LEVINAS, ADORNO, AND THE LIGHT OF REDEMPTION: NOTES ON A CRITICAL ESCHATOLOGY

DYLAN SHAUL
University of Toronto

It seems natural to suppose that the burgeoning field of critical phenomenology would come to bear at least some affinities or resemblances (whether implicitly or explicitly) to critical theory, insofar as both are deeply concerned with directing a rigorous critical eye towards the most pressing political, economic, cultural, and social issues of our time.[1] Yet critical theory has also had its share of critics of phenomenology itself, not least of which was the foremost member of the first-generation Frankfurt School critical theorists, Theodor W. Adorno. Adorno's critique of phenomenology was, for historical reasons, confined to Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and might be concisely put as follows: for Adorno, classical phenomenology is insufficiently *critical* towards contemporary realities of oppression and domination (an insufficiency variously attributed to an alleged pernicious idealism, solipsism, methodological individualism, descriptivism, or ahistoricism in classical phenomenology).[2] On this count, critical phenomenologists today may very well agree—at least to the point of affirming that phenomenology's critical potential remained largely "untapped" in its classical formulations. However, in a twist of historical fate, Adorno failed to engage with a contemporaneous phenomenologist with whom he perhaps had more in common than anyone else: Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas himself was also notably critical of Husserl and Heidegger (while of course also being enormously indebted to them), for reasons not altogether dissimilar to Adorno's. For Levinas, phenomenology had hitherto neglected the fundamental ethical or moral dimensions of experience—in particular our ethical responsibility towards the Other in the face of the manifold evils and injustices of

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[1] For existing work on the general relationship between critical phenomenology and critical theory, see Salamon (2018a) and Guenther (2020). The present paper builds on this work by drawing a detailed comparison between a specific phenomenologist (Levinas) and a specific critical theorist (Adorno), with the project of critical phenomenology in mind.

[2] For Adorno's critique of Husserl, see Adorno (2013). For Adorno's critique of Heidegger, see Adorno (2003). For a book-length account of Adorno's relationship to Husserl, Heidegger, and classical phenomenology (as well as existentialism), see Gordon (2016). A serious consideration of the details of Adorno's critique of classical phenomenology exceeds the bounds of the present paper.

the world.[3] What might Adorno have thought of Levinas's work, and Levinas of Adorno's? What might they have learned from one another? And how might this exchange have affected the trajectories of critical theory, phenomenology, or critical phenomenology?

This article is motivated by the possibility that bringing Levinas's phenomenology and Adorno's critical theory into a mutually illuminating and enriching conversation can meaningfully contribute to the ongoing development of critical phenomenology. Though a number of studies have compared and contrasted these two thinkers from a variety of angles, I will take up a set of themes that has not yet received direct and thorough attention: both thinkers' central concern with a redemptive or messianic futurity, which provides the basis for what I will identify as a shared "critical eschatology."[4] In particular, I will argue that Levinas and Adorno's respective critical eschatologies share three key features: a fundamental ethical responsibility toward that which exceeds systematization or totalization (the Other and the non-identical, respectively), a refusal of philosophical theodicy in view of the historical catastrophes of the 20th century, and a foregrounding of the "light of redemption" as the key methodological tool proper to the recognition of the preceding concerns. (Of course, there may be as many differences between Levinas and Adorno as there are similarities, and any full account of the relation between these two thinkers would have to take both into account. If this study emphasizes the similarities at the expense of a robust consideration of the differences, it is only due to limitations of space, and the general sense that these similarities are less obvious and less frequently remarked upon, thus warranting being drawn out here at length.)

In section one to follow, I consider Levinas's and Adorno's shared identification of the inherent limits to philosophy's systematizing or totalizing activities, affirming the radical alterity that surpasses these limits as the locus of ethical responsibility. For Levinas, the Other constitutes an "infinity" that transcends every totality, and so perpetually overflows every thought that attempts to think it or conceptualize it. The ethical is precisely a matter of responding to and caring for the Other in view of its domination by the Same, gestures given expression not least by Levinasian phenomenology itself. For Adorno, the non-identical escapes every effort to grasp it in the terms of identity (paradigmatically, conceptual thought). Giving voice to the suffering of the non-identical under the grip of identity is a self-described condition for the truth of Adorno's critical theory. This above all comprises its profound ethical thrust. Just as Adorno's theory of the non-identical gives rise

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[3] References throughout Levinas's corpus would be too numerous to cite here, but it would be worth mentioning in this regard that Levinas's critique of Husserl and Heidegger had already begun in his earliest studies, e.g., Levinas (1995, 1998c).

[4] Existing work connecting and comparing Adorno and Levinas has taken up this connection and comparison via questions of religion and theology (de Vries 2005), ethics and materiality (Nelson 2020), and aesthetics (Smith 2006; Belmer 2019), among others. Particular attention has been paid to similarities and differences between Levinas and Adorno's responses to the Holocaust (Eisenstadt 2006; Sachs 2011; Portella 2019). I take my emphasis on eschatology and redemption to offer a new perspective on the Levinas-Adorno relationship that nonetheless builds upon all of these prior studies, to which I am indebted in innumerable ways.

to a negative dialectics, Levinas's phenomenology of the Other gives rise to a unique ethical variety of negative theology: it is the "negativity" of these two approaches that lends them their critical edge.

In section two, I consider Levinas and Adorno's shared understanding of the historical catastrophes of the 20th century as delivering a definitive repudiation of the traditional philosophical project of theodicy (whether in its Leibnizian or Hegelian formulations, among others). With parallel biographies as European Jewish intellectuals born at the turn of the century, Levinas and Adorno each identify the Holocaust (or Auschwitz, by metonymy) as a historical refutation of any and every attempt to offer a comprehensive rational justification for human suffering. For Adorno, horror in the face of the event of Auschwitz grounds a new categorical imperative to prevent any comparable event from recurring; for Levinas, this event similarly poses a summons to an unconditional obligation toward the Other. In effect, theodicy is the archetype of the perspective of the Same or identity that attempts to assimilate all alterity, thus dominating the Other or the non-identical. To reject theodicy is to refuse reconciliation with an unjust present—this being the very meaning of the "critical" outlook (whether critical phenomenology or critical theory), I claim—and instead opening a horizon of anticipation for a redemptive future.

In section three, I consider the ways in which both Levinas and Adorno take the standpoint of this redemptive future to be the necessary condition of possibility for a critical engagement with present injustice. Without offering any positive conception of such a future, this standpoint nevertheless shines a negative light through which we may see the manifold ways in which the current state of affairs falls short. For Levinas, it is only an eschatology of messianic peace that can break through and thereby expose the totality of war—under which is included all forms of violence and oppression. The messianic promise exerts its ethical force not through an awaiting of its final fulfilment, but rather in the call it issues here and now to come to the aid of the Other. For Adorno, only the light of redemption (whose full meaning must await clarification below) can properly illuminate the world—with all its evil, depravity, and so on—such that it might be investigated by the critical theorist. This light offers a unique kind of critical phenomenological "seeing," allowing phenomena to appear in a way that reveals their implication in all manners of unjustifiable suffering. For both Levinas and Adorno, such seeing is simultaneously the simplest and the most difficult. The simplest, since there is perhaps nothing more evident than the immense suffering which engulfs the world, and the immense distance this world therefore stands from any possible or impossible redemption. The most difficult, since our very efforts to understand the world in the light of redemption are themselves a part of the unredeemed world—a fact with which any critical eschatology must itself critically reveal and understand. The productive tension between these two conditions, I would argue, inevitably shapes the practice of contemporary critical phenomenology. It is my hope that the close reading of Levinas and Adorno in what follows will prove helpful in navigating this tension in critical phenomenological work today.

I. LEVINAS AND ADORNO'S NEGATIVE ETHICS

In this section, I examine and compare Levinas's account of our fundamental ethical responsibilities to the Other in *Totality and Infinity* with Adorno's account of our fundamental ethical responsibilities towards the non-identical in *Negative Dialectics*.[5] Both exhibit what I will call—for reasons that will become clear—a "negative ethics," which comes to serve as the ethical basis for a critical eschatology.

I.I LEVINAS: AN ETHICS OF THE OTHER

In Levinas's (1969) *Totality and Infinity*, the two titular concepts are first presented in terms of war and peace. Totality manifests in and as war, where individuals are reduced by force to serving functions within totalizing systems, compelled to carry out actions in which they do not recognize themselves and through which all higher values are annulled (21-22). In war, as in any totality, nothing is permitted to remain exterior: everything is violently reduced to the domination of the Same. Philosophy encounters Being in the form of war and, for that reason, totality is the dominant form of philosophical thought. The totality of war, Levinas maintains, can be overcome only through "the eschatology of messianic peace," whose truth exceeds philosophical evidences (Levinas 1969, 22). We will have to wait until section three to determine the precise contours of Levinas's messianism. But suffice it to say for the moment that the promise of peace shines forth in the transcendence of the face of *the Other*, which Levinas expresses with the notion of *infinity*. The Other qua infinite overflows any thought that attempts to think it: the Other is irreducible to the Same, and so forever exceeds the grasp of philosophical or conceptual totalities. Of course, the forces of totalization nonetheless perpetually attempt to forcibly reduce the Other to the Same, from which attempts emerge all forms of oppression, domination, subjugation, and so on—"war," in a word (Levinas 1969, 21-30).

For Levinas, *ethics* denotes our responsibility towards the Other in light of the threats of such totalizations: in short, we are responsible for respecting the Other *as infinitely other*, and for alleviating those conditions in which the Other is not respected as such—a task that is itself *infinite*. Levinas (1969) raises ethics to the status of "first philosophy" (42-48, 302-04), a gesture he takes to be unique in the history of philosophy generally, but particularly within phenomenology, which (on Levinas's account) privileged the theoretical over the practical in its classical forms. Nevertheless, Levinas sees in (Husserlian transcendental) phenomenology a certain invaluable openness to transcendence and exteriority, which he will come to recognize for the first time as ultimately that of the Other (28-29). Levinas's phenomenological ethics can be construed as "negative" in the precise sense of negative

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[5] Though the choice of these two texts is somewhat arbitrary, they each strike me as the single most powerful and comprehensive articulation of their authors' positions and views available. Interestingly, *Totality and Infinity* and *Negative Dialectics* were both originally published within a span of five years in the 1960s (1961 and 1966, respectively), after each of their authors had already enjoyed long careers— Levinas was in his mid-fifties, Adorno in his early sixties.

theology, his occasional protests to the contrary notwithstanding. Levinas analogizes the Other both to the Cartesian God (the referent of Descartes's idea of infinity) and to the Platonic "Good beyond Being," which through Neoplatonism becomes the basis for the negative (apophatic) theological tradition of the Middle Ages and beyond (Levinas 1969, 25, 79-81, 102-05; Descartes 1996; Plato 2003, 508a-e).[6] Who or what the Other "is" cannot be positively specified (for the Other exceeds Being itself), nor can our duties towards the Other be given any complete or systematic positive elaboration: we can only ethically *encounter* the Other in the phenomenological revelation of the face, in which the Other's very presence is marked by an indelible absence qua transcendence.

I.II ADORNO: LENDING A VOICE TO SUFFERING

In Adorno's (1973) *Negative Dialectics*, the titular negativity is first presented in terms of the relation between identity and non-identity. For Adorno, philosophical thought as such is identity-thinking: the systematic effort to reduce all reality to the terms of its own conceptual identities. Yet the non-identical forever exceeds any and every attempt to exhaustively systematize or conceptualize it. When identity-thinking runs up against the limitations of its own efforts to grasp the non-identical, it falls into dialectical contradictions. It is the project of negative dialectics to rigorously uncover these contradictions without providing any positive resolution to them—for to do so would be to relapse into identity-thinking. Compelling non-identity to conform to identity is the form of all oppression, domination, subjugation, and so on. Negative dialectics, if it is anything, is the struggle against this conformity and compulsion (4-11). Adorno offers a related schema of subject and object to get at much the same point: identity-thinking qua philosophical thinking has historically privileged the subject over the object, whereby the object is compelled to conform to the systematic conceptualizations and identifications of the philosopher's subjectivity. Against this, Adorno proposes a new priority of the *object*: the object, as the non-identical, exceeds every effort to exhaustively subjectify it. The object "objects" to such subjectification (174-92).

The ethical thrust of Adorno's negative dialectics is given one of its most powerful formulations with reference to the relation between subjectivity and objectivity: "The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed" (1973, 17-18). Critical theory (which I take to be synonymous with negative dialectics in the present context, this being Adorno's chosen name for his own particular practice or brand of critical theory) is precisely an effort to lend a voice to suffering, and only on this condition does critical theory possess any measure of truth. Of course, lending a voice to suffering is in service of the struggle to *eliminate* such suffering. Following Adorno's conception of the subject-object relation, the voice lent to suffering must always be unfinished, fallible, and so on. The objectivity weighing on the subject as suffering itself exceeds any complete

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[6] For work on Levinas and negative theology, see Fagenblat (2008) and Wolosky (2017).

conceptualization or identification, requiring the negativity of negative dialectics to be given proper expression. In other words, "[negative] dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things": this is an *ethical* project insofar as it is in service of bringing about the *right* of state of things (Adorno 1973, 11). Once again, this project is *negative* insofar as the right state of things cannot be given a positive description in the midst of the wrong state in which we live.[7]

I.III LEVINAS AND ADORNO:
TOWARDS A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL ETHICS

Levinas and Adorno already seem to agree, strikingly, on a number of points. For both Levinas and Adorno, our ethical responsibilities are directed towards that which exceeds philosophical or conceptual totalization or identification: the Other and the non-identical, respectively. Notice that in both cases this excess is a matter of alterity or difference: non-identity is what is *other* with respect to identity, while the Other is what is *non-identical* with respect to the Same. Again, in both cases, oppression and domination arise from the attempted forcible reduction of this alterity: the reduction of the Other to the Same, and of non-identity to identity. Our responsibility is accordingly to resist this reduction: to respect the Other *as other* and the non-identical *as non-identical*, and to struggle against conditions in which they are not so respected. These tasks are *negative* insofar as the irreducible alterity of the Other and the non-identical—and, by extension, our duties towards them—cannot be given an exhaustive positive description. As Adorno (1973) evocatively writes: "Materialism brought [the theological ban on graven images] into secular form by not permitting Utopia to be positively pictured; this is the substance of its negativity. At its most materialistic, materialism [i.e., Adorno's critical theory] comes to agree with theology" (207).[8] As it turns out, the ban on graven images is equally *Levinas's* stance towards the Other, whose reduction to the Same would be the form of all idolatry; this is the substance of the negativity of Levinas's negative theology (see Levinas 1969, 294-98). At the risk of an overstatement we might say that, at its most critical, Adorno's critical theory comes to agree with Levinas's phenomenology.

So, how might this agreement between Adorno's critical theory and Levinas's phenomenology contribute to the project of a critical phenomenology? On the one hand, Adorno's critical call to lend a voice to suffering can be given a distinctively phenomenological bent. A critical phenomenology of suffering would strive to give voice to the weight of objectivity on the subject, as the most subjective experience of the objective conditions of oppression and domination. The tools of phenomenological description seem better suited than any to giving voice to these experiences *qua experiences*, insofar as such description is,

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[7] For work on the "negativity" of Adorno's ethics, see Bernstein (2001) and Freyenhagen (2013).

[8] For a book-length account of Adorno and the "ban on images," see Truskolaski (2020).

I claim, the most attuned to the intricacies of experience as such.[9] On the other hand, Levinas's phenomenological account of the face of the Other may supply an invaluable experiential ethical grounding to Adorno's critical theory. A critical phenomenology open to the ethical encounter with the Other could profoundly witness and testify to the countless ways in which this openness is systematically blocked, obstructed, and so on. Of course, what I ultimately want to suggest is that a critical phenomenological *eschatology* stands as the most promising point of mutual illumination and enrichment between Levinas and Adorno. We have already seen that Levinas takes the respect for the Other to underwrite a vision of messianic peace, and that Adorno takes the respect for the non-identical to herald the "right" state of things—a "utopia" that cannot be positively pictured. But before we can get to the details of this critical eschatology, we might first consider a concrete case of its opposite: namely, the oppression or domination of the Other and the non-identical, and the totalizing philosophical outlook that fails to properly respond to this condition.

II. LEVINAS AND ADORNO CONTRA THEODICY

In the previous section, I examined the "negative ethics" of the Other and the non-identical at play in Levinas and Adorno. In this section, I take up the challenges to the classical philosophical project of theodicy that follows from this ethics, with specific historical reference to the Holocaust (or Auschwitz, by metonymy, as per Adorno's usage), which bore particular biographical significance for both Levinas and Adorno. As we will eventually see, it is their rejection of theodicy that will come to open the horizon of redemptive futurity constitutive of a critical eschatology.[10]

II.I LEVINAS AGAINST "USELESS SUFFERING"

Levinas was born in 1906 to a Jewish family in Lithuania, moving to France as a young man to undertake his philosophical studies. He served in the French military during the Second World War, spending most of the war as a prisoner-of-war in Germany, where his POW status protected him from the Holocaust's death camps. Maurice Blanchot managed to shelter Levinas's wife and daughter (who had also been living in France) in a monastery, but the members of Levinas's family that had remained in Lithuania were not so fortunate: they were deported to the camps or killed by the SS (Malka 2006). The French dedication

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[9] Here contemporary work in critical phenomenology on *witnessing* and *testimony* as ways of "giving voice" to experiences of suffering and oppression is crucially important: see Oliver (2001, 202) and Stauffer (2018).

[10] Here again I am indebted to Eisenstadt (2006), Sachs (2011), and Portella (2019) for their accounts of Levinas and Adorno's responses to the Holocaust. Each of these accounts chooses to favor either Levinas or Adorno as providing the more valuable or profound response. I have left such a choice in suspension here.

to Levinas's (1998b) second masterwork *Otherwise than Being* reads: "To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and of the millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism"—the Hebrew dedication then gives the names of Levinas's family members who perished (vii). Though Levinas offers many different reflections on these events over the course of his career, some of the most potent are contained in his essay "Useless Suffering":

> Perhaps the most revolutionary fact of our twentieth-century consciousness . . . is that of the destruction of all balance between Western thought's explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century. This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason sets limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics. Among these events the Holocaust of the Jewish people under the reign of Hitler seems to me the paradigm of gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror. . . . The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity. (1998a, 97)

Let us try to unpack this passage. "Theodicy" was first coined by G. W. Leibniz (1990) to denote the effort to justify the ways of God to humanity—in particular, to explain the existence of evil and suffering in the world in such a way that would render it compatible with God's perfect goodness and justice. Though Leibniz may have introduced the term, Levinas rightly sees the theodicean impulse as characteristic of the entirety of the Western tradition from Plato to Hegel. Leibniz himself argued that, since God is all-good, this world must be the best of all possible worlds: whatever apparently unjustified evil or suffering we may encounter is in fact "for the best," since God's goodness requires that this world is the best possible. All evil and suffering must be in the service of God's higher purposes, even if we cannot understand them.

For Levinas, the historical catastrophes of the 20th century have rendered any such project of theodicy radically untenable and unconscionable. To attempt to justify the horrors of the Holocaust by appeal to a "higher purpose" would be a desecration of the memory of the victims; no purported justification could ever be proportionate to the suffering endured. The search for such justifications manifests the classical philosophical domination of the Same and of totality; all evil and suffering can be justified (so the philosopher of the Same declares) once it is understood in terms of its place in a totalizing system, which lends it a higher systematic purpose or meaning. But this precisely neglects the dimension of the *Other*, and above all the *suffering* of the Other. For Levinas, the desire to justify the suffering of the Other is itself the beginning of all evil. The proper ethical response to suffering is

not to *justify* it, but to strive to *eliminate* it. Indeed, it is in the very essence of the suffering of the Other to be thoroughly "useless," and thus lacking in any sufficient justification (Levinas 1998a, 91-94). Our witness to the terrifying suffering of the 20th century—an utterly "gratuitous" suffering, a suffering beyond all reason and all limits—calls us to our responsibility towards the Other, and to the struggle to end the Other's ongoing suffering. This call, we will see, is ultimately the eschatological call of messianic peace: a peace that would spell the end of useless suffering.

II.II ADORNO AGAINST "RECONCILIATION"

Adorno was born in 1903 to a Jewish family in Germany, beginning his academic career in the 1920s. By the 1930s, in light of the rise of Nazism, Adorno fled to England in exile, and subsequently to the United States. In 1949 he would return to Germany, where he lived out the rest of his life (Müller-Doohm 2009). Adorno never ceased in his efforts to come to grips with the catastrophes that had transpired in the country and continent of his birth. Indeed, he never ceased in his efforts to search for what it would *mean* to "come to grips" with catastrophes that were in their very essence unimaginable and unthinkable. Adorno (1973) maintained that it certainly could *not* mean extracting a positive meaning or "sense" from the events that would purportedly "reconcile" us to them:

> After Auschwitz, our feelings resist any claim of the positivity of existence as sanctimonious, as wronging the victims; they balk at squeezing any kind of sense, however bleached, out of the victims' fate. . . . The earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure Voltaire of the theodicy of Leibniz, and the visible disaster of the first nature was insignificant in comparison with the second, social one, which defies human imagination as it distills a real hell from human evil. Our metaphysical faculty is paralyzed because actual events have shattered the basis on which speculative metaphysical thought could be reconciled with experience. (361-62)

No doubt the references to "speculative thought" and "reconciliation" here are directed primarily to Hegel (1975), who described his own philosophy of history (the historical unfolding of Spirit qua "second nature") as a "theodicy" in the Leibnizian sense (42-43). For Hegel, history is a "slaughter-bench" on which individuals and nations are sacrificed for the sake of the march of Reason through history; when the philosopher comprehends the justified necessity of these historical sacrifices, they become reconciled to them (69). For Adorno, Auschwitz marks the definitive repudiation of any such account of history. To attempt to justify the real Hell of Auschwitz with reference to historical necessity, "squeezing" some perverse meaning out of it, would be to infinitely defile and wrong the memory of the victims.

In effect, such a historical theodicy amounts to the domination of the non-identical by identity: whatever does not or cannot conform to the systematic rational necessity of the historical process can be justifiably sacrificed. Negative dialectics must lend a voice to the

suffering that such domination invariably produces, as much as to the historical suffering that paralyzes our metaphysical faculties. Indeed, it is the suffering and disasters of history that impose on us an ethical obligation to struggle against all such suffering:

> A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen. When we want to find reasons for it, this imperative is as refractory as the given one of Kant was once upon a time. Dealing discursively with it would be an outrage, for the new imperative gives us a bodily sensation of the moral addendum—bodily, because it is now the practical abhorrence of the unbearable physical agony to which individuals are exposed even with individuality about to vanish as a form of mental reflection. It is in the unvarnished materialistic motive only that morality survives. (Adorno 1973, 365)

The bodily sensation of unbearable physical agony, not any transcendental deduction via pure practical reason, is now the materialist basis for morality, on Adorno's view. Here is another way in which materialism and theology coincide:

> At its most materialistic, materialism comes to agree with theology. Its great desire would be the resurrection of the flesh, a desire utterly foreign to idealism, the realm of absolute spirit. . . . Only if the physical urge were quenched would the spirit be reconciled and would become that which it only promises while the spell of material conditions will not let it satisfy material needs. (Adorno 1973, 207).

True reconciliation is achieved not, as Hegel believed, when we come to affirm the horrors of history as justified necessities and sacrifices. Rather, it is only through the *refusal* of any such affirmation, which alone can guide us toward the "resurrection of the flesh" (foreign to idealism and absolute spirit, i.e., to Hegelianism): the satisfaction of our material needs and the defeat of all abhorrent bodily agony. Only with this future resurrection and redemption could we be *truly* reconciled (with ourselves, with each other, and with the world).

II.III LEVINAS AND ADORNO: TOWARDS A REDEMPTIVE FUTURITY

Once again, the points of agreement between Levinas and Adorno are striking. Both repudiate theodicy as wronging the victims of historical injustices, recognizing the historical catastrophes of the 20th century as definitively delivering this repudiation. Both reject the classical philosophical project of rationally justifying past suffering, in favour of the ethical project of alleviating present suffering. The very horrors of history that defy imagination call us to our responsibilities towards the Other (our "categorical imperative"), and to the difficult labour of working towards a redeemed future in which the suffering and agony of the Other would be no more (an eschatological "resurrection"). The political, economic, and social world in which we live remains the very world that allowed and produced these

horrors, and which continues to produce them (in an occasionally less obvious fashion) in countless ways. Our responsibility is not to explain them away as necessary means to a higher end, but to ceaselessly struggle against the conditions of their continued production and reproduction.

In a sense, this is what I take *critical* to mean, whether with reference to critical theory or critical phenomenology: the refusal of reconciliation with an unjust present, the refusal of justification for the suffering of others, the refusal of all conditions in which the Other is debased, degraded, or destroyed.[11] Both Levinas and Adorno exemplify this critical outlook. A critical phenomenology premised on a cooperation of insights from Levinas and Adorno would evince this same outlook twofold, insofar as it brings these two thinkers together.[12] But how would such a critical phenomenology approach the phenomena under its investigation, given its criticality? Would it be simply "negative" in a narrow sense? Of course, it would be affirmative insofar as it labours in the service of justice, of goodness, and of a better world in a better future. Indeed, as we will see, both Levinas and Adorno maintain that it is precisely from the perspective of this redemptive futurity that past and present unjustifiable suffering can be seen in the proper light, so as to engage in the critical struggle towards this redeemed future—a future that can only be conceived "negatively," insofar as our unredeemed present (and its "ban on images") precludes the positive construction of the "right state of things." This light is the "light of redemption," and the critical approach it engenders is a critical eschatology.

III. LEVINAS AND ADORNO ON THE LIGHT OF REDEMPTION

In section one, we examined Levinas's and Adorno's basic ethical positions concerning responsibility towards the Other and the non-identical, including the need to lend a voice to suffering. In section two, we saw how these ethical positions related to the historical events of Levinas and Adorno's own times: a rejection of theodicy qua rational justification for unjustifiable human suffering, and a concomitant commitment to the struggle for a

[11] For reflections on the notion of "critique" in contemporary critical phenomenology, see Salamon (2018a) and Guenther (2020). Guenther explains the political practice of critical phenomenology with particular clarity and force: "As a political practice, critical phenomenology is a struggle for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others. These structures exist on many levels: social, political, economic, psychological, epistemological, and even ontological. . . . As a transformative political practice, critical phenomenology must be beyond a description of oppression, developing concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world. In other words, the ultimate goal of critical phenomenology is not just to interpret the world, but also to change it" (15-16).

[12] One might think that Adorno's emphasis on the materiality of *bodily* suffering would be incompatible with Levinas's phenomenology, but in fact Levinas is a powerful phenomenological thinker of embodiment (see Meskin 1993 and Guenther 2012).

redeemed future in which such suffering would be eliminated. In this section (three), I explore the methods by which Levinas's phenomenology and Adorno's critical theory approach their objects of investigation, in light of the foregoing exposition. Both Levinas's "messianic peace" and Adorno's "messianic light"—i.e., the "light of redemption"—allow us to see and investigate the evils and injustices of the world with the critical eye necessary to work towards a *better* world, which might form the basis for a critical eschatology.

III.I LEVINAS'S MESSIANIC PEACE

In the preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1969) identifies the standpoint of totality and the Same with *war,* and the opposing standpoint of infinity and the Other with *peace*. With those identifications in mind, Levinas offers his most direct and powerful account of their relationship and their import for his own phenomenological project in eschatological terms, which we will proceed to unpack in detail:

> Morality will . . . proclaim itself unconditional and universal when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war. Philosophers distrust it. . . . [F]or them eschatology—a subjective and arbitrary divination of the future, the result of a revelation without evidences, tributary of faith—belongs naturally to Opinion. . . . But, when reduced to the evidences, eschatology would then already accept the ontology of totality issued from war. Its real import lies elsewhere. It does not introduce a teleological system into the totality; it does not consist in teaching the orientation of history. Eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history, and not with being beyond the past and the present. . . . It is a relationship with *a surplus always exterior to the totality*, as though the objective totality did not fill out the true measure of being, as though another concept, the concept of *infinity*, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality, non-encompassable within a totality and as primordial as totality. This "beyond" the totality and objective experience is, however, not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience. The eschatological, as the "beyond" of history, draws beings out of the jurisdiction of history and the future; it arouses them in and calls them forth to their full responsibility. . . . It does not envisage the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. . . . Without substituting eschatology for philosophy, without philosophically "demonstrating" eschatological truths, we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. (22-24)

Let us try to make sense of this passage. Levinas maintains that the eschatology of messianic peace must come to "superpose itself" onto war. But what precisely does this superposition amount to? Traditionally, eschatology refers to divinely-revealed predictions or prophecies regarding the future eschaton or "end times," in which history would be brought to an end by God's final judgment; philosophers of the Same naturally distrust such predictions (insofar as prophecy and revelation are taken to be non-philosophical), treating them as matters of faith or opinion rather than of philosophical truth. But for Levinas, the true significance of eschatology is not a matter of predicting any such definitive future. The superposition of messianic peace onto the ontology of war emphatically does *not* amount to the determination of a teleological end to history qua totality. (Such a determination would have to be supported by various evidences, the necessity of which would be tantamount to a capitulation to war and the Same). Rather, it requires the institution of a relation *beyond* totality and history, which is nevertheless reflected *within* totality and history—namely, *infinity*. No totality can ever "fill out" the whole of reality; there is always an excess of the infinite that escapes it, and which, when reflected within it, can allow us to break up and break down the totality in question. In other words, the true meaning of the messianic future described in eschatology is the call it issues to us *here and now* to take up our ethical responsibilities, drawing us out of the domination of totality and the Same towards the infinity of the Other.

Indeed, though the infinite exceeds experience, it is equally reflected within experience, precisely in "the gleam of exteriority or transcendence in the face of the Other." It is the gleaming light of this transcendent face of the Other that shines on totality, revealing its conditionality and sites of breakdown. This light is the infinite messianic light: the light of the eschatology of messianic peace. Though this light shines from beyond our experience (the Other is *transcendent*), it illuminates our experience in a certain way. Specifically, it illuminates the totality of war (domination, oppression, etc.) in the service of the possibility of future peace: a peace in the name of which we take up the present ethical struggle against war in all its forms. Levinasian phenomenology is precisely a phenomenological account of experiences as illuminated by this light. Its eschatology does not guarantee a future messianic era "beyond" history, but rather institutes a redemptive futural orientation within history and experience—the opening of history itself to new and unknown futures. Such an orientation rouses us to identify and understand the totalities that besiege us, and break them up in the service of and out of our responsibility for the Other.

III.II ADORNO'S LIGHT OF REDEMPTION

Adorno's (2005) most powerful account of the "light of redemption" comes in the "Finale" to *Minima Moralia*, which I quote in full:

> The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is

reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair's breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters. (Adorno 2005, 247)[13]

For Adorno, only a philosophy that would contemplate all things from the standpoint of redemption could be practised responsibly in our present despairing condition; a philosophy that dismissed this standpoint by denying the project of alleviating the despair of the world could not be responsibly practiced. But what precisely is entailed by this contemplation from the standpoint of redemption? Redemption sheds a certain light on the world, which Adorno takes to be necessary for any knowledge about the world. This knowledge offers perspectives that render the world displaced and estranged by revealing a certain indigence and distortion therein (domination, oppression, injustice, etc.). Such distortion ("distorted" relative to the transparent clarity of a redeemed world) would be visible only under the illumination of the messianic light, i.e., only in an imagined retrospection from the standpoint of a future redemption that would be free from these same qualities. The world needs this light, for it is itself a world of darkness qua suffering, despair, and so on; the suffering world seen only in its own darkness would fail to recognize the depths of its own despair. In other words, it is only from the perspective of a *better* world (even if only conceived negatively) that we can understand the shortcomings of the present one. The task of thought is to acquire such displacing and estranging perspectives from "felt contact" with the "rifts and crevices" of the objects of examination—a task that is simultaneously profoundly simple and impossible. It is simple because the despair of our condition is so blatant and total that its opposite (redemption) is equally clear, if only negatively. It is impossible because the very knowledge fashioned in the light of redemption would itself be marked by the manifold imperfections of the unredeemed world in which it is fashioned. Critical theory (to give

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[13] For a helpful contemporary discussion of this passage and similar ones throughout Adorno's corpus, see Truskolaski (2020, 94-104).

this knowledge a name) must also criticize *itself* and its own complicity in the suffering of the world, for the sake of the "possible"—that is, for the sake of the possibility of a future redemption, in whose light critical theory itself sees what it sees.[14]

The final sentence of the "Finale" is remarkable: "But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters" (Adorno 2005, 247). It is not the reality or the unreality of redemption that Adorno cares most about, but rather the *demand* placed on thought by the very standpoint of redemption and its messianic light. This is fundamentally an *ethical* demand, a moral imperative to see the world in the light of redemption—whether or not we may in fact ever be redeemed, whether or not any such thing is truly conceivable. The *futural* orientation of the standpoint of redemption nonetheless demands that we confront the despair of the *present*, the here and now, on which the messianic light shines. It is to present suffering that we must lend a voice, for the sake of a better future.

III.III LEVINAS AND ADORNO: TOWARDS A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL ESCHATOLOGY

The commonalities between Levinas and Adorno on the interconnected thematics of eschatology, the messianic, and redemption are deep and profound. For both Levinas and Adorno, the standpoint of a redemptive future (messianic peace or redemption) shines a necessary light on the present, illuminating it for phenomenological or critical analysis. The possibilities for a critical phenomenology on this basis seem to me especially promising. The illumination afforded by the light of redemption is precisely an illumination of the phenomena to be investigated by the critical phenomenologist who takes up the standpoint of redemption to perform such an investigation. The particular way of "seeing" in this light is a particular critical phenomenological mode of observation and description, attuned precisely to phenomena of oppression, domination, injustice, evil, and so on. Adorno's call to displace and estrange the world by intimately attending to its rifts and crevices has a clear phenomenological valence; Levinas's phenomenology no less enjoins this critical stance, and offers an array of phenomenological tools to make good on it. Insofar as the critical phenomenology practiced in the light of redemption refers to an eschatological future, we can call it a critical phenomenological eschatology, or simply critical eschatology.

Following both Levinas and Adorno, such a critical eschatology must be ready to subject itself to its own critique. For Levinas, the infinite which stands beyond totality must nonetheless reflect itself *within* totality, and only by so doing can it draw us to the point at which totality breaks down; our efforts in this regard, being forever finite and fallible, may always fall prey to the totalities in which they must be reflected. For Adorno, critique is conditioned by the damaged world at which it is aimed, and is thus marked by the very

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[14] An exemplary contemporary instance of this self-critique at work in critical theory would be Allen (2017), which is helpfully held up as a model for critical phenomenology in Salamon (2018a).

imperfections it theorizes. This is not a defeatism on either Levinas's or Adorno's part, but rather a demand that we redouble our critical efforts, never succumbing to the contentment of "good conscience" at having ostensibly completed our task once and for all. As far as either Levinas or Adorno are concerned (as far as either of them can surmise from the present state of things), the task cannot nor ever will be completed— redemption remains a future always just beyond the horizon, whose very unreachability ensures that the work of critical eschatology will never come to rest. For Levinas, messianic peace is not a final end to history, but a call to our responsibilities towards the Other here and now. For Adorno, the reality or unreality of redemption hardly matters, only the demand it places on us in the present. Again, far from defeatism, this is a redoubling of our critical eschatological efforts, necessary if critical eschatology is to be true to its own cause. As long as the light of redemption shines on our suffering and despair, critical eschatology can and must set to work.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, let us recapitulate the results of the foregoing investigation. For both Levinas and Adorno, our fundamental ethical responsibilities are towards that which exceeds philosophical totalization or systematization (the Other or the non-identical), whose suffering under the domination of totality or systematicity (the Same or identity) we must give voice to and struggle to eliminate. For both Levinas and Adorno, we are obligated to *put an end* to the suffering of others, not to seek a purported philosophical justification for such suffering—as the classical philosophical project of theodicy has sought to do. The historical catastrophes of the 20th century have repudiated theodicy: the memories of the victims— including all those who continue to fall victim to injustice anew every day—instead call us to take up our responsibility to fight against present oppression and domination in favour of a better future. For both Levinas and Adorno, the methodological tool proper to these concerns is the "light of redemption" (the messianic light, the standpoint of redemption or the eschatology of messianic peace). To see all things as they would appear in the light of redemption is to see clearly and distinctly the manifold totalities, structures, and systems of domination, oppression, and injustice in the present world, revealing all the ways in which the present world is utterly distorted and indigent in comparison to a would-be redemptive future. Even if this redemption can only be negatively specified in relation to the despair of the present, even if this redemption may never come, its light still shines—and all the more brightly—for we the unredeemed.

Insofar as Levinas's phenomenology and Adorno's critical theory both take up this eschatological standpoint, they can both be said to evince a certain "critical eschatology" with promising possibilities for critical phenomenology. The task of a critical phenomenological eschatology would be, first of all, to lend a voice to suffering by articulating the experiences of intolerable objective conditions weighing on the subject (in Adorno's terms), or of totalities weighing on the Other (in Levinas's terms). Such critical phenomenological work would be *critical* inasmuch as it steadfastly refuses reconciliation with an unjust present

(Adorno) and any purportedly rational justification for the useless suffering that our world produces and re-produces (Levinas). The light of redemption illuminates phenomena for critical phenomenological analysis oriented at its most fundamental level towards a critique of the present and the struggle for a more ethical, more just, more flourishing future for us all.[15] Of course, this comparison between Levinas and Adorno has only just scratched the surface of a critical phenomenology of this kind; I take myself only to have laid the groundwork for further research in this regard by drawing attention to certain points of mutual agreement or resonance between the two. Further work would also be needed to explore the various crucial and productive differences between Levinas and Adorno in greater detail; I have only emphasized their similarities for the sake of making particularly salient the possibilities for mutual illumination and enrichment between these two epochal thinkers.

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As a coda of sorts, I give the final enigmatic words to two *other* thinkers of our unredeemed condition and of a messianic redemption. First, to Walter Benjamin (1969):

> Our image of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the image of redemption. The same applies to our view of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply. (254)

Second, to the always paradoxical Franz Kafka (1958): "The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival" (80-81).

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[15] Some contemporary critical phenomenological studies that seem to me to exemplify this approach (whether implicitly or explicitly to varying degrees) include Guenther (2013) and Salamon (2018b).

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