

The Faceless Palestinian: A History of an Error

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In recent years, a number of books and articles have appeared claiming that Levinas's thought and writing dehumanizes Palestinians, categorizing them as people to whom ethical obligation is not due. In this paper we trace the lineage of this idea and attempt to show that the extreme formulations used by some of Levinas's critics are in error. We begin with a close reading of the interview that is regularly cited in support of the image of the dehumanized Palestinian, an interview published in English in *The Levinas Reader* under the title "Ethics and Politics."¹ We then take up a short text by Martin Jay from 1990, and continue with texts by Howard Caygill (2002) and Judith Butler (2012). Our intention is to sketch a progression by which Jay suggests, Caygill argues, and Butler assumes that Levinas's words in the interview, and his thought as a whole, are tainted by an ethnic or national parochialism that violates the terms of his ethics. We also intend to show that the progression intensifies with each reading, culminating in Butler's striking claims that, according to Levinas, the

1. Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Finkielkraut, and Shlomo Malka, "Ethics and Politics," trans. Jonathan Romney, in Seán Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 289–97. Further references will be cited parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation LR. A portion of our discussion of the interview appears in Claire Elise Katz, *An Introduction to Modern Jewish Philosophy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014). We offer special thanks to Jonathan Bibeau, graduate student in philosophy at Texas A&M, for compiling a number of the citations we have used here, as well as to Robert Bernasconi, our debt to whom should become clear in the course of the paper. Oona Eisenstadt would also like to thank Zdravko Planinc for insightful criticism of drafts. Claire Katz would like to thank Daniel Conway for his comments on the penultimate draft.

Palestinians have “no face” and that their human vulnerability prescribes “no obligation not to kill” them.

We aim to avoid reading with a partisan eye: we do not write to support Levinas’s political stance, nor do we probe all of its difficulties. Our intention is to begin to expose a history of compounded misreading, to describe some of the ways the misreading functions, and to lay an error to rest. For the error is a serious one. It opens Levinas not only to charges of inconsistency, but also to allegations of philosophical and personal hypocrisy, as if statements he made betray the limits of his hospitality, or show that he fails the test of his own ethics; it invites, in other words, an indictment of his thought in its entirety. We address the error in the interest of clearing the way for fairer readings to come.

The Interview

The interview in question was conducted for radio in 1982, slightly less than two weeks after the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut, Lebanon. In view of these events, Alain Finkielkraut and Levinas were invited by Shlomo Malka to discuss the themes of Israel and Jewish ethics. In the middle of the interview, Malka turned to Levinas and said, “Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the ‘other.’ Isn’t history, isn’t politics the very site of the encounter with the ‘other,’ and for the Israeli, isn’t the ‘other’ above all the Palestinian?” Levinas replied:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you’re for the other, you’re for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (LR 294)

Levinas’s critics, to be sure, cite other passages as well as this one, and they support their critiques with analyses of the general thrust of his thought. But this comment is almost always cited, and forms the point of origin of the accusations.² We begin, therefore, with a detailed examination of its

2. See, for example, Zahi Zalloua, “The Ethics of Trauma/The Trauma of Ethics,” in *Terror; Theory and the Humanities*, ed. Jeffrey R. DiLeo and Uppinder Mehan (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012), which we discuss in notes 15 and 28.

meaning in the context of both the interview as a whole and the political situation that motivated it. Our conclusions, in a nutshell, are that while it is true that Levinas did not offer a crisp political statement, and certainly not an unambiguous condemnation of Israel, there were at least three connected reasons for this: that the facts were still unclear; that Levinas, characteristically, was speaking about broader philosophical issues; and that he had certain particular thoughts about the relationship between responsibility and guilt that he came to the interview wanting to express and toward which he tilted his answers in ways that were sometimes clumsy. These thoughts constituted in part an insistence that Israel meet its moral obligations.

The massacres, which began on September 15 and continued until the morning of September 18, were committed by Christian Phalangists in response to the assassination of Bachir Gemayel, the recently elected president of Lebanon. Both before and after his election, Gemayel had advocated accepting support from the Israeli forces that had invaded his country in order to weed out the PLO operatives working there, forces that he expected would also help his country in the Lebanese struggle with the Syrians. At the time of the radio interview, the assassination was thought to be the work of Palestinian terrorists, and this view did not change until early October, when it was discovered that Habib Shartouni, a member of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, had planted the bomb that killed Gemayel. Up until that time, it appeared that the PLO had assassinated a man who might have facilitated a lasting peace between Israel and Lebanon.³

The circumstances of the massacres were likewise not understood in their entirety. We know now that the camps were not harboring the assassin; nor do we have any evidence that a new PLO leadership was about to emerge from Sabra and Shatila. We know also that the Israeli defense minister, Ariel Sharon, allowed the Phalangist militia to enter the camps, had his troops guard the exits, and refused to withdraw when reports of atrocities began to surface, for which acts an Israeli commission found the Israeli government indirectly responsible and Sharon personally responsible. Men, women, and children were murdered indiscriminately and brutally, and the Israeli government as a whole must share the blame, if not shoulder it solely. However, this was not clear on September 28 when the interview was conducted. A *New York Times* article by war correspondent

3. See Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999).

Thomas Friedman published on September 26 had put some of the blame on the Israelis, but was careful to say that the facts were not yet in. “The full truth,” Friedman writes, “may never be known. Too many people have already fled the scene. Too many people were killed on the spot. Too many people are now under pressure to hide their deeds.”⁴ Meanwhile in Israel there was a growing sense that the government was implicated. Officially, responsibility was denied, but it is impossible to hide such matters from a populace some of whom had been among those guarding the gates of the camps. The streets of Tel Aviv were full of protestors, horrified by the massacres and calling the Israeli government to account. These protests, which led the government finally to set up a commission of inquiry on the day of the interview, September 28, are mentioned by both Finkelkraut and Levinas as a sign of hope.⁵

The opening exchange can serve as an example of a number of aspects of the interview as a whole. Malka remarks that he chose Finkelkraut as Levinas’s interlocutor because of a talk Finkelkraut recently gave arguing that the Jews “are split between a feeling of innocence and responsibility.” Turning to Levinas, he asks: “. . . [is Israel] innocent or responsible for what happened at Sabra and Shatila?” (LR 290). Levinas replies: “Despite the lack of guilt here . . . what gripped us right away was the honour of responsibility. . . . Prior to any act, I am concerned with the Other, and I can never be absolved from this responsibility.” He then adds that the idea that he is expounding is a Jewish idea, that he has always thought of “Jewish consciousness” as the sense of a responsibility outside and prior to the question of innocence, “an attentiveness” to a certain human feeling, “the feeling that you personally are implicated each time that somewhere . . . humanity is guilty” (LR 290). How are we to understand this statement? Undoubtedly it is questionable of Levinas to open the interview by saying that Israel is probably not guilty. It is clear, despite his

4. Thomas L. Friedman, “The Beirut Massacre: The Four Days,” *New York Times*, September 26, 1982, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/26/world/the-beirut-massacre-the-four-days.html>.

5. Our brief sketch is necessarily incomplete. The circumstances surrounding the events in 1982 were complex, with many different nationalities and peoples involved. Although the political situation—then and now—remains of interest, this essay is not centrally about the political situation in the Middle East. Our concern is that the political situation has become a pretext for a misreading, allowing scholars to dismiss Levinas and his philosophy because it fits a preconceived notion of the relationship among Jews or the relationship between Jews and others.

later praise for the protestors, that he is engaged here in wishful thinking. In his defense we can only repeat that on September 28 it was not known whether the Israeli government was guilty or not. The rest of the response, however, is more characteristic of the interview as a whole. At several points Malka asks a specific question, to which Levinas responds with a broad philosophical assertion, albeit often a fruitful one. Evidently, Levinas finds Finkelkraut's distinction inadequate to his thought, one of the cornerstones of which is that I am responsible whether or not I am innocent. To respond directly, either by saying that Israel is guilty and therefore responsible or innocent and therefore not responsible, is inadmissible for him, as it would constitute an assertion that responsibility is something other than a foundational characteristic, something secondary to moral and legal determination rather than prior to it. It is likely that Levinas's answers would have been more politically concrete had the situation been clearer to him. Certainly he has the sense that Israel is not directly implicated in the massacres, but equally certainly he is aware that the events and motivations are obscure—hence his shift to the more general philosophical register. Despite all this, however, his answer is on the whole a good one. Despite a belief that Israel did not cause the massacres, he binds it in responsibility and claims that this is a Jewish thing to do.

Finkelkraut, realizing that he has to clarify his notion of innocence, adds that what most disturbed him was the initial response by the Israeli government, which refused to inquire into the massacres because, as Finkelkraut paraphrases, “Nobody can teach us anything about morals” (LR 290). The implication is that Jews, having been victims of the Holocaust, have nothing left to learn. This Finkelkraut calls “the temptation of innocence.” Levinas responds with a further philosophical clarification of the idea of innocence. He begins by pointing out that many Israelis do feel responsible for the massacres; they bear this burden. And, according to Levinas, a “real innocence” arises here. In other words, Levinas continues to gesture toward his broader philosophy, in which innocence cannot be defined as a freedom from guilt but arises, rather, as part of our responsibility, such that the only real innocence that exists is an awareness of a shared guilt. Having established this point, he states his agreement with Finkelkraut: To have survived the Holocaust does not give one a free pass to close one's ears to the cries of the other. Evoking the Holocaust as if to say that the victims of this atrocity are always and everywhere right is “as odious as the words ‘Gott mit uns’ written on the belts of the [German]

executioners” (LR 291). Finally, he spends a moment clarifying his ethics/politics distinction. No one is always right, but it is also true that sometimes it is necessary to take a stand. While “I” am infinitely responsible to the other, he explains, while “I” am never absolved, it is not obvious that this means “I” should not defend myself. For it is never just me who is attacked. It is also “those close to me, who are also my neighbours,” and they might require my help. Thus, he concludes, “alongside ethics, there is a place for politics” (LR 292).

What Levinas says here is true to his thought as expressed throughout his oeuvre. The ethical subject is infinitely responsible to and for the other, but when it is a question of the subject, the other, and other others—when it is a question of the “third”—then the infinite responsibility of ethics persists under a new set of demands that are necessarily finite. I cannot give everything to one other if there are two others before me, and I might well be put into a situation in which I must defend one other against another.

Finkelkraut replies that the ethics/politics distinction needs to be reconsidered and the demonstrators lining the streets of Tel Aviv are asking to have this relationship rethought. Speaking in Levinasian terms, he points out that political necessities cannot always be used to justify a violent response. He asks Levinas if there might have been some slippage, e.g., if ethical imperatives had been forgotten or covered over in the name of political necessity. Levinas agrees that this is a problem, and proceeds to make two arguments about the relation between ethics and politics as they bear on the state of Israel. The first is that the political existence of the state was originally ethically necessary, “as a way of putting to an end the arbitrariness which marked the Jewish condition, and to all the spilt blood which for centuries has flowed with impunity across the world.” The existence of the state as a political entity thus has an ethical justification: “the old ethical idea which commands us precisely to defend our neighbours” (LR 292). But, he continues, Finkelkraut is right to suggest that politics can become an excuse for violence, and thus he suggests a second role for ethics, “an ethical limit to this ethically necessary political existence.” There are things that one simply must not do. Moreover, Levinas continues, it might be that the events at Shatila and Sabra reveal this limit. But of this he cannot speak more specifically, as the limit is not an abstraction that can be thought about, much less resolved in a thought experiment; it is found only through the lived experience and confrontation we encounter daily in real situations, real choices. If Sabra and Shatila are to shed some

light on the relationship between ethics and politics, it will be found “in the concrete consciousness of those who suffer and struggle” (LR 293), those in Lebanon, those in Israel, and those in Europe.

By now Levinas has wandered far from Finkelkraut’s point that to keep ethics and politics separate opens the door to a justification of political evils, and Finkelkraut brings him back to it, arguing that if one rejects “the reflex of a noble soul, the luxury of a pure conscience exempted from the mudpit of history,” then one runs the runs the risk of an “aberration” by which political necessity is unchecked by any limit. Levinas concedes the point, saying that “because we are afraid to become noble souls, we become base souls instead” (LR 294). That is to say, because we are afraid of being too high and fine to dirty our hands with politics, we enter politics with a vengeance, becoming as dirty as we can possibly make ourselves. It is a remarkable statement. From Levinas’s first position, that Israel is probably not guilty, he has been led to propose the idea that any nation, Israel included, might engage in politics that is simply unethical, exceeding the limit, doing things that must not be done. It is not an idea that guides or governs the interview, but it is present nonetheless.

It is at this point that Malka asks the question with which we began this discussion. “Levinas, you are the philosopher of the ‘other.’ Isn’t history, isn’t politics the very site of the encounter with the ‘other,’ and for the Israeli, isn’t the ‘other’ above all the Palestinian?” One can see why Malka might venture this question. It is not only that Levinas has just now opened the thought that Israel might be as capable as any nation of sullyng its soul. It is also that in his very first statement he spoke of a collective responsibility—and if a collective responsibility, why not a collective ethics, and a collective other? In other words, despite the fact that Malka appears here to have made what is a common error among readers of Levinas, conflating the face with a nationality, and thus ethics with politics, there is some justification for his question in Levinas’s own statements. Levinas, however, is evidently not willing to abandon his ethics/politics distinction, and thus his response reprises that distinction for Malka, opening with the words, “my definition of the other is completely different.” He explains to Malka that the other, with whom I have an ethical relation and to whom I owe an infinite response, is a singular human being, i.e., a “neighbour,” whereas politics arises in a situation in which I have to chose between neighbors, “in which a neighbour attacks another neighbour,” at which point the other, who presented himself to me

as alterity itself, now has a political appearance, such that “in alterity we can find an enemy.” Behind his remark lies the idea, expressed in *Totality and Infinity* and many other writings, that ethical responsibility arises not between a person of this kind and a person of that kind, but whenever the self is faced with any other human being, prior to a definition of who or what that being is, such that the face shows itself non-empirically as a “nudity stripped of form.”⁶ One can, of course, dispute this idea, and many scholars have taken up Levinas on the point, uneasy, for instance, with an ethics that has no place for ethnicity, and therefore takes no account of what might be a history of injustice based on that ethnicity.⁷ But whether these arguments are right or wrong, there is no doubt that the situation in which the other is named or categorized, e.g., as Palestinian, is for Levinas a political situation rather than an ethical one, which is to say that it treats not a subject and an other but a set of collectives with different names and competing interests. A political situation, to be sure, remains one in which one is called on to strive for justice! But it is not a face-to-face encounter. As Robert Bernasconi puts it, “the Palestinian is not as such the Other of the Jew.”⁸ This is the gist of Levinas’s response. Alterity pertains to ethics, not politics. It is clear that even if he could at this point have fruitfully been pressed on the matter of Israeli politics and the ethical limit, what he has done instead is to retrench, returning the interview to a philosophical square one.

Some further light can be shed on Levinas’s response by a consideration of the political context. Even as Levinas finds himself correcting Malka’s formulation, arguing that in a political dilemma there is no relation to an other but rather a choice between competing neighbors, must he not also view the question—and particularly Malka’s “above all”—as a request for him to make this choice, and to make it in favor of the

6. Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998), p. 96.

7. See, for example, Robert Bernasconi, “Who Is My Neighbour? Who Is the Other? Questioning the ‘Generosity of Western Thought,’” in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological Tradition* (Pittsburgh: Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center, Duquesne University, 1992), pp. 1–31; reprinted in *Emmanuel Levinas: Critical Assessments*, vol. 4, ed. Claire Elise Katz and Lara Trout (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 5–30. See also John Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011).

8. Robert Bernasconi, “Strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt: Levinas and the Politics of Otherness,” in *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*, ed. Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2006), p. 248.

Palestinians? Likely this is what he hears behind the question. But can he do this? Ought he to be called on to do this? As we mentioned, at the time of the interview it was believed that the Christian Phalangists were responding to the assassination of their president by Palestinian terrorists. Levinas is thus faced with what appears to be a conflict between a group including some who have just committed atrocities, and a group including some who have just assassinated a leader who might have brought peace to Israel and Lebanon. Under these circumstances it would be the height of arrogance for him to make a political pronouncement, choosing one of these sides, choosing it moreover, not in his own name but in the name of the Israelis—and all the more so given that he has just suggested that Israel itself might be guilty. The closest he can come to an answer is an insistence that such choices must not be seen as arbitrary, or merely partisan. “There are people who are wrong,” he says, meaning that one does not flip a coin and choose this neighbor over that neighbor, nor does one attend in one’s decision only to political pragmatism or prior alliance. One must try to work out the moral dilemma. But to do so, to determine “who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust” takes time and facts, neither of which Levinas has on September 28, and more often than not it is an impossible task in the best of circumstances. One might, on this basis, point out that state violence is complex and cannot be fit into the terms of Levinas’s rubric, under which a neighbor attacks a neighbor. But of course Levinas is aware of this, and likely it is precisely because of this complexity that he does not answer Malka by making a choice.

In response to Malka raising a concern that mysticism might turn into politics, Finkielkraut now says that he is concerned with the opposite: politics turning into mysticism. After the 1967 war, with its fast, decisive victory, something entered into the Israeli psyche. It was as if they could not help seeing this victory as a messianic moment. Levinas counters with the idea that Israel is less in danger of this cast of mind than other nations. He believes that in Israel ethics will never be the “good conscience of corrupt politics,” at least not in any lasting way, and that the Tel Aviv protests demonstrate this (LR 295). He offers in support a short account of ideas he has developed elsewhere,⁹ the gist of which is to distinguish between triumphalist political messianism, which he does not believe obtains in Israel, and what others have called *weak* messianism, which he sketches

9. Emmanuel Levinas, “Messianic Texts,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997; first published in 1963), pp. 59–96.

here by speaking of “day-to-day life,” and “hard work, the daily sacrifice made by people who’ve left secure positions and often abundance in order to lead a difficult life, to lead a life which isn’t disturbed by the values of our Western comfort” (LR 295). This kind of messianism is alive in Israel, where, as Levinas adds a bit later, we do indeed find “a new way of life” (LR 296). Finkielkraut expresses partial agreement, saying that despite what he sees as a potential growth of the bad kind of messianic politics in Israel, “the Zionism of Ben Gurion and Levi Eshkol is still alive” and can be seen in the protests (LR 295).

Levinas finishes the interview by speaking of old books, as he often does when discussing Zionism or Israel. He asserts that “not enough has been said about the shock that the human possibility of the events at Sabra and Shatila—whoever is behind them—signifies for our entire history as Jews and as human beings,” and then he mentions that the old Jewish books are “in jeopardy.” Finkielkraut queries this, and, to explain, Levinas turns to two passages of Talmud (LR 296). The first valorizes “those who are defamed without defaming” and links this virtue to the military victory of Deborah in Judges 5, suggesting that even when one has just led a successful conquest, one must be prepared to bear defamation rather than defaming others. The second text also deals with defamation, as it arises in the talmudic account of the story from Numbers 13 in which Israelite spies go into Canaan and return to the desert telling lies about the land, lies for which God strikes them dead. Levinas interprets: “if calumny of that which is ‘but stones and trees’ already merits death, then how serious, a fortiori, must be calumny related to human beings. . . . A person is more holy than a land, even a holy land, since, faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness to be but stone and wood” (LR 296–97). Brief as they are, Levinas’s analyses of these texts weigh against an association of triumphalism with Zionism and against the idea that the land itself is sacred. They weigh in favor of a morality that forbids the slaughter of a person in the name of a land, and that shoulders the blame in a case where blame is in doubt. Levinas might be thinking of many things when he says that the old books are in jeopardy, but it is these ideas that he brings out, these ideas, we must assume, that he believes are in danger of being lost and must be preserved.

We note, in conclusion, that the thrust of the interview as a whole, the idea Levinas opens with and closes with, is that there is responsibility even when there is no guilt, that this is, as he says at the beginning, a Jewish

idea, and as he says at the end, a talmudic idea. It is not a stretch to say that this was the idea he came to the interview wishing to express, and that it is the idea that he thinks Israel is in jeopardy of losing and must not lose. Whatever the commission finds, then, Israel must share responsibility for the massacres. It is worth highlighting, in addition, two points that we believe contribute to the misreadings we are about to discuss. First, the radical distinction that Levinas makes between ethics and politics and the alteration in the relationship between subject and other implied in that distinction create the radicality of his philosophical project, but they are difficult ideas to work with. It is clear that they cut against the grain of Western philosophy, requiring a shift in entrenched thought, but the paths that shift should take are not always clear, even to scholars of his thought. Levinas's statements in the interview rely on the idea that ethics precedes ontology, and thus precedes the political, but do little to clarify the potential application of the idea. If we add a volatile political situation in which everyone is assumed to have chosen a side, it can become tempting to misread the distinction in order to deny that we need to contend with Levinas's project at all. Second, and more simply, Levinas does not issue an unequivocal denunciation of Israel's hand in the massacre. These two points together allow for a misunderstanding not only of how his responses relate to his philosophical project but also of what he might actually think about those events.

Misreadings

Alliances are Biological

In an endnote to the 2006 article we have cited, Robert Bernasconi suggests that the confusion about how to read the interview might originate in Martin Jay's 1990 review of *The Levinas Reader*.¹⁰ In the review, Jay offers a brief but sound account of Levinas's ethics and the way it differs both from Kant's and Buber's; he speaks of the role of the third and how it draws ethics into the sphere of the political, or "the totalizing discourse of ontology"; and he describes with skill some of the binary oppositions that follow from the ethics/politics distinction. Turning at last to the interview, he cites the exchange that has since become the focal point for Levinas's critics: Malka's suggestion that the other for the Israeli

10. Bernasconi, "Strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt," p. 259n11; Martin Jay, "Hostage Philosophy: Levinas's Ethical Thought," *Tikkun* 5, no. 6 (1990): 85–87.

is “above all the Palestinian” and Levinas’s response, which we have analyzed at length. The response strikes Jay as “chillingly close-minded.” He explains: “Here the infinity of alterity and the transcendence of mere being by ethical commands, the hostage-like substitution of self for other, are abruptly circumscribed by the cultural-cum-biological limits of permissible kinship alliances. Ontological considerations of who people are interfere with the ethical injunction that we ought to treat all others with responsibility.”¹¹

Insofar as Jay intends here to point to the tragedy that accrues to the sphere of the political, we would say that Levinas is aware of this tragedy and has written of it in many texts. For example, the talmudic reading “Toward the Other” is an elegant and moving consideration of the Jewish day of Atonement and the difficulty of forgiveness in the face of injustice, a lament that to offer justice to some might mean bloodshed for others. Likewise Derrida, whose critique of the Levinasian binary Jay mentions, describes in *The Gift of Death* the scandalous aporia of responsibility: that to be responsible to some necessitates being irresponsible to others. That an infinite obligation is “abruptly circumscribed” by “alliances” when one is forced to choose is an idea central to Levinas, and important also to Derrida; ontological considerations do indeed interfere with the ethical injunction, and both Levinas and Derrida would likely accept that there is something chilling in this. But it seems clear that this is not what Jay finds chilling, which is rather the idea that the alliances that circumscribe obligation must be cultural or biological—i.e., matters of kinship. Jay suggests that Levinas has chosen Israel, once and for all, over any and every other alliance, and that he has made that choice on the basis of culture or blood, rather than any other consideration.

Jay’s reading is defensible as what it is, a reading, in the same way that other readings would also be defensible. Levinas’s refusal to offer a formula for political justice is intended to leave room for political actors to make decisions based on circumstances, but the resulting gap also leaves room for critics to speculate on the way an actor might make those decisions, and on the way Levinas himself might have made those decisions. Jason Caro is particularly sensitive to this problem. He understands that Levinas’s refusal to determine criteria by which one could define an ally or an enemy is a philosophical strength. And yet, as he notes, “because the

11. Jay, “Hostage Philosophy,” p. 87.

criteria for the consideration of justice are theoretically underdeveloped, the Levinasian and Levinas himself run the risk and temptation of serving partisan aims instead of the obligations inescapably owed to the Other.”¹² And one could indeed argue from statements Levinas has made in interviews to the effect that all true civilization flows from the Bible and the Greeks,¹³ or thoughts developed in *Totality and Infinity* that link ethical obligation to the father–son relationship,¹⁴ that he has made the choice in ways that favor his own culture and kin. We are not, therefore, arguing that Jay’s interpretation is absolutely illegitimate; although the text at hand does not substantiate it, it does not refute it either. But as we continue, we think it will become clear that what might have been a viable, if narrow, reading on Jay’s part becomes something else for others. Caygill will work hard to support Jay’s reading, but will do so with illegitimate interpolations. And Butler will use Jay’s reading as a ground. By the time she is writing, one can evidently take it for granted that the political alliances Levinas sees as necessary for the tragic and aporetic work of justice are to be made on the basis of kinship.¹⁵

12. Jason Caro, “Levinas and the Palestinians,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 35, no. 6 (2009): 678. Caro raises several interesting criticisms of Levinas but does not misread the interview.

13. Emmanuel Levinas, *Is It Righteous To Be?*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2011), p. 149. (The original interview from which this formulation is drawn is from 1985.) See also an interview with Raoul Mortley conducted in 1991: Raoul Mortley, “Levinas,” in *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 18.

14. See his discussion in the sections included in “Beyond the Face,” in particular sections C, “Fecundity,” pp. 267–69, and E, “Transcendence and Fecundity,” pp. 274–77. It is worth noting that Levinas is thought to have addressed this perception of the ethical in his 1974 book, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

15. The influence of Jay’s reading persists, and not only through the chain we will trace. In 2012, Zahi Zalloua defends Jay’s point: “On this reading, it is not Levinas’s philosophy of the Other itself that is questioned, but only its inconsistency or ‘misguided’ application. What could be more contrary to Levinasian ethics than an appeal to religious and national sameness (as the basis for ethical or political action)?” Yet Zalloua also recognizes Bernasconi’s argument that the real problem for Levinas’s critics is his refusal to use alterity as a sociological marker. Zalloua, “The Ethics of Trauma/The Trauma of Ethics.” See Bernasconi, “Who Is My Neighbour? Who Is the Other?” p. 10: “Had Levinas identified the stranger as literally a foreigner, one whose country of origin is other than my own, he would have neglected the disruptive sense of being a stranger and reduced the term to a sociological category.”

The Jew as Other and Neighbor

Howard Caygill's remarks on the passage,¹⁶ like Jay's, are introduced by an analysis of the way the entry of the third compromises the infinite demands of ethics. As we will see, however, Caygill's analysis makes explicit the idea that is only gestured at in Jay. He opens the relevant discussion by citing a line from *Otherwise than Being*: "To be on the ground of the signification of an approach is to be with another for or against a third party, with the other and the third party against oneself, in justice."¹⁷ It is a difficult line, but Caygill is clearly correct in his interpretation: the entry of the third engenders a situation (a situation that we, following Levinas's usage in the interview, have been calling "politics," but which Caygill, legitimately following other usages, calls either an "ontological supplement" or "justice") whereby ethics is transformed into "a system of alliances" (LP 132). So far, so straightforward. But Caygill now adds two ideas that are increasingly controversial. First, he points out that the "I" here might stand with the other for the third, or with the other against the third, or with both of them against the self, but does not stand with the third against the other. This is true and somewhat interesting, but it might be particular to this formulation. Other formulations of the same idea—such as the one from the interview where a neighbor attacks another neighbor—do not have this peculiarity. This first idea, though, is intended to deepen the problem with a second, which consists of an interpretive leap. Caygill tells us that it is "permitted by the terms of the ontological supplement" to "name the 'other' and the 'third' the 'State of Israel' and the 'Palestinians'" (LP 132). The implication is that by the terms of Levinas's philosophy, we could stand in any political configuration except one: with the Palestinians against the State of Israel. The Israelis, as our other, are those to whom we owe everything; the Palestinians are those whom we owe at most justice, but a harsh and practical justice, one that might involve everything that Levinas puts into the camp of the political, including war. We can see no justification for this interpretation. Even a scholar as critical of Levinas as Jason Caro calls it "methodologically intrusive."¹⁸ If it is true that one could name the third "Palestinians," it is also true that one could name the third "the State of Israel." The other, of course, could

16. Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002). Further references will be cited parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation LP.

17. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 16.

18. Caro, "Levinas and the Palestinians," p. 678.

carry neither of these names and is addressed most commonly as you, *tu*. Caygill appears here to be offering a systematic analysis that would back up Jay's ideas about culture, biology, and kin, but it requires a creative interpolation that is more adventurous than anything in Jay, and it is not warranted by Levinas's words.

In his next chapter, Caygill turns his attention to the interview, from which he draws more ostensible support for his understanding of the ontological supplement, support that is based on a certain reading of the word "neighbour." According to Caygill, Levinas uses this word exclusively to mean Israel and the Jews. He reminds us of the preface to *Beyond the Verse*, where Levinas emphasizes that "my family and my people . . . are my 'others,' like strangers. . . . Those near to me are also my neighbours,"¹⁹ drawing from this a dubious equivalence between neighbor and kin (LP 192); in addition, he points out that Levinas uses the word "neighbour" to mean "Jew" early in the interview itself, where he says that "when you defend the Jewish people, you defend your neighbour" (LR 292). Let us look again now, in this light, at the infamous lines from the middle of the interview. Levinas says: "The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy" (LR 294). If it were indeed the case that "neighbour" always meant Jew to Levinas, the sentence "if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour" would be an ugly one. But it seems clear to us that Levinas is at this point using the word "neighbour" more generically. For one thing, he cannot quite be using the definition Caygill draws from *Beyond the Verse*, where the neighbor was, as Caygill saw it, kin, as he says here explicitly that neighbor might or might not be kin. For another, he signals a change of usage with the words "in this sense." And finally, he speaks immediately of a neighbor attacking another neighbor, which, if Caygill's reading were right, could only refer to a Jew attacking a Jew, or an Israeli an Israeli. Echoing Jay, Caygill claims that Levinas's response is "chilling," adding that "it opens up a wound in his whole oeuvre" (LP 192). But these reactions appear to be based strictly on a misreading of the word "neighbour," on which he has imposed a consistency it does not have.

19. Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), p. xvii.

Caygill appears to hold that the only way to defend Levinas's words is through an "apologetic" reading that would assume Levinas was speaking of "transcendental" others rather than "empirical" ones. But he himself offers other ways to read the lines, for he is pressed to wonder "who are the neighbours who are at war with each other?" (LP 193) and to speculate in answering: "Palestinians are not the other, are not neighbours. . . . Or is the State of Israel being attacked by the Palestinian 'neighbour'?" Caygill is right, certainly, to say that there is a disjunction between Levinas's rubric "when a neighbour attacks a neighbour" and the situation in Lebanon. He says: If [the knowledge of who is right and who is wrong] is more than tactical or strategic utility, that is, if it is ethical, then it will become less easy to identify in the other an enemy" (LP 193). We agree, as we agree with his analysis of the remainder of the interview, and with his suggestion that Levinas could have said more than he did about Sabra and Shatila, despite the fact that at the time the nature of the events was unclear. Robert Bernasconi neatly expresses a great deal of this when he writes that to the extent that the interview is a failure, it is because Levinas did not take "this opportunity to condemn the massacre unambiguously." Bernasconi also argues that Levinas's insistence on radical alterity—his unwillingness to allow the ethics/politics distinction to be compromised—means that "Levinas sacrifices the possibility that his ethics can open up a radical politics."²⁰ This too is perhaps compelling. But equally compelling is Bernasconi's polite suggestion that although "Caygill has shown very well the richness of Levinas's response," "Caygill is insensitive to Levinas's use of the notions of stranger, neighbour, and other, even to the point of imagining that Levinas suggested that 'the Palestinians are not the other, not neighbours.'"²¹

20. Bernasconi, "Strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt," p. 248.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 258n8. Besides Bernasconi, others who have defended the interview include Peter Atterton, review of Michael Morgan, *Cambridge Introduction to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/24763-the-cambridge-introduction-to-emmanuel-levinas/>; Amanda Loumansky, "Reply to Fagan: Hanging God at Auschwitz: The Necessity of a Solitary Encounter with the Other as the Genesis of Levinasian Ethics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 8 (February 2009): 23–43, see especially the section "Who is the Neighbour? The Engagement of Ethics and Politics"; Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), see in particular, p. 457; and Jacob Schiff, "The Trouble with 'Never Again!': Rereading Levinas for Genocide Prevention and Critical International Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 36, no. 2 (2008): 27–49.

We should add that Caygill is very good on the way Levinas's last few statements challenge a militaristic Zionism. He discusses the idea of defending old books, claiming it as a "departure from classical Zionism" (LP 193). He cites the line in which a person is more holy than a land (LR 297), saying that here "ethics seems once more to prevail over politics and the state." And finally he links Levinas's second talmudic reference to the longer reading of the same passage in "Promised Land or Permitted Land," where Levinas struggles with the Talmud's apparent sacralizing of the land, but in the end reads it to mean that Israel "is a country that vomits up its inhabitants when they are not just"—this Caygill rightly takes as "a warning that the State of Israel is only justified if it obeys the prophetic call for justice—if it ceases to do so, then its inhabitants will be expelled" (LP 194). Here we see Levinas suggesting that Israel might be held to a higher moral standard than other states. It is an idea that might well annoy Zionists, who could reasonably ask why Israel should be singled out for extra obligation, and also anti-Zionists, who might see it as an exclusivism, a spiritual elevation of Israel. But as Caygill points out, it is at any rate not an imperialistic Zionism. Insofar as it is a Zionism at all, it is one of duties rather than rights, responsibility rather than power.

The Faceless Palestinian

One of the central aims of Judith Butler's *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*²² is to locate within the Jewish tradition resources for a resistance to Zionism, or more precisely to what Zionism has, in recent years, come to seem to many people to represent. These resources include of course a "certain diasporic train of thought" (PW 23), but in addition a critique of state violence and oppression, as well as a sense of how our human obligations to one another might sustain possibilities for mutual cohabitation. Levinas is central to this project not only because he often speaks of Judaism as diasporic in character, but also because he links this trait to an account of the human obligation to the stranger, an obligation he also regards as Jewish, though not exclusively so. Butler, however, finds herself confounded by what appears to be a direct contradiction in Levinas's words. She writes: "It is interesting that Levinas insisted we are bound to those we do not know, and did not choose, and that these

22. Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012). Further references will be cited parenthetically within the text using the abbreviation PW.

obligations are, strictly speaking, precontractual. He was of course the one who claimed in an interview that the Palestinian had no face, that he only meant to extend ethical obligations to those who were bound together by his version of Judeo-Christian and classical Greek origins” (PW 23). Midway through this remarkable statement, following the words “no face,” she inserts an endnote that references the interview we have been examining. It reads: “See Levinas’s remarks that the Palestinians have no face (and hence their human vulnerability can be the ground for no obligation not to kill)” (PW 227n24). Following her insertion of this note, Butler uses the term “faceless” several times to refer to the place of the Palestinians in Levinas’s thought, sometimes with quotation marks and sometimes without.

Some months after the publication of *Parting Ways*, in a blog post for *Le Monde*, Bruno Chaouat pointed out what was clear to many: that Levinas did not actually call the Palestinians “faceless.”²³ Butler’s response appeared in the same forum a week later, and opens with a disclaimer to the effect that she did not say that he did. Quotation marks, *guillemets*, she points out, are “now used quite regularly in English for non-literal expressions, for ironic formulations, and for coinages,” the last of which explains her use of the term “faceless,” which is “not a quotation but my own coinage.”²⁴ Butler’s explanation here is technically plausible. At no point does she reference the word “faceless” to Levinas’s works or say that it is his word. In a typical formulation, for example, she writes that for Levinas, “the prohibition against violence is restricted to those whose faces make a demand on me, and yet these ‘faces’ are differentiated by virtue of their religious and cultural background. This then opens the question of whether there is any obligation to preserve the life of those who appear ‘faceless’ within his view or, perhaps, to extend his logic, by virtue of not having a face, do not appear at all” (PW 39). Here, as elsewhere, the attribution of the term “faceless” is ambiguous, and we certainly can grant Butler the benefit of the doubt when she says that the quotation marks are intended to designate her own coinage.

However, it seems to us that Chaouat did not intend to restrict his concern to her use of this formulation alone, and it is quite clear that Butler

23. Bruno Chaouat, “Débat: Judith Butler ou Levinas trahi?” *Le Monde* blog, March 13, 2013, <http://laphilosophie.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/03/13/debat-judith-butler-ou-levinas-trahi/>.

24. Judith Butler, “Levinas trahi? La réponse de Judith Butler,” *Le Monde* blog, March 21, 2013, <http://laphilosophie.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/03/21/levinas-trahi-la-reponse-de-judith-butler/>.

could not have defended herself in the same way had he explicitly objected to the term “no face”—which is, after all, equivalent to “faceless,” and which appears in the much less ambiguous phrases “claimed in an interview that the Palestinian had no face,” and “Levinas’s remarks that the Palestinians have no face.” These words suggest statements made by Levinas. Only he did not make them. And they are not addressed in Butler’s response to Chaouat. Chaouat’s general accusation therefore persists, even if Butler can defend her use of the one word he singles out.

But it is the other half of Butler’s idea that interests us more, namely, her statement that Levinas “only meant to extend ethical obligations to those who were bound together by his version of Judeo-Christian and classical Greek origins” (PW 23). For here we see at least part of the lineage of the image of the faceless Palestinian, a lineage that we have traced to its origins in Martin Jay’s and Howard Caygill’s claims about alliances to culture and kin.²⁵ Interestingly, no such claim about alliances is made in Butler’s response to Chaouat, where, following the discussion of quotation marks, she suggests that her account in *Parting Ways* dealt only with the transition from ethics to politics, a transition in which “the face as the primary modality of ethics is suspended when alterity appears precisely as enmity,” such that “the provisional facelessness of the enemy would apply to any enemy that conformed to conditions laid out by Levinas, surely not just the Palestinian people or its leadership.”²⁶ In the blog response, then, Butler appears as an orthodox Levinasian, and the implication that there is something uniquely faceless about the Palestinian has disappeared along with the idea that ethical obligations are only owed to Jews, Christians, and Greeks—the idea, in other words, that the transition to the political is guided by alliances rooted in culture and kin. But these ideas are not only stated clearly in *Parting Ways*, they are also one of its grounds, as we will try to show.

Our attempt to trace the links in the game of academic broken telephone that fill in the gap between Caygill and Butler is not decisive. Nevertheless, we will mention two relevant scholarly strands. The first is the rise of concern in various philosophers and scholars over the way

25. Interestingly, Butler does not adopt Caygill’s reading of the Jew as essential other, having previously developed a reading of Levinas that linked his figuration of the Jew to his figuration of the ethical subject—an account that reappears here in a description of the Jew as defined by having been persecuted. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham UP, 2005), see in particular the discussion on pp. 84–101.

26. Butler, “Levinas trahi? La réponse de Judith Butler.”

enemies are rendered faceless or given false faces, a concern that draws fruitfully on Levinas's own imagery and is explored in works such as Butler's *Precarious Life*,²⁷ as well as eventually being used to put questions to Levinas himself by such thinkers as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek.²⁸ The second is a growing concern over Levinas's apparent lack of sympathy for the Palestinian and his associated eurocentrism; representative of this concern is Tina Chanter, who writes in 2007 that "the Levinasian I subsumes, consumes, and abjects women and Palestinians without noticing, without recognizing their faces as faces that demand an ethical response."²⁹ Together, these texts can be understood to argue that Levinas should be read as a racist, and perhaps particularly as anti-Palestinian or anti-Arab. But all of them present this as an interpretation

27. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2006).

28. Zahi Zalloua, who speaks in his own name of "the phantasmatic investment in the image of the Jew as a figure of radical alterity, an image that Levinas . . . does much to perpetuate," also quotes Badiou writing of Levinas in 1993 that "this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a good other. . . . That is to say: I respect differences, but only, of course, in so far as that which differs also respects, just as I do, said differences," and Žižek, writing in 2003 that "what Levinas is basically saying is that, as a principle, respect for alterity is unconditional (the highest sort of respect), but, when faced with a concrete other, one should nonetheless see if he is a friend or an enemy. In short, in practical politics, the respect for alterity strictly means nothing." Zalloua, "The Ethics of Trauma/The Trauma of Ethics," p. 227; Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 24; Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003), p. 106.

29. Tina Chanter, "Hands That Give and Hands That Take: The Politics of the Other in Levinas," in Marinos Diamantides, ed., *Levinas, Law, Politics* (New York: Cavendish, 2007), p. 76. Chanter's concern is well represented in Diamantides's book, which also contains relevant essays by Simon Critchley and Caygill, as well as a reading of the interview by Desmond Manderson. Other critical readings worth considering include: Kaveh Bassiri, "On Transformative Compassion," *Michigan Quarterly Review* blog, August 21, 2014, <http://www.michiganquarterlyreview.com/2014/08/on-transformative-compassion/>; John Drabinski, "The Possibility of an Ethical Politics: From Peace to Liturgy," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 26 no. 4 (2000): 49–73; Catriona Hanley, "Levinas on Peace and War," *Athena Filosophijos Studijos* 2 (2006): 70–81; Anna Strhan, *Levinas, Subjectivity, Education: Towards an Ethics of Radical Responsibility* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Mahidi Teimouri "Edward Said: A Remembrance and a Tribute," *Expositions* 7, no. 2 (2013): 55–61; David Campbell, "The Deterritorialization of Responsibility: Levinas, Derrida, and Ethics after the End of Philosophy," *Alternatives* 19, no. 4 (1994): 455–84; and Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2013), pp. 70–73. The general consensus of these pieces is that Levinas has failed to live up to his philosophical ethics, a consensus we dispute.

of cryptonormative tendencies in his thought. No one until Butler implies that he made explicitly anti-Palestinian remarks.

There are, in fact, a number of questionable statements in the chapters of *Parting Ways* devoted to Levinas, some of which actively hinder the reader's understanding. For example, she tells us at one point that Levinas "objects to Islam as a 'founded religion,' meaning that it was charismatically induced by a leader who worked his way with unthinking peoples" (PW 49). She offers no reference, but the words "founded religion" are used dismissively of Islam in Levinas's account of Rosenzweig—an account, however, that gives no indication that Levinas agrees with Rosenzweig on the point. It is, of course, possible that Levinas speaks elsewhere in a derogatory way of Islam, but we do not know of such an instance. Nor are we given any account of the source for the claims that Islam was "induced" or Mohammed's followers "unthinking." These ideas do not appear in Levinas's piece on Rosenzweig, or anywhere else in the corpus that we have been able to find.

In an account that contains misrepresentations that appear to attribute to Levinas a negative attitude toward Islam—an account that is moreover punctuated here and there with descriptions of recent Israeli atrocities—the facelessness of the Palestinians becomes a significant substructure, one that forms the foundation for serious interpretive slippages. Take for example Butler's account of the section of "Jewish Thought Today" where Levinas speaks of "the countless masses of Asiatic and underdeveloped peoples," the needs of which will increasingly shape world politics, pushing Christians and Jews to the margins of history. Despite the fact that Levinas is also hard here on Jews and the Christians—"sects that devour one another because they cannot agree on the interpretation of a few obscure books"³⁰—this passage might well be understood, as Butler says, to betray a streak of racism (PW 46). But what kind of racism? Butler implies that the countless masses are Arabs or Muslims (PW 48), but this is unlikely given Levinas's statement that to these people "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob no longer mean anything."³¹ Butler's concern with the Palestinian plight deserves respect; nevertheless it seems clear that her conviction about their facelessness has allowed her to conflate them with these countless ones—with the result being that she cannot help us measure Levinas's

30. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 165.

31. *Ibid.*

real, and in this essay obvious, failings. And again in this passage, the absence of careful referencing compounds the problem. Having quoted liberally from the unfortunate essay, Butler adds that Levinas “calls for a new kinship between Christians and Jews to combat this rise ‘in what could only be called barbarism’” (PW 47). Those final seven words appear to be quoted, but they are not in Levinas’s essay and once again we have not been able to find them anywhere in his corpus. And they are strong words! Perhaps Butler would tell us that here too she is using quotation marks in a way that is now quite regular in English, and yet this formulation seems neither to be a non-literal expression, an ironic formulation, or a coinage. What it seems to be—what it will be understood to be by those who take up *Parting Ways* without an intimate knowledge of Levinas—is a blatantly racist statement made by Levinas himself.

At two other points what might have been fruitful criticisms of Levinas are undermined by her reference to the faceless Palestinian. The first opens in a challenging discussion of the object of ethical obligation. It is true, Butler suggests, that the Levinasian subject responds ethically to any other who faces her. But it is also true that she cannot come face to face with everyone. Is she not more likely to form an ethical bond with those with whom she lives? And are these not more likely to be members of her own ethnicity, or in some other way like her? The questions are worthwhile, and they have been dealt with thoughtfully by readers and scholars of Levinas.³² Butler, however, uses the faceless Palestinian to cut through the problem abruptly, returning to her initial contradiction by which Levinas denies his obligation to the stranger in denying his obligation to the Palestinian. Thus the problem of the multiplicity of faces—that one might have to choose this face over that face—leads Butler not to an account of the Levinasian political, but to the assertion that one chooses on the basis of “culture, ethnicity, and religion” (PW 39). The reading originally given by Martin Jay is thus iterated and strongly supported by the supposed facelessness of the Palestinian.

The second discussion that seems to us to come off the rails begins in an argument to the effect that Levinas’s occasional claim that the Jews are shaped by a history of persecution functions to break down his distinction between the pre-ontological and the ontological. Certainly it might

32. The essays in Eleanor M. Godway and Geraldine Finn, eds., *Who Is This ‘We’?* (Montreal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1994), are particularly insightful on these questions.

be possible to bring a legitimate critique against Levinas on this issue! Instead, however, Butler states: “If ‘persecution’ now characterizes the ‘fate’ of the Jews, and so a recurrent and ahistorical dimension of existence, then any historical argument suggesting that the Jews are not always in the situation of being persecuted could be refuted on definitional grounds alone: Jews cannot be persecutory since, by definition, Jews are the persecuted” (PW 45–46). This appalling argument for eternal Jewish innocence is of course mentioned in the interview, where Finkelkraut attributes it to the Israeli government and condemns it. Levinas too condemns it, saying that to claim that Holocaust victims can do no wrong by virtue of having suffered is “as odious as the words ‘Gott mit uns’ written on the belts of the executioners” (LR 291). In other words, such attitudes on the part of Jews prompt Levinas to compare them to Nazis—and he does this in the very interview from which Butler draws the image of the faceless Palestinian. Clearly Levinas’s suggestion that Judaism has been shaped by persecution does not imply that Jews can never be persecutors—unless one succumbs to Butler’s distortion concerning the faceless Palestinian, outside of ethical protection.

When we try to imagine a more fruitful dialogue between Levinas and Butler on the question of Palestine, we begin with Levinas’s assertion at the beginning of the interview that to accept a responsibility that extends beyond the question of innocence and guilt is a Jewish idea. Butler places the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Israelis, and Levinas believes that it is fundamental to Judaism to shoulder responsibility. If we removed the faceless Palestinian from the picture, would they not have much to discuss? Part of what Levinas might want to say in such a discussion harks back to a worry Butler expresses in her introduction about whether in searching within the Jewish tradition for her resources to combat Zionism, she is privileging Judaism—a privileging that Levinas might see operating equally in her relentless criticism of Israel. For the figure of the third in Levinas does not function only to mitigate the ethical obligation. We would argue that *Totality and Infinity* introduces the third precisely because if the other does not have an object for her responsibility, she does not have full subjectivity. Levinas is responding here to the master–slave dialectic in Hegel—where only one side attains self-consciousness and moves forward. The third provides reciprocity and symmetry, the third requires one to choose a neighbor over a neighbor without providing grounds for that choice, but the third also subjectivizes the other, allowing her to take

up messianic responsibility—a responsibility that Butler’s account leaves little room for Palestinians to shoulder. And in the same vein, Levinas might have questioned whether an ironically exclusionary thrust creeps into Butler’s reading insofar as it might be seen to proscribe Jewish group solidarity—as if Jews acting in concert, or Jews acting in the interests of other Jews, would somehow violate the political, leaving the defense of the interests of others as the only public presence open to Jews. Levinas, in other words, might want not to lose sight of the fact the Palestinians can come together in solidarity and cultural autonomy, as can Jews. Butler would likely raise counterarguments, and it is this kind of back-and-forth that we would like to have heard.

We share Butler’s abhorrence of state-sponsored violence. We are not surprised that she finds resources in the Jewish tradition to support her quest, as she would find them in all of the world’s major religious traditions. But though cohabitation would be desirable, Butler’s pursuit of its theoretical underpinnings and their subversion in Levinas is slanted by a series of misrepresentations, many of which are supported by a single erroneous image. We particularly admire the parts of Butler’s book that discuss reading as a route to peace. Misreadings, though, are another matter.

What we found in all three scholars was a twofold problem. First, their respective projects would each have been served better by a more faithful if not more charitable reading of Levinas’s statements in the interview. By taking the approach they took, they put themselves in a position to reject the very parts of Levinas’s project that might have helped support their own philosophical and political commitments. Second, we were made uneasy by what seems to us an increasing tendency to read the interview hastily, almost as if Levinas is expected to make the racist remark. As we said, we do not wish to defend Levinas’s political commitments nor his ambiguous response to the massacres. But finding a philosopher’s response other than one might wish is different from exaggerating or misrepresenting the remarks he did make. We have noticed moving forward that these three readings have allowed other scholars to dismiss Levinas’s ethical project out of hand. This seems not simply unfair to the philosopher but a detriment to the many difficult discussions we need to have about ethics and politics, discussions that could benefit from his voice.