

## Carrying Levinas' Thought Forward

*Levinas Studies: An Annual Review. Volume 1.*

Edited by Jeffrey Bloechl and Jeffrey L. Kosky.

Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005. 211 pp.

ISBN 0-8207-0371-0. Hardcover. \$56.00

*Review by Ryan A. Mest*

Levinas' work had a successful year in 2005, which marked 100 years since Levinas' birth. The North American Society for Levinas Studies formed and will soon be hosting its first conference in 2006. Duquesne University Press, who published many of Levinas original works, including *Time and the Other*, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, has offered Levinas scholars and students the first of an annual collection of essays addressing the work of Emmanuel Levinas. Far from being an introduction to Levinas studies, Co-Editor Jeffrey Bloechl in his introduction describes *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* as a testament to the present and growing importance of Levinas' thought. He writes, "The present volume, and indeed the series that it announces, is situated less in the wake of that thinking than in the horizon, broader and still expanding, where those questions, and *its* questions feel urgent." The nine essays in the volume cover different territory and especially new territory in commenting and building on Levinas' thought. Due to the breadth of topics, each reader will have their individual attention drawn to particular essays and fields of Levinas studies particular to their interests.

Opening *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review, Volume 1*, my eyes ran over the titles and names. An essay by Paola Marrati struck me first. Lately, I've been reading Levinas and Derrida alongside each other. Naturally, the article entitled "Derrida and Levinas: Ethics, Writing, Historicity" drew me in. The essay brings the work of Levinas and Derrida together as a similar response to the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Marrati introduces Levinas' and Derrida's common philosophical offering as "passive time." Time in phenomenology cannot bear the radical alterity of the Other. Time must exceed the present, the One, and the Same. In short, Levinas' ethics and Derrida's deconstruction bear a rethinking of time that opens philosophy to the Other. Perhaps I may summarize the first part of Marrati's essay by sharing a question that guides it. How has their unique

articulation of (passive) time united Levinas and Derrida and what does it offer philosophy in context of phenomenology?

For most of the essay, Marrati explores “three points of contact” between the work of Levinas and Derrida. Transcendental violence, the trace, and justice are the sites of difference and elucidation in which the reader dwells with Marrati. Through most of the pages, one reads more about the work of Derrida than Levinas, although Marrati addresses Derrida’s work to the Levinas scholar. Perhaps the striking value of this essay is twofold. First, it grapples with the similarities of Levinas and Derrida vis-à-vis phenomenology. Second, it explicates the differences between a Derridean and Levinasian philosophical project all the while enriching the meaning of each project by these very differences.

Perhaps inspired by the friendships Levinas held, including a friendship with Derrida, I found myself turning next to Alan Udoff’s essay entitled “Levinas and the Question of Friendship.” Udoff’s essay opens with an evocation of the letter as a revelation of the meaning of friendship. Appropriately, he begins with the distance often experienced between friends, calling to mind for me the infinite distance between self and Other. And yet, he introduces the letter as that which traverses this distance. Across an infinite divide, might a letter find its way in the spirit of friendship? How might we think the letter alongside the relationship between friends?

Udoff leads us from Aristotle to Cicero and through St. Augustine on a philosophical tour through a history of writing on friendship: both writing about friendship and writing as friendship (perhaps writing becomes the emblem of friendship?). At the end of this tour, I arrived at a very brief section on Levinas which although short bears a very heavy question. Did Levinas write nothing about friendship? What of this absence in his work, a work which inspires such close friendships in his own life? How bizarre that Levinas immediately calls to mind a history of philosophical works articulating friendship and yet none of these works are his own. Having followed Udoff’s inquiry and exegesis of major philosophical works, how could we end up still thinking of Levinas without finding friendship in his texts? What of this paradoxical end which strikes me as so appropriate and yet remarkably empty? Udoff does offer us some relief in brief arguments calling forth friendship from the work of Levinas. He also wonders profoundly about friendship by thinking of the absence of writing on friendship as telling of what friendship is for Levinas. Thinking of friendship in the work of Levinas, I read the last line of the essay with you: “Now absent, where is it to be found?”

The next essay I turned to was “From the Other to the Individual” by Jean-Luc Marion. With the recent death of Jacques Derrida, Marion appears to me as the most prominent continental philosopher working today, particularly in relation to phenomenology. Marion follows the theme and process of individuation from Levinas’ *Time and the Other* through *Totality and Infinity*. Marion does a remarkable job of summarizing Levinas’ objection to being as a way of thinking of individuation and the individual. In just a few pages, he clearly articulates Levinas’s starting point, which is a response to Heidegger’s phenomenology. Marion even summarizes his already clear argument for the benefit of the reader,

Let us summarize the argument so far: being is equivalent to ‘evil’ because its universal anonymity forbids individuation, and thus access to the Other. What is more, this access implies my own individuation as well as his or hers. The individuation of the *I* is traced in its suffering, yet it cannot ‘assume itself’ in the death that nonetheless destroys it. One must thus pass directly to the ‘face to face without intermediary’ with the Other. (101)

In a very small space, Marion impressively offers Levinas’ move from being to the Other. His summary alone is food for thought, leaving me chewing on his sentences that carry a lasting flavor and craving for more. By setting off from being to the topic of the individuation of the subject in relation to the Other, Marion offers the reader a course through Levinas’ works that carries the profound weight of Levinas’ philosophical project with rigor.

The constitution of the individual in and by relating to an Other follows a path through *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity* that winds through dense philosophical concepts that stand as substantial markers on the way to the Individual from the Other. Marion’s section headings guide the reader by informing him or her of what philosophical exegesis might be found in each section: “Breaking Solipsism: Suffering and Death”, “The Other as ‘Femininity’”, “The Face Appears as No Other Person”, “The Face Appears as No Person”, “Individuation and the ‘Ambiguity’ of Love”, and “That Word that is Too Beautiful or Too Pious or Too Vulgar”. While rigorously articulating the process of individuation and encountering philosophical difficulties along the way, Marion takes up central themes of Levinas’ work as the section titles suggest. Each section is valuable in its own right for the commentary on these central themes. The overarching argument regarding

individuation stands forth with discursive power. Marion offers Levinas' work in terms of individuation, allowing philosophers and philosophically minded scholars to think of the individual in a radical and sophisticated manner quite different from and quite revealing in context of other discourses on the individual and individuation. I found this essay useful for thinking about the premises of Social Psychology, where the individual is a central object of study. Marion's clear summary in the beginning of the essay and the subsequent path opened up by the following sections offered me a language with which I could address classic experiments in social psychology on the relationship between individuals and social situations.

In addition to the essays I've briefly described here, the first volume of *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* contains many more: "Levinas and Judaism" by Michael L. Morgan, "Emmanuel Levinas on Secularization in Modern Society" by Ze'ev Levy, "Levinas, Plato and Ethical Exegesis" by Richard A. Cohen, "The Exception of Testimony" by Rodolphe Calin, "Ethics of the Image" by Kevin Hart, and "The Blessings of a Friendship: Maurice Blanchot and Levinas Studies". In my study of the work of Levinas and Derrida in context of each other and in my attempt to rearticulate social psychological thought in terms of the Other and individuation, I found this collection of essays useful, thought-provoking, current, and fresh. Duquesne University Press has begun a series which any scholar taking up Levinas will find useful and inspiring. For an aged Levinas scholar, a newcomer to Levinas, or an interdisciplinary thinker interested in taking Levinas' work beyond philosophy, this collection will surely offer you at least one essay if not quite a few that address your interests. However, keep in mind that the essays in this book are both lucid and demanding philosophical reads. The reader interested in an introduction to Levinas' thought should look elsewhere because this collection of essays carries Levinas' thought forward with new questions and research rather than summarizing what's already been written.