "mystery connotes the inexhaustible and limitless character of "knowledge-in-process,"[215] mystery in language is the future meanings it holds in potentiality. Heschel writes: "The chain of causality and of discursive reasoning , is fixed in the space of endless possibilities like the tongue hanging in a silent bell . It is as if all the universe were fixed to a single point. In revelation the bell rings, and words vibrate through the world."[216]

It is perhaps with eschatological fervor, that is, an ethical impetus that acknowledges mystery in relation to an ultimate end, that creative people are inspired to use language metaphorically. Revelation in essence reveals metaphor by revealing finitude, transcendence *and* creativity in its use of language. Revelation, like the use of metaphor, is ethical because it intends its meaning to be open to the newness of the other. In the transfer of this meaning, in the perpetuation of symbol for the sake of future others,

---

[214] M. Black, "More about Metaphor," in A. Ortony (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p.37 (quoted by Perrin, p.273.)
[215] See Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *Metaphoric Process* Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984, pp.186-189, (cited in Cook, p.391.)
[216] Heschel, p.211.

there is dependence on the yet-known interpreters who will add still further perspectives for understanding. Metaphor essentially links the past with the present and future through language.[217]

---

[217] Here the distinction between symbol and metaphor needs to be expanded upon. With symbol the implication is that it is something that is perceived by a subject. Metaphor is the intentional creation of symbol by a subject. This comes into play theologically if we understand, as Heschel does and as does the theory of Incarnation, that there was divine ethical will in the creation of the revealed. Ethical intentionality in the creation of metaphor is an implied indication in this thesis.

CHAPTER 4: REVELATION AND TEMPORAL RELATIONALITY –

ESCHATOLOGICAL ETHICS

REVELATION AS INNOVATIVE

The ethical analysis of metaphor is strikingly similar to Heschel's understanding

of temporality in his analysis of revelation. "Revelation," he writes, "is not an act of

interfering with the normal course of natural processes but the act of instilling a new

creative moment into the course of history."[218] Revelation "is always a radical challenge

to contemporary images of God . . .[R]evelation is a metaphoric act, the creation of new

possibilities."[219]

Though Heschel writes that, "the moment of revelation must not be separated

from the content or substance of revelation,"[220] he also suggests that the content itself is

its form, ie. relationality itself. [221] The content of revelation highlights the capacity for

innovation from within a cultural heritage.

Cook writes that "the question of revelation is . . . a question of truth. . . [I]t is a

question of the interrelationship of propositional truth, historical truth, personal truth (in

the sense of direct experience, whether immediate or mediated), transcendent truth, and

immanent truth."[222] He suggests that in the case of revelation, the new creative moment

was the insight into the interplay between temporality and the transcendent. "In contrast

to magical attempts to control the Deity through knowledge of the Name, Israel's God is

free, absolutely transcending human attempts to control Him, able to be known only in

---

[218] Heschel, p.211.
[219] Cook, p.396.
[220] Heschel, p.217.
[221] See Schorsh, p.
[222] Cook, pp.390-391.

the actual unfolding of Israel's story in the process of history. This was truly a revolution in human consciousness."[223] This is of key importance, for human history indeed unfolds, and therefore one cannot claim at any point in time to have full knowledge. In its form and content, revelation, like symbol, rejects ontology. Cook explains that , "although a variety of images may be used . . . root metaphor implies that there is a basic or dominant analogy in terms of particular structural relationship."[224] Like in metaphor, the dominant analogy in revelation is the interplay between self-awareness and radical otherness.

The symbolic/metaphoric embraces all of these. It emphasizes the capacity of language to reveal, not a fixed ultimate truth, but an evolving truth, which is revealed in a perpetual way. This revelatory nature occurs because of a structural self-reference that involves awareness of finitude, and also because of a capacity, or more importantly, an intention to be open to other horizons. In other words, metaphor makes this invitation explicit. Symbolic language is meant to evoke self-awareness of one-self as a non-knower by evoking the knowledge that it will inevitably be understood differently by different people, in different times. Symbolic language at once accounts for the timelessness of linguistic structure, the particularity of one's time and place, and the awareness of others, in other times and places.

There is both this creativity and the transcendent objective in divine revelation. Like the poet, according to Perrin's analysis, so too the Christian "prophet brings that past into the present in new unforeseen ways and so creates new possibilities for the future. This is what Jesus did as a prophet to Israel."[225] "Jesus, as prophet to Israel,

---

[223] Cook, p.396.
[224] Ibid. p.389. For more on root metaphors, see Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.
[225] Ibid. p.394.

employed the root metaphor, 'Kingdom of God' but invested it with a metaphoric meaning that was intended to challenge the expectations of his contemporaries in the light of what was deepest and best in the heritage of Israel." "The ability to identify the kingdom with these unfamiliar and unforeseen images provides a shock to the imagination that reveals new and creative possibilities of seeing and acting for those who are willing to enter in."[226]

This last notion of willingness is the reflection of true dialogue, for as both speakers and listeners, dialogue involves the will to enter into it. Both as creators of metaphors and interpreters of them, we are engaged in the very dynamic of our finite selves and the infinity of the other. This is why metaphoric revelation reflects an ethical dynamic. In *Truth and Method,* Gadamer writes that "understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. . . and the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – ie. . . it allows something to "emerge" which henceforth exists,"[227] yet, "no one knows in advance what will 'come out' of a conversation."[228] In the henceforth (past), we see the will, in the moment (present) and the unknowability of future understanding, the other plays a predominant role, and it is in this that the link to transcendent ethics is made.

The fusion of horizons that metaphor involves is essentially the concept of hermeneutics. Indeed, though artistic, or intentionally literary language will be explored for the ethical intentionality that goes into writing and reading poetic text, it will be shown that any written text bears the same relational structure that accounts for the subject, and the other.

---

[226] Cook, p.397, see also M. Cook, *The Jesus of Faith,* New York: Paulist, 1981, pp.35-72.
[227] H. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* London: Sheed & Ward, 1975, p.385.
[228] Ibid.

THE WRITTEN WORD

It is not to understand the writer that the reader intends, but to understand the text. Therefore, "understanding is . . . not concerned with 'understanding historically,' –ie. reconstructing the way the text came into being."[229] Though the temporal situatedness of the author is of interest (certainly in exegesis), a text is of ethical significance (and by that I mean it can inspire or initiate ethical action in its readers) when it is understood within the context of the reader.

McEvenue points out that for both Gadamer and Derrida, "giving to [a] text a life independent of historical authors," is a necessity.[230] However, this does not mean disregarding the historicity of both the authors of sacred texts and their interpreters. Exploring the life of the author and of various readers, essentially the work of biblical scholars, sheds transcendental light in that this reveals our own historicity as readers. This awareness can inspire a heightened self-awareness that emphasises our own temporal finitude – a key component of ethics. Thus any derivation of truth we may come to, enhanced by historical analysis, can be measured as ethical only in relation to what lies beyond our realm, in the not yet revealed.

It should be noted that Levinas prioritises orality and the face of the other over written language.[231] For the theologian, however, the written language of scripture is held in ethical regard, and therefore must be addressed. Here we can defer to Derrida, who, commenting on Levinas, asserts that "the writer better renounces violence, because he cannot control the use of his signs... In order to renounce violence, to signify

---

[229] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.390.
[230] McEvenue, p.29.
[231] Kepnes, p.107.

responsively, it is better to perform the lack of control over signs. Indeed, writing here is differerance [sic], the recognition that meaning lies ahead, indeed after my ultimate absence."[232]

The written word and ethics are inextricably linked. "Writing is central to the hermeneutcial phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own. What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of meaning in which everyone who can read has an equal share."[233]

In the interplay between text and reader, it is evident that the text is not 'dead' as Levinas would have it, though I certainly do not argue the primacy of the face-to-face encounter. It is the face-to-face encounter that challenges us to return again and again to our texts with the voice of the new other in mind.

According to Gadamer, "it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other," and he sees this as true in the reading of a text. He continues: "the text is a fixed expression of life that is to be understood; and that means that one partner in the hermeneutical conversation, the text, speaks only through the other partner, the interpreter. Only through him are the written marks changed back into meaning."[234]

He adds, "the understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning."[235] "A written tradition is not a fragment of a

---

[232]Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essy on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas: in *Writing and Difference,* trans. A. ass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), quoted by Kepnes, p.108.
[233] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.393.
[234] Ibid. p.387-389.
[235] Ibid. p.394

past world, but has already raised itself beyond into the sphere of meaning that it expresses."[236]

I add here the emphasis that beyond the present meaning there will be new, other readers who fuse their horizons as well. Because there is no pause in the linearity of history, the potential meaning of a written tradition is in constant expansion. "To acquire a horizon of interpretation requries a fusion of horizons . . . [T]here cannot, therefore, be any single interpretation that is correct "in itself."[237]

What McEvenue describes is very similar to how Gadamer understands the temporality of textual conversation. He writes, "in speaking of meaning, it is helpful to distinguish . . . meaning as it occurs in the text, which is derived from the author and what lies behind him, and meaning as it occurs in the reader. . . This discussion . . . intends to designate a range of awareness stretching from merely potential awareness on the one hand, all the way to full but implicit awareness of the other."[238]

THE BIBLE

What McEvenue describes as a spiritual foundation of the biblical reader is expressed clearly in the example of what he calls the subliminal meaning of "let there be light." It is not "a doctrine of creation, much less an explanation of the origin of light' rather it is a personal sharing of the Priestly Writer's faith in God's limitless power to illuminate the dark."[239]   McEvenue dichotomizes here in an effort to highlight the

---

[236] Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* p.392.
[237] Ibid. p397.
[238] S. McEvenue, *Interpretation and Bible – Essays on Truth and Literature,* Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994. p.27.
[239] Ibid. p.29.

spiritual intentionality of the writer, and the spiritual orientation of the reader. Yet in doing so, he is offering his own interpretation.

None of these are wrong per se. "Let there be light" can mean, and has meant all of these things. What I argue is that there is a need for a methodology which captures this spiritual foundation of the act of writing and reading itself, the meaning of ethics which is encapsulated in the will to communicate and the will to understand. If this spirituality wants to claim itself ethical, it requires a methodology that bases itself on an understanding of transcendental ethics. Any reading that does not do this is by nature reductive of the ethical imperative, and is therefore distorting to the very spirituality intended.

The pertinent question in theology, then, is not just how one should embrace finitude, unattainability and ethical humility in the search for truth, but also how one should do so when approaching sacred texts. Writes Dulles, "By virtue of [its] symbolic dimension, the revelatory language of Scripture is capable of grasping and transforming the responsive reader."[240]

Consider metaphor as an event. Perrin: "Each metaphor is a tentative solution to an experiential problem or enigma. As Ricoeur pointed out, "the metaphor is not the engima but the solution to of the enigma." [241] It is a conquest, a revelation,[242] a reorganization or refocusing of experience."[243]

Now consider McEvenue's description of artistic affirmation of truth:

---

[240] Dulles, p.136.
[241] Ricoeur, "The metaphorical process as cognition,, imagination, and feeling. *Critical Inquiry,* 5, 1978, pp.143-159, p.146 (quoted in Perrin p.271.)
[242] Murry, "Metaphor," in W. Shibles, (Ed.) *Essays on Metaphor* Whitewater, WI: Language Press, 1972., p.30, (quoted in Perrin, p.271.)
[243] J.M Edie, *Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, p.188, (quoted in Perrin, p.271)

One assembles sounds and images and notions and narrative, and plays with them until they finally express what one has been trying to grasp, that is, until they finally enable one to express preconceptually, elementally, what one has already understood in a heretofore mute insight. The reader, in turn, grapples with this artistic product, its elements and logic and omissions and contrasts until a unified understanding occurs. Thus the work incarnates as elemental meaning the artist's insight, and provides an object in which the reader can share that insight.[244]

This temporal dynamic, enlightened by a theological understanding of revelation, has lead to an approach to readership of scripture, with the intention of preserving the ethical dynamic. For this to occur, the text is not approached as authority to adhere to, but as an example of ethical inspiration and intent, which is initiated by the experience with the other and is expressed for the sake of the other through the medium of language.

McEvenue encourages a readership of scripture that approaches it as literary. Literary genres are particularly appropriate in conveying dynamic ethical truth because, writes, McEvenue, "literature is a way of writing in which the subjective stance of the writer shapes and controls an inquiry to which the resulting poem, or story, or speech, or letter, is a unique answer."[245] Yet this answer contains further inquiry. Symbolic language makes this explicit. Literary language overtly invites the subjectivity of the reader to come into play. Poetic affirmation is appropriate to ethics because it is not about objectified truths, "but rather about subjective states of expectation."[246] It is not surprising, then, that the poetic realm is of great interest and reference in Gadamer's investigations.

"Literary affirmation is . . . often subtly conceived through ellipse and allusion and juxtaposition and sound and image in such a way that it cannot be expressed in any other words than those of the unique poem, or story, or exhortation, and so forth. . .

---

[244] S. McEvenue, *Can You Really Believe the Bible*, p.13.
[245] McEvenue, *Interpretation*, p.45.
[246] Ibid. p.74.

Commentary should never presume to carry that burden itself. It should enable the reader

to hear, once again, the song which rose in the heart of the biblical writer. It should place

the reader in the best location to hear and see. And it should stop there."[247]

McEvenue compares biblical and poetic inspiration in his argument against

scripture as authority. He does so in an attempt to ground claims of authority in text,

namely scripture, without falling into the trappings of dogma. He focuses on the

converting power of text and on its inherent call for openness toward the other. He writes,

"We shall attempt to show that what the text does to us is determined by an unnamed,

unarticulated, and very elusive "speaker" who addresses us from the text. . . and in effect

exercises subliminal authority. Second, we shall point to one kind of unarticulated

message of that speaker, which will be present in each text, and which will be normative

and important theologically. This kind of message we shall call "spirituality."[248]

"SPIRITUAL" READERSHIP

Fundamental to McEvenue's understanding is the appreciation of mystery and

transcendence that poetic and prophetic work entail. This transcendent mystery,

potentially common to all texts, is a symbolic awareness which provides an ethical

orientaiton. When we enter into dialogue, we enter it with both capacity and desire to

transcend, and if the nature of language impedes us, it also grants us with the tool and

framework for our efforts.

McEvenue writes: "Now the Bible's authority is not that of the letter of the law.

Nor is the Bible a collection of dogmas, or even doctrines. We must ask, then, what

---

[247] McEvenue, p.46.
[248] Ibid. p.27.

precise aspect of biblical meaning exercises authority? We have ruled out original

articulated meaning and later expressed intra-biblical interpretations, because these never

have been normative. . . . . . Has the authority of Scripture been applied, not to what

Scripture said, but rather to what the texts do to the reader without our adverting to its

influence? Should we look to affects rather than ideas? To conversion rather than truths?

The answer must be "yes" in some degree, no matter how painful such an admission may

be to scholars trained for exact definitions, and for objective data."[249]

This is a blessing, rather than a curse. The content of scripture itself alludes to

this converting capacity and to this anti-dogmatic capacity, both because of its frequent

poetic register, and its frequent internal references to writing, the role of inspired scribe,

text preservation, etc.[250] The idea herein is that revelation models a dynamic and

transcendent structure rather than one historical moment of revealed ontological

knowledge, and therefore the use of text, rather than the contents of a specific text, takes

ethical precedence.

A methodology of scriptural readership that is in fact transcendental, (ie. ethically

responsible) is one that takes the symbolic dynamic into account. McEvenue provides the

example of Exodus 15 – in which God will melt the heart of the enemy before a battle.

He asks, "What *spirituality* is carried out by the text? In what realm is God expected to

appear?"[251] Certainly, it depends on the reader. He explains, for instance:

> If one focuses on the Pentateuchal editor-author, then one might think of a concrete Zionist hope:
> God will intervene when the Jews are restored to Jerusalem. However, the distancing of the text
> from historical reality could justify less sharply defined expectancies: God will be expected to
> intervene in any Jewish community facing persecution or to save his Church at odds with any

---

[249] McEvenue, p.27.
[250] See Jeffrey.
[251] Ibid. p.35

secular power, and so on. . . . In meditating on these images, one . . . is invited to apply them to any concrete circumstances of his or her own life and times.[252]

What is common to all of these is that God will intervene in some facet that is recognizable to the community that names Him their God. The unknown source of benevolence will fuse in some capacity with what is temporally and socially appropriate. The point is that these other interpretations are possible as non-exclusive entities only if we take the symbolic nature of the text, and seek the irreducible essence, which is that God intervenes on behalf of his people. The dynamic relationship between God and his people is the basic understanding that goes into the reading of the text, the spiritual foundation of the reader. It is hard to deny that even if not made explicit, (even when the reader lacks the self-awareness of his or her own temporality) the highlighting of this symbolic capacity occurs each time scripture is used in a new era, or even moment.

"The truth, or revelation of Scripture does not lie in its articulated religious teachings, which may at times be contradictory, but rather in the authenticity of its authors, an authenticity which the community is able to recognize."[253] It is crucial to point out here, that there are non-religious modes of this expression, as well as similarly metaphoric expressions in other religions, and that a true methodology of readership that takes ethics of the other into account must recognize the legitimacy of these non-biblical but still inspired sources. A biblical community is still finite in its horizons to some degree, even when it understands itself symbolically. This is not a failing though, if it remembers its own finitude.

---

[252] McEvenue, p.35.
[253] Ibid. p. 31. McEvenue here refers to the work of Joseph Blenkinsopp, in *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution of the Study of Jewish Origins,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame press, 1977.)

When ethics is considered, it is only if dialectic is embraced, and if the fact that multiple alternatives exist is taken into account, that "biblical truth"[254] is restored. It is within the very tenets of scripture in its narratives of revelation and prophecy, that this is encouraged. As new voices, new interpretations come to light, the truth of the bible as dynamic plays itself out. The symbolic approach not only respects this, it encourages it.

In other words, there is always another other, other than a specifically addressed recipient. Within the realms of theory and justice, symbolic self-understanding, and transcendental method need to be remembered. Or in other words, one ought to pay heed to the significance of relationality in revealed ethics. Certainly, this is true when dealing with scripture as an ethical source.

It is not merely a question of uncovering the context alone. McEvenue writes: "The implications of . . . insight and . . . affirmation . . . can be conceptualized in terms of materialism, feminism, sexuality, and so forth [as] implicitly affirmed about reality by [the] artistic product." In reference to biblical literature he adds, "these kinds of questions can be asked. However, they are not specifically religious [that is, ethical] questions."[255] For him the religious question is a spiritual groundedness that anticipates divine revelation. This is like asking toward what ethical orientation the text inspires. How and why does it move the reader? What does it move the reader to do?

However we approach this last question, we must never take our answers, our understanding, as fixed. The precepts of truly dynamic ethics, of transcendental method,

---

[254] McEvenue, p.36.
[255] Ibid. pp.16-17. McEvenue here argues against biblical scholarship which has dealt with these contextual characteristics such as dating, geography, textual criticism, of which he says none has "the weight of truth," (p.17.) What he argues for is an unapologetic literary scholarship that tries to recover the simple meaning, an argument much in line with Gadamer's hermeneutics. Where I diverge is in my emphasis of the parallel between transcendent ethics and the dynamic structural relationship between author-text-reader, where truth is subordinate to method, and method, or structural awareness, make the ethical parallel. My effort is to show the way in which the 'other' is respected in McEvenue and Gadamer's model of textual language.

suggest we must maintain a vigilance that is not only sensitive to the answers of others,

but to the future of answers, and the blatant fact of our incomplete grasp. In other words,

we should never forget that we are engaged in interpretation that is relational.

A SPIRAL PROCESS – THE SYMBOL AS PRIMARY

Ricoeur describes a three-fold process of interpretation as a "creative engagement

or conversation between the text of a tradition and contemporary experience."[256]

> First there must be an initial openness to what the text might say or the question it might raise in the light of the interpreter's own experience. . . .The second step seeks to move . . to a critical explanation of it by employing various methods. . . Here is where [Cook] locate[s] Dulles' first three models; propositional, historical, and experiential. As indispensable, they are intrinsic to revelation as metaphoric process; but as subordinate, they can be perceived to be revelatory only in relation to the primacy of symbol. There is a natural and necessary move of the human mind toward definitions and descriptions, but the danger is to think that our human conceptualization and systems have grasped or exhausted the content of the mystery. Thus, Ricoeur's third step is a return to the symbol as primary. Once we have gone through the process of critical appropriation and have been transformed by a new comprehension, we experience the symbol ever anew with a second, postcritical naivete. This process is a continuous spiral, as the new experience of the symbol (or text) will give rise to new thought, etc.[257]

"The Bible," writes Heschel, "is not an intellectual sinecure, and its acceptance

should not be like setting up a talismanic lock that seals both the mind and the conscience

against the intrusion of new thought. . . The full meaning of Biblical words was not

disclosed once and for all. Every hour another aspect is unveiled. . . The Torah is an

invitation to perceptivity, a call for continuous understanding. . . The Bible is a seed, God

is the sun, but we are the soil. Every generation is expected to bring forth new

understanding and new realization."[258]

---

[256] Cook, p.400.
[257] Cook, p.400, He refers to Thompson, *Jesus Debate,* pp.80-84, in which Thompson summarizes Ricoeur's approach.
[258] Heschel, p.273.

ESCHATOLOGY AND MEANING

"For the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, God is fully revealed only at the end of history. This logically includes the whole of history from beginning to end."[259] Likewise, McEvenue states that "Biblical truth speaks about a truth that will only be known in the future."[260] This is significant ethically in the sense that the future is other, unknowable and ungraspable by us. If the full potential of meaning of any and all texts will only be 'revealed' at the end of time, this is because the contemporary always and inevitably offers new meaning for old texts – thus any written phrase will mean more and more over time. As far as determining meaning, McEvenue puts it aptly, "This reader of the Bible, for one, is more aware of the many ticks than of the apocalyptic tock."[261]

For Heschel, the eschatological realm is the realm of fully realized Biblical meaning. This has a parallel in Christian eschatology. Cook discusses the symbolism of the resurrection of Christ – which falls beyond the scope of this paper. However, the category of Christian eschatology is important here. McEvenue distinguishes between the Word of God as fully revealed in the person of Jesus Christ at the time of the New Testament, and the full revelation of Jesus in the parousia at the end of time.[262] Despite the notion that the Word is a complete revelation, there is still the indication that human understanding of such revelation will only be attainable at the end of time.

Herein lies the space for humility. Cook writes, "Christianity would lose its self-identity if it ceased to make claims for the absolute uniqueness of Jesus . . .On the other hand, Christianity equally loses its self-identity when it turns from service in and for the

---

[259] Cook, p.404.
[260] McEvenue, p.44.
[261] McEvenue, p.84.
[262] Ibid. p.45.

world to imperialistic claims for its own superiority. . . Such claims are contrary to the spirit of Jesus. . ."[263]

Understanding the metaphoric capacity of Jesus allows us to emulate him – to see in him an example of innovation in interpretation with service toward the other as the motivation. Service of the other must include the non-Christian if it is to be in dialogue with those outside of the Christian community. Thus, "Christianity must be open to the *possibility* of equally final and definitive in the strict sense outside Christianity."[264] It should always be noted that other religions should be "encountered as a *resource* that is intrinsically constitutive of any valid theology."[265]

Heschel emphasizes again and again that revelation is in fact a reminder that we cannot define the world by a set of closed and fixed laws. "What do we mean, "the world?" he asks. "If we mean an ultimate, closed fixed and self-sufficient system of phenomena behaving in accord with the laws known to us, then such a concept would exclude the possibility of admitting any super-mundane intervention or penetration by a voice not accounted for by these laws. . . reality is a mystery given but not known."[266] It is clear from these statements that for Heschel, ontology is inadequate in conveying the otherness that revelation intends. Revelation is not of the past alone. "The journey with God includes both memory that preserves past identity (and so can be "dangerous") and imagination that opens up new and unforeseen possibilities for the future. It is narrative in form, but each story has universal import."[267]

---

[263] Cook, p.406.
[264] Ibid. pp.406-407.
[265] Ibid. p.407, (Cook here cites Lucien Richard, *What are They Saying about Christ and World Religions?* New York: Paulist, 1981, p.35.)
[266] Heschel, p.210.
[267] Cook, p.409.

CONCLUSION

In our ethical search, the alterity of the other forces us to turn away from preconceived notions of 'the Good.' If we act from these preconceived codes of ethics, in the words of Derrida: "we could simply unfold knowledge into a program or course of action. Nothing could make us more irresponsible: nothing could be more totalitarian."[268]

If theological study is the undertaking of an ethical quest, as Lonergan certainly suggests it is, it must never let go of the concern of possession of knowledge, for in such presumption, actual ethics is undermined. Theological study must therefore concretize this concern by painstakingly unraveling its own finitude. Self-awareness in the context of history, culture and language is therefore an integral prerequisite to any transcendent notion. Such self-awareness need not be lamented. It can be seen as ethical, but only when it understands its own relationality to what lies outside of its realm.

If ethics is transcendent, it must be true that theological ethical truth, that is, divinely revealed knowledge regarding the good, must be, rather than content that can be encapsulated in a given culture's truth, a kind of truth that surpasses any given time and place, self or group. It must be the revealment of relationality itself.

This claim has profound implications both in its blatant deconstruction of several theological models and claims, and in its reparation of theology at large in the context of the severe criticism by the secular/scientific world, as well as the challenges of multiculturalism. Such reparation is possible predominantly because of human language, which allows for the transfer of concepts from specific contexts to other contexts. This is the metaphoric capacity.

---

[268] Derrida J, *Adieu to Emannuel Levinas*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (in, Poepke, 2004).

Ethical reparation of theology is possible because the structure of language accounts for and in fact reveals relationality. The essence of this relational dynamic is made overt in symbol, and therefore symbol is an ideal paradigm by which to understand relational human knowledge within a spatial and temporal axis. It understands itself as both specifically situated and transcendent in endeavor, as the ethical task indeed must be.

The Jewish and Christian models of revelation embrace this phenomenon in both structure and content, indicating a kind of hybrid of both. The radical mystery of the divine serves as the ethical parallel to the unknown other that impinges upon our consciousness and demands our vigilant attention. The response is not a pre-set one, but a coming to awareness of our finitude and an embrace of intending value that intends both inclusiveness in determining value and the sense that such determination is an open-ended process.

The symbolic methodology that these understandings of revelation offer has a profound influence on the way in which moral education is handled, primarily in the approach to the content of its sources. A fundamental shift from an authoritarian model has to occur for truly ethical encounters to have room. Thus, in the case of sacred scripture, a shift from bible as authority to bible as artistic affirmation of a spiritual foundation might be more appropriate. Emphasis on the longevity of the spirit through ever-unfolding interpretations of scripture needs to be embraced.

But this shift need not only occur in the religious realm. Both Levinasian ethics and Lonerganian method have been steadily applied to the field of education at large, where curriculum and teachers as bodies of authority have been replaced by the emphasis

on student experience and process as opposed to content.[269] Other fields that have traditionally relied on authority and ontological ethics have been profoundly altered by these thinkers.[270] The kernel of ethical truth is relationality. This is itself the content that needs to be taught and emphasized.

Jewish and Christian theology can be helpful tools. The social and temporal dynamic relationship between divine and human history, especially with an eschatological horizon, takes this very same form. Symbol/metaphor, revelation and ethical meaning all share a fundamental principle which is the tension between the finite subjective and infinity of otherness, and this is itself ethical in content. This dynamic brings us back to what Woloski called a positive approach to our finitude. Indeed, it is only in the present moment that things take meaning. The historical is the linear thread of these present moments, and the future is what humbles us, and keeps us from perceiving our understanding of the good as total.

---

[269] See Gert Biesta, "Learning from Levinas: A Response", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22:61-68, 2003. p.61., and A. Chinnery, "Aesthetics of Surrender: Levinas and the Disruption of Agency in Moral Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22: 5-17, 2003.

[270] See for instance, Per Nortvedt, "Subjectivity and Vulnerability: reflections on the foundation of ethical sensibility" *Nursing Philosophy*, 4, pp.222-230, 2003; D. Loewenthal, "Psychotherapy, ethics and citizenship: 'When the other is put first, how to position oneself?" *Psychodynamic Practice*, Feb. 2004, Vol. 10 Issue 1, pp.121-125; E.J Popke, "Postructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community," *Progress in Human Geography* 27,3 pp.298-316, 2003; E. Wingenbach, E. "Reducing the temptation of innocence: Levinasian ethics as political theory," *Strategies* 12 : 219-238.

REFERENCES

St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine,* 1.13, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1963

Baird, M., "Revisioning Christian theology in light of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of responsibility," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies,* 36:3/4, 1999.

Bahktin, M., "epos I roman," *Voprosy literatury I estetiki: Issledovanija raznyk let,* Moscow: Xudoz, 1975.

Baum, G., and Vaillancourt, J., "The Church and Modernization," *Religion and the Social Order,* Vol. 2, JAI Press, 1991.

Baum, G., "Paul Tillich's Ethic of Nationalism" in *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics,* McGill University Press, 2001.

Biesta, G., "Learning from Levinas: A Response", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22:61-68, 2003.

Black, M., "More about Metaphor", in A. Ortony (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Blenkinsopp, J., *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution of the Study of Jewish Origins,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame press, 1977.

Brown, R.E., *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament,* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968.

Bruns, "Blanchot/Levinas: Interruption (On the Conflict of Alterities), *Research in Phenomenology,* Vol.26, pp.132-155, 1996.

Buber, M. (ed.) *Tanhuma,* II, 76; *Sifre* to Deuteronomy 11:13; *Berachot,* 63; Rashi to Exodus 19:1, Deuteronomy 11:13 and 26:16), in Heschel, p.215.

Chinnery, "Aesthetics of Surrender: Levinas and the Disruption of Agency in Moral Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 22: 5-17, 2003.

Cook, M., *The Jesus of Faith,* New York: Paulist, 1981.

Cook, M. "Revelation as Metaphoric Process," *Theological Studies,* Vol.47, Issue 3, pp.388-411, 1986.

Derrida, de Man, & Hartman, *Deconstruction and Criticism,* New York: Seabury, 1979.

Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas: in *Writing and Difference,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

Derrida, *Adieu to Emannuel Levinas,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Drazenovich, G., "toward a Levinasian understanding of Christian ethics – Emmanuel Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Other," *Cross Currents* 54:4, pp.36-45, 2005.

Dulles, A., *Models of Revelation,* New York: Doubleday & Company, 1992.

Dupre, *Symbols of the Sacred,* Michigan: Wm. B. Eedermans, 2000.

Edie, J.M., *Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976.

Ferreira, M.J., "Total altruism in Levinas's "ethics of the welcome," *Journal of Religious Ethics,* 29.3, pp. 443-70, 2001

Foucault, M., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* (Trans. Anonymous) New York: Random House, 1973.

Gadamer, H.G., *Truth and Method,* London: Sheed & Ward, 1975.

Gadamer, H.G., *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* (trans. Joel Weinsheimer), New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

Gerhart, M., and Russell, A., *Metaphoric Process,* Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1984.

Jeffrey, D., *People of the Book,* Cambridge: Wm.B. Eedermans, 1996.

Heidegger, M., *Untwrwegs zur Sprache,* Pfullingen: Gunther Neske, 1959.

Heidegger, M., *Gesamtausgabe,* Vol. 5, *Holzwege* Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 1977.

Heschel, A. J., *God in Search of Man – a Philosophy of Judaism,* New York: Harper and Row, 1955.

Kepnes, S., "Ethics After Levinas: Robert Gibbs's Why Ethics? Signs of Responsibilities," *Modern Theology* 19:1, 2003.

Lee, "Neither Totality or Infinity: Suffering the Other," *The Journal of Religion,* 1999.

Levinas, *Totalite et Infini: Essaie sure l'exteriorite,* La Haye : M. Nijhoff, 1961.

Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* (Trans. Alphonso Lingis,) Pittsburght, Pa.:Duqense University Press, 1961.

Levinas, "Substitution," *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence,* (trans. Alphonso Lingis,) Boston and London: Martinus Nijhof Publishers, 1981.

Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," (trans. Alphonso Lingis,) in *Deconstruction in Context,* ed. Mark C. Taylor, Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1986.

Levinas, "Dialgoue with Emmanuel Levinas," trans. Richard Kearney, in *Face to Face with Levinas,* ed. Richard A. Cohen, Albany: SUNY press, 1986.

Levinas, *Hors Sujet.* Cognac: Fata Morgana, 1987.

Levinas, *Proper Names,* (Trans. Michael B. Smith,) Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996.

Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind,* (trans. Bettina Bergo,) Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Loewenthal, D., "Psychotherapy, ethics and citizenship: 'When the other is put first, how to position oneself?" *Psychodynamic Practice,* Feb. 2004, Vol. 10 Issue 1, pp.121-125.

Lonergan, Bernard, *Method in Theology,* Toronto: University Press, 1971.

Macquarrie, J., *God Talk,* New York: Harper & Row, 1967.

McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language,* Philadelphia: fortress Press, 1982.

McEvenue, S., *Interpretation and Bible – Essays on Truth and Literature,* Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994.

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Humanities Press, 1962.

Moran, G., *The Present Revelation,* New York: Seabury, 1972.

Murry, "Metaphor," in W. Shibles, (Ed.) *Essays on Metaphor,* Whitewater, WI: Language Press, 1972.

Nortvedt, P., "Subjectivity and Vulnerability: reflections on the foundation of ethical sensibility" *Nursing Philosophy,* 4, pp.222-230, 2003.

Nuyen, A.T., "The "Ethical Anthropic Principle" and the Religious Ethics of Levinas," *Journal of Religious Ethics,* 29:3, pp.427-442, 2001.

Peperzak, A., *To the Other*, Indiana: Purdue UP, 1993.

Perrin, S., "Metaphorical Revelations: A Description of Metaphor as the Reciprocal Engagement of Abstract Perspectives and Concrete Phenomena in Experience." *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity,* 2, pp.251-280, 1987.

Popke, E.J., "Postructuralist ethics: subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community," *Progress in Human Geography* 27,3 pp.298-316, 2003.

Popke, E.J., "The face of the other: Zapatismo, responsibility and the ethics of deconstruction." *Social & Cultural Geography*, Vol. 5, No. 2, June 2004.

Purcell, M., *Mystery and Method,* Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1998.

Purcell, M., "Notes and Comments, 'Levinas and Theology'? The Scope and Limits of Doing Theology with Levinas," *Heythrop Journal* XLIV, 2003, pp.468-479.

Rahner, K., *Hearer of the Word,* New York: Continuum, 1994.

Richard, L., *What are They Saying about Christ and World Religions?* New York: Paulist, 1981.

Ricoeur, "The metaphorical process as cognition,, imagination, and feeling. *Critical Inquiry,* 5, pp.143-159, 1978.

Romanyshyn, R.D., "Metaphors and Human Behavior," *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 5, pp.441-460,

Schon, C.O., "Generative metaphor" a perspective on problem setting in social policy," in A. Ortony (Ed.) *Metaphor and Thought,* Cambridge, England: Cambrdige University Press, 1979.

Schorsch, R., "The Hermeneutics of Heschel in Torah min Hashamayim," *Judaism,* pp.301-308, 2001.

Smith, G.B., *Religious Thoughts in the Last Quarter-Century*, Chicago, 1927.

Thomas, D., 'Incarnate Devil,' in *Collected Poems 1934-1952,* London: J.Bent & Sons Limited, 1952.

Tracy, D., "The Particularity and Universality of Christian Universality," in E. Sccillebeeckx and Bas van Iersel, eds., *Revelation and Experience* (Concillium 113; New York: Seabury,) pp.106-116, 1979.

Wandel, T., "The Power of Discourse: Michel Foucault and Critical Theory, *Cultural Values,* 5:3, 2001, pp.368-382.

Wheelwright, P., *Metaphor and Reality,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.

Wingenbach, E. "Reducing the temptation of innocence: Levinasian ethics as political theory," *Strategies* 12 : 219-238, 1999.

Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* (trans. Pears & McGuiness,) London: Routelage and Kegan Paul, 1975.

Woloski, S., "Moral Finitude and the Ethics of Language," *Common Knowledge* 9:3, Duke University Press, pp.406-423, 2003.

Wright, T., *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy,* Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999.