

We all know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him. (1 Cor. 8:1-3 NKJV)

Reflections on Who Is My Neighbor?

By John Wilcox

There is a space in time that each person enters at some point in life. It is a space that defies any relation to normal, rational time, a space where despair, tears, and loss seem to form the whole of one's horizon and where that better world of small and ordinary pleasures can hardly be remembered or imagined. Even if we do not enter into this space, we know people who are living there or have lived within it, and so are familiar with that seemingly infinite distance that seems to separate us from them.

I had never felt that distance so keenly until the summer of 1994, when ADRA International sent me to eastern Zaire to assess the needs of Rwandan refugees who had crossed the border into the town of Goma to escape conflict in their own country. I was confronted there not simply with the grief and suffering of an individual, but also with the crushing loss and suffering of a whole people.

Upon my return to Washington, D.C., I found it impossible to account for any relation between my existence in Washington and what I had seen in eastern Zaire, an impossibility that only deepened for me as I attempted to relate what I had witnessed to friends and acquaintances, and during several television interviews. Literary critic George Steiner wrestles with precisely this same relation in his essay, "Postscript."

The essay recounts the death of two men, Mehring and Langner, at Treblinka, a Nazi concentration camp. Steiner writes that at "the same hour in which Mehring and Langner were being done to death, the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, 5,000 miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist." For Steiner, this is where his "imagination balks." "The two orders of simultaneous experience are so different, so irreconcilable to any common norm of human values, their co-existence is so hideous a paradox," that he can only puzzle over time.¹

Since my experience in Goma, my own awareness of this "hideous paradox" has been heightened as I have read the reports and seen the faces of those caught in other points of irrational time, such as those in Kosovo, New York City, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. How are we to relate to events such as these—or rather to the people living through them? More to the point, what is my relationship to the one who suffers? What is the nature of my responsibility to him or her?

It hardly seems necessary for me to argue for the existence of a relationship of responsibility with those who suffer, and throughout this article I assume that the existence is self-evident, at least for the Christian. Christ commands us, after all, to love God and our neighbor. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, he clearly taught that

culture, class, ethnicity, or any other human category we might use to divide and distinguish between humans must not circumscribe our definitions of the neighbor and our responsibility for his/her welfare.

Instead, I will approach the question of responsibility from what is perhaps an unusual starting point. I will explore how our ways of thinking about what is true may silence and deface both God and our neighbor so that we truly do not even encounter them in the process of forming our ideas about the world and taking actions that proceed from those ideas. Although the way in which I think about an inanimate object such as an apple may have little or no ethical consequences, if I apply the same process of knowing to God and others I immediately confront very significant problems, both in how I treat them and in the truth of my conclusions.

However, first a word of caution: In the argument that follows, there will be a particular danger for many readers to assume that the warnings expressed apply to those “unlike” us—conservatives, traditionalists, legalists, or, alternatively, liberals, iconoclasts, and abusers of grace, and the temptation to point the finger smugly and shake the head may be strong. This is precisely the kind of reaction that I argue against throughout this article. Indeed, indulging in that reaction will merely prove my point. This article should make the reader feel uncomfortable, as it has me. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Two Ways of Knowing

In the March 27, 1997, issue of the *Adventist Review* Clifford Goldstein wrote a short essay in which he attacked postmodernism as being a significant factor in what he describes as the normalization of deviancy. He wrote that postmodernism “teaches that such concepts as truth and morality, right and wrong . . . don’t exist in any objective, absolute sense, but only as relative, indeterminate, fluctuating notions that each individual and community must define for themselves,” and that unlike modernity, which relies on the ability of human reason to determine objective reality, postmodernism “rejects the very notion of objectivity itself,” an act that inevitably leads to moral chaos.

In relation to this article, we need to ask ourselves what is meant by the word, “objectivity.” It is important to pause and define the word because it describes a

way of attempting to reach truth to which I will refer throughout this article. We are all familiar with statements that describe a newspaper reporter, or a judge, as objective in her news story or judicial opinions. What such statements usually mean is that personal biases or prejudices have not entered into her thinking about a particular issue, or at least she has attempted to minimize the influence of such irrational factors on her thinking. The theories, accounts, or opinions that such people present are, therefore, viewed as more reliable because by reducing or eliminating irrational influences they have gotten closer to what is really true in a universal, absolute sense.

From this example we can conclude that objectivity has at least three important characteristics. First, the idea of objectivity *assumes that out there somewhere is Truth*, like some perfect, shining holy grail to which all of our thoughts (however imperfectly) aspire, something

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For these Rwandan refugees medical treatment was a necessity.

like Plato’s concept of the ideal table from which all of our ideas and attempts to create tables ultimately are derived. Second, the concept of objectivity *affirms the possibility of achieving perfect knowledge* about how a thing really is. Third, the idea of objectivity requires that the subject—or the person thinking objectively—

assume a position of distance and sovereignty over the object of study, putting to the side those things that might obstruct or impede a clear, unfettered view of how a thing truly is.

Therefore, when Goldstein attacks postmodernism, he is defending the view that there is Truth to be discovered, that we can know it, and that to do so we must use human reason, which is clear-sighted and impartial in its method. The broader world view that

encompasses this way of knowing to which Goldstein appeals is typically called "modernity," in contrast to the "postmodern," which denies the possibility of objective reason and where foundational Truth is viewed as a mirage.

Goldstein is correct in identifying the postmodernist's discomfort with the ability of human reason to determine Truth and with the notion of objectivity itself, though this same discomfort is hardly new to the postmodernist. I share Goldstein's unease with the radical rejection of all foundations for human thought and belief, and certainly do not consider myself an apologist for postmodernism. However, I do not believe that as Christians we should be so quick to look only to modernism—of which the assumption of objectivity is central—as the intellectual basis for how we make moral decisions, particularly those that affect our treatment of others (though in making this assertion I do not deny the possibility of foundational, absolute Truth).

In the realm of people—and certainly of the Divine—our use of the cold, precise tool of objective reason has dangerous implications. As stated at the beginning of this article, a morality founded upon the assumption of objectivity is one that from the start incapacitates the moral self by eliminating the possibility of the revelation that the intrusion of otherness entails. What do I mean by this statement? To explain further, I would like to examine the relationship between the thinking self, or ego, and the object that it faces.

In Book 10 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle states, "a wise man can practice contemplation by himself."² In making this statement he advances a particular theory of knowing the world that began

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In Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, these people fled their homes after the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano.

with the Greeks and has continued into what Goldstein and others have called "modernity." According to Aristotle's theory, the mind is a self-sufficient entity. All thought is conceived in a splendid isolation. Indeed, to breach this solitude is to compromise objectivity, hence the reliability of the thought that proceeds from objective thinking. Within this theory of knowledge thought is crafted in monologue; ideas emerge essentially from a conversation with self about the object of inquiry.

What are the implications of this theory of knowledge in relation to how you and I approach another person? To answer this question I would like to use two metaphors, the first to describe objective thinking and the second for what I will later describe as an alternative to objectivity. These metaphors are vision and language. First, let us look at knowledge as vision, which I would characterize as describing the modernist's approach to knowing truth.

Knowledge as Vision

There are three characteristics of knowledge as vision. First and most telling is the silence of vision toward the objects it encounters. Vision does not require dialogue. To know a thing, to determine its nature, I must simply observe it. The silence of vision thus assumes sovereignty for the one exercising it. I place my thinking self in a position of absolute control over the objects of my gaze. This is so because objects receive their meaning, and thus their being, from the gaze of the omnipotent mind.

A second characteristic of knowledge as vision is



its assumption that what is seen or observed is the sum total of that which exists, and provided that an object is viewed clearly (or rationally), you and I should arrive at largely identical conclusions about an object's nature. The images that proceed from vision are thus fixed, forming a totality that captures the very being of an object.

A third characteristic of knowledge as vision is the way in which it acts upon its objects. Vision seizes, appropriates, or grasps the essence of its objects. The primary movement of vision is one of possession in which any independent existence for an object is neutralized. Nothing is allowed to remain beyond the power of vision. These characteristics of vision describe, I believe, the theory of how we know the world as objective thinkers.

As objective thinkers, we prize detachment from the object of our study. To compromise detachment by breaking silence with the object is to compromise the reliability of our conclusions as to its nature and behavior. This leads to the second characteristic of our metaphor of knowledge as vision, which is the belief that what is observed is what exists. Any residue of being that may escape the careful observation and analysis of our minds is viewed either as secondary or simply nonexistent. To paraphrase the well-known aphorism, what you see (or what can be understood through objective study) is what is. Objective knowledge, like vision, in explaining the nature of things does indeed grasp and possess them, admitting to no possibility of anything beyond the capacity of reason to understand.

Use of the metaphor of vision to describe objective thinking may appear abstract and detached from real life, particularly in relation to the questions about responsibility to other human beings posed in the introduction to this essay. But what I am describing strikes at the heart of what it is to be moral. The modernist strives after a height of sovereign self-sufficiency from which the world of perception may be surveyed as if from a throne. From this throne, high above the chaos of diversity and otherness that is the outside world, rules, systems, standards, codes of behavior, ideologies, and descriptions of reality can be formulated and handed down.

The problem with such a relation to the world is that it strips men and women and things of their

independence apart from my perception of them, thereby allowing me to manipulate them according to my purpose without danger of moral disturbance to myself or my ideas. Morality becomes subordinate to purpose. This is the ultimate irony: in their attempt to construct an absolute morality, modernists sever the link with the external point—the otherness of God and persons—upon which morality is grounded. In so doing, we set our moral system adrift within a sea of competing moral “authorities,” each with its own purpose.

I began this essay with a question: what is my relation to the one who suffers? I would like to summarize what I have said so far. My argument is that the modernist model of how we gain knowledge of the external world has compromised our capacity to care for the Other. Modernists have set up a relationship of distance and detachment between the thinker and the world of other men and women. Any other relationship is considered a breach of the modernist's objectivity, which directly affects the reliability, or truth, of his conclusions.

However, objectivity built upon such isolation is self-referential. It lacks the means of its own criticism, and so becomes purely instrumental. Instead of an ethic of responsibility for the welfare of Others, one is left with an ethic allied and subservient to the assertion of my own being. Thus, in the most fundamental sense possible the question of a true relation to the one who suffers—or any “other” for that matter—becomes an impossibility for us, or at least diminishes that relation and makes it subservient to the process of self-realization. Enclosed within the security of my own “objective” categories, I never even approach the Other (whether God or my fellow human). Furthermore, isolated from the Other, ethics may even become a tool by which the Other suffers.

Thus, my objections to a modernist morality are twofold: First, within such a morality the question of responsibility for others is simply not asked. Second, the result of the absence of this question is that morality is reduced to politics. In other words, morality becomes a means of asserting my own being rather than justifying it.³





Our ways of thinking about what is true may silence and deface both God and our neighbor so that we truly do not even encounter them in the process of forming our ideas about the world and taking actions that proceed from those ideas.

So what is the external point upon which morality is grounded if one does not resort to the modernist way of knowing truth through objective thinking? I have already suggested the answer to this question in my criticism of the way the objective relation to the external world strips men and women of their independence apart from my perception of them. It is indeed the Other that provides morality with its external reference point, or its foundation. To see how vital the independent existence of the Other is to the rules or codes of behavior that we use to govern our treatment of him/her, I shall now turn to the metaphor of language to describe the alternative to the modern way of knowing truth.

The Metaphor of Language

Language represents the possibility of dialogue between persons. To communicate through language is to put my world into words and to offer it to another, to exchange meanings, however imperfectly. It represents an "initial act of generosity, a giving of my world to him [the Other] with all its dubious assumptions and arbitrary features."⁴

This concept of language contains within it an assumption that I and the others whom I encounter are completely separate from one another—that we are in a real sense "strangers." By speaking to an-Other, one transcends, or attempts to transcend, the isolation of sole being while still preserving the Other's independence apart from me and my thoughts. Thus, language does not entail simply the exchange of meanings, it also puts one into a relation with other persons, or in the context of prayer, with God.

The relation possible within language is one in which both parties to the dialogue maintain their autonomy, unlike vision, in which others are caught within the circle of my silent gaze. Indeed, there is even a distance between the speaker and what is spoken. I may change my mind and speak a totally

different meaning, or I may draw back and criticize or change what I have just said. My speech cannot finally bind me, nor I bind the other with his.

What occurs in language cannot be predicted, and after something is said it is open to interpretation and reinterpretation. My autonomy and that of the Other are only stimulated through language as I come into contact with a point of view not simply opposite from, but also genuinely other than mine. It is an approach to another person in which he maintains his own meanings and is able to explain and defend them. The "Other is not an object that must be interpreted and illumined by my alien light. He shines forth with his own light, and speaks for himself."⁵

This mode of thinking is not so much concerned with how objects appear to the sole self of the modernist, but rather with how things are in themselves, their otherness. This mode is what philosopher Emmanuel Levinas calls "metaphysical desire." In other words, conversation with the Other brings me into contact with a totally other world that allows me to escape from an uncriticized, arbitrary existence. To pursue knowledge based on metaphysical desire is to escape the monologue of the sole self and enter into a relation based upon language, or conversation, in which the Other is encountered, yet maintains his/her integrity as a separate, sacred being.

Moral capacity, then, is this encounter with infinity, or the Other, in which the sovereignty and spontaneity of the ego is brought into question and checked. As a Christian, I would further argue that it is in our encounter with God, the great "I Am," that moral capacity and the situation in which it is born are made possible. The capacity to be moral is not above all familiarity with a code of conduct, or even a noble yet abstract idea of altruism and love, but rather an encounter with God, who constantly overwhelms and goes beyond my idea of him. To become sensitive to the ethical is first an encounter that shatters the freedom and spontaneity of the sole self embodied by neutral reason (objectivity), and to open to criticism the categories and generalities by which I enclose God and other humans.

In the moment in which the ego is checked—in this crisis of the self, precipitated by a realization of the

Other's presence—one is called to responsibility, to a regard for the Other in his uniqueness and noninterchange-ability. This is a mode of being in which one returns to a "capacity to fear injustice more than death, to prefer to suffer than to commit injustice, and to prefer that which justifies being over that which assures it."⁶ It is made possible most fully and decisively in the encounter with the Divine, but is also repeated and perhaps put into practice through our constant encounters with other persons and the call to care implicit in looking into another person's face and hearing his voice.

Emmanuel Levinas, the philosopher and Talmudic scholar to whom I owe a great debt for the ideas discussed here, writes that "politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself."⁷ It distorts individuals, judging them according to universal rules as if they were absent. It renders them little more than types to which common concepts may be applied. Furthermore, we are often told that politics represents a true reality against which morality becomes derisory, that politics represents the "very exercise of reason," and that to pursue the ethical is utopian. We are all familiar with the Hobbesian state of nature, of Thomas Hobbes's reference to existence as nasty and brutish; confronted with the exigencies of mere survival it is difficult to advance a convincing case for moral action that may endanger the self.

Yet if we allow the moral relation to the Other to become derisory in the face of war or the defense and maintenance of the institution, ideology, or idea—however progressive or noble they may be—we then enter a world in which politics is total; self-assertion is not only necessary, it is also identified as right. This is a step that comes dangerously close to obliterating human agency, or choice and will, and replacing it with instinct. Such a step necessarily restricts the definition of the possible in human affairs to those actions that enhance the chances for survival in the most immediate and basic sense.

This is my fundamental objection to uninterrupted politics—or the unquestioned maintenance and assertion of individual, group, or institutional being: it robs us of our individual will to contemplate action



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An ADRA worker examines a young boy left homeless by the Nyiragongo volcano.

beyond the circular logic of political necessity/self realization and in so doing severely reduces individual human existence and moral possibility.

My argument is not that personal, group, or institutional survival is unimportant. My argument is that at all times, even within the most desperate, we must maintain the relation with the Other, the ethical relation. Politics in which this relation is present are interrupted politics, politics that are not allowed to become totalizing, or panoramic. It is this transcendence made possible by ethics that makes a community open and just and loving, both within and outside its boundaries. The bulwark against totalizing politics is the irreducible ethical difference between myself and the Other. The just state, society, or community is one in which this ethical politics is at play.

This is the alternative to objective thinking as I defined it above: a way of dealing with and approaching truth that is open to otherness and adopts as its foundation responsibility for the Other's well-being. It is true that we must act, and to act is to make decisions from among various potential courses of action. Action requires us to form ideas and conclusions as to right behavior, to develop moral systems that we use in our own lives and that we encourage our children to adopt, as well.

If we did not have these, or if we—like postmodernists—reject all foundations for truth, the barrier against evil would be weak indeed. Can anyone describe our revulsion at the murder of millions of



Jews in Europe in the last century as merely a contingent, arbitrary construction of the victorious Allies who have now used the power gained by their military victory to impose their particular notion of right and wrong on the world? Can we really imagine a world where fascist ideologies were right in some universal, timeless sense? Is not my revulsion at the suffering I witnessed in Goma, Zaire something that we all share?

We must also avoid an opposite danger: that in our thinking, and the decisions to act that follow from our thoughts, we shut out the face and voice of otherness (both God's and man's) by a mode of thinking that is isolated and self-referential, which is fundamentally concerned with establishing the self. The effect of knowledge so gained drives God and our neighbor into a third world, that place where all whom we oppose (whether conservatives or liberals, white or black, Republican, Democrat, or Libertarian, heretic or orthodox believer) are safely silenced and imprisoned within our "objective" understandings of them, unable to interrupt the views of the world we have constructed and in which we so contentedly reside.

Concluding Remarks

Here is a personal observation from my experience of growing up within North American Adventism during the 1980s. I grew up very aware of the debates that have occupied the Church's attention. Some of my earliest memories as an Adventist are of the breaking of what I shall simplistically call "traditional Adventism."

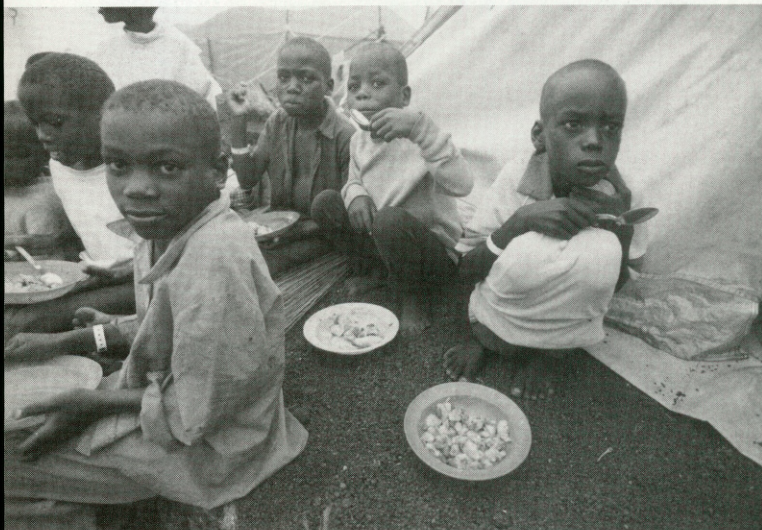


Photo: ADRA International/Tereza Byrne

Addressing the nutritional needs of refugees was important after the eruption of the Nyiragongo volcano.

What strikes me about many of the debates that have occupied us is the manner in which they have been conducted. My fear is that on all sides we have sought to carve out "our place in the sun" without any concern for the Other. At what point in our attempt to "win" the argument do we lose sight of the human across the table, or worse, God? At what point do we trap ourselves within a monologue, thereby losing the opportunity to hear a point of view wholly other than ours, which might even lead both sides toward greater truth?

I believe that in debates within the Adventist community we must constantly make the choice to keep in view the "face of the Other" who calls us to responsibility. Prior to all systems, institutions, policies, rules, intellectual constructions, and interpretations is a God who is being, presence, and Truth. The beings that he has created similarly are prior to our laws, norms, and systems of thought, however useful and necessary these may be. Is not the summation by Christ of the Law into the simple but infinite command to love God and to love one's neighbor a reminder that behind the great architecture of our beliefs, morals, and institutions is the simple duty to enter into a loving relationship with God and our neighbor?

Within the Church perhaps the very terms we use to describe each other—conservative and liberal—are wrong. Can we not move beyond these old categories to recapture an exclusive devotion to God, who will lead us into ways of thinking, ways of being, that will shatter our tired old ideas and rigid understandings of him and of each other? Should we not do as C. S. Lewis advised, and instead of thinking about our own potential glory at Christ's Second Coming, think about that of our neighbor?

The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all



friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. . . .
[I]t is immortals whom we joke with,
work with, marry, snub and exploit.⁸

The modernist strives after a height of sovereign
self-sufficiency from which the world of perception
may be surveyed as if from a throne.

Finally, I wonder on both sides of any given debate whether our attentiveness to right doctrine and behavior has led to a mentality of preservation, maintenance/defense—both in terms of our doctrine and as an institution. Have we committed a subtle idolatry in our concern for constructing and maintaining—or reforming—Adventist thought, behavior, and institutions, rather than the worship of the God behind these, who lends them validity and life?

Furthermore, have we so focused on the task of maintaining our systems of thought and our institutions—or alternatively reforming or merely criticizing them—that the question of responsibility to the poor, to those who suffer oppression and injustice, simply fails to occur to us? Are we helping those who are marginalized in our world, the voiceless, the poor, and the oppressed toward the destination of glory that Lewis speaks about? As a church, are we more concerned with asserting our (individual concepts of a correct and true) corporate identity in the world—conservative or liberal—than in fulfilling Christ's command to love God and our neighbor?

For those tempted to counter that I favor an easier, wishy-washy law, or that I am antifoundationalist, I counter that the command to love is one that can never be filled or exhausted, and it is the true foundation for all of our action in the world. My responsibility to seek for others their place in the sun is infinite; I can never slip back into complacency because I have fulfilled my obligations. That is the duty against which all that I think and do must be measured, and against it all my efforts are indeed "filthy rags."

My own life, the way in which I am choosing to order it, is very much a response to the profound, unspeakable suffering that confronted me in Goma, Zaire. The days I passed there can only be described as an encounter with the Other who precipitated a crisis of the self in me that has led me to ask constantly whom I have "oppressed or starved or driven out in order to take my place" in the sun.⁹

Goma has conceived in me a fear for "all the violence which my existing might generate,"¹⁰ resulting in a profound uneasiness of being that, in turn, has

created in me a resolve to treat with infinite caring the strange world inhabited by the Other; to lend to the Other the same dignity that I expect rather than treating him/her as a means to achieve my own purposes; and to treat my judgments, my ideas of the world and its people and things as contingent rather than final and absolute—always open to be remade through the intrusion of divine revelation into my closed mental categories and ideas.

Again, what is the relation between those who suffer and those who are not presently suffering? I was not guilty of the evil that resulted in Goma, in Kosovo, in East Timor, or in New York City. I did not kill.

However, I am responsible. We are responsible for each other in as much as each of us has the capacity to care for each other. We become guilty when we repudiate our responsibility by enclosing another human being within our own, self-referential idea of what he is, and thereby excusing ourselves from caring for his well-being, or limiting our responsibility to act on his behalf.

If I may paraphrase Levinas, Hamlet had it wrong. The question is not "to be or not to be." It is, rather, how may I justify my being?

Notes and References

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5. *Ibid.*
6. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 85.
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8. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 18, 19.
9. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, 82.
10. *Ibid.*

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