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Emannuel Levinas, Fr. William Richardson, and the return of the irresponsible subject

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This article returns to the famous encounter between Levinas and the Heidegger scholar, Jesuit, and Lacanian, Fr. William Richardson in 1962 when Levinas told Richardson of his own suffering as a prisoner of war in a Nazi camp in 1943. Richardson recounted this incident in his 1993 talk titled "The Irresponsible Subject." Here Richardson makes it clear that he regarded Levinas's behavior during their encounter as rude and irresponsible. In this article I analyze Richardson's interpretation of this incident from the perspective of Levinas's ethical philosophy. How did Richardson respond when confronted face to face with Levinas's own radical otherness as a Jewish prisoner of the Nazis and as someone whose parents and brothers were murdered by the Nazis? Did Richardson testify to an overwhelming and disorienting sense of ethical responsibility that made his return to his previous ways of understanding and conceiving impossible? I argue that though anyone can imagine a Levinasian reaction to such a revelation of Levinas's own suffering, there is no evidence of this in Richardson's interpretation of the incident. Rather, Richardson's essay seems to refute Levinas's ethical philosophy and even performs in many ways the strong ability of the subject to encounter even radical otherness, reduce it to more of the same, and return to itself securely and completely.

KEYWORDS: Levinas, responsibility, William Richardson

Emannuel Levinas, Fr. William Richardson, and the Return of the Irresponsible Subject

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Did you hear the one about Levinas meeting at a party a Jesuit, a Heideggerian, and a Lacanian? This might sound like a joke, but what it refers to, of course, is really quite serious: the famous, perhaps infamous, encounter in 1962 between Levinas and Father William Richardson, a noted Heideggerian scholar, Jesuit priest, and Lacanian psychanalyst. What we know about this encounter we know entirely through Richardson's perspective. He recounted the incident some thirty years later during the talk he gave at the first conference in America devoted to Levinas' work, in Chicago in 1993, a talk to which he gave the provocative title, "The Irresponsible Subject." Probably none of us who were there and heard Richardson's talk have forgotten it. We haven't forgotten what Levinas reportedly said to Richardson during that encounter so long ago, and we have not forgotten what Richardson said about Levinas during that talk. After all, Richardson made clear in that talk that to him the irresponsible subject was Levinas himself, who was explosive and violent. Now who could forget that?

In this paper I return to that fascinating, unforgettable, perhaps troubling double event to look more closely at both of its sides: First, Richardson's account of that encounter with Levinas in 1962 when Levinas reportedly directly spoke to Richardson in the first person about his own suffering and the suffering of his parents. Secondly, Richardson's own rather astounding interpretation of that encounter some thirty years

later in his talk and subsequent essay titled "The Irresponsible Subject." In this paper I analyze Richardson's interpretation of that event through the lens of Levinas' own radical philosophy about ethical responsibility to the Other.[1]

Before we get to the details of the encounter in 1962 we should point out one important thing about Levinas that is nearly incontestable: Levinas does not like to talk about Levinas. He almost never talks about himself and he even avoids using the first person singular. In his major philosophical works he studiously avoids the use of the first person. Even in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (1978), where he insistently states the same powerful argument over and over again, he never says "I argue" or "I maintain". His never making I statements in his philosophical work is rather astounding considering Levinas is a very argumentative philosopher and is nearly always making strong and powerful arguments. His avoidance of I statements is perhaps most glaringly obvious in the short autobiographical account from 1963 titled *Signature* (Levinas, 1990). Who else but Levinas would write even a short autobiography without employing even once the first person? And I do believe that it is important to observe and contemplate the fact that even in the most important, most cited, and probably most revealing one sentence Levinas ever wrote about himself and his life, even here he did not speak in the first person. After listing several events in his life without using the I he says of his biography that one most important and most cited line: "It is dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror" (1990, p. 291). I-saying is simply not Levinas's style.

Remembering Levinas's strong aversion to using the first person singular, to saying I, we turn or we return to that famous incident where Levinas uses or at least is reported as using the I. What brought Levinas and Richardson together at the party was the celebration of Richardson's doctoral defense in 1962 at the Catholic University of Leuven. Levinas as a scholar of both Husserl and Heidegger served as an examiner. The famous encounter takes place not at the defense but afterward, at the party, the celebration of Richardson's great day. As Richardson recounts in his essay, he was at the party politely greeting people, thanking them for coming, when all of a sudden, he says, "I felt a very vigorous poke on my shoulder from someone who came up from behind" (1995, p. 125). It was Levinas. Richardson says he was delighted to see him, despite the poke apparently, and warmly reached out his hand in gratitude, a friendly gesture Levinas ignored. Levinas looked straight at him and said: "I was talking with some old friends, regaling them with stories, had them all laughing. I thought you might want to know what they were laughing at." Sure, says Richardson. Then Levinas asked Richardson if he remembers where in his book he describes 1943 as a "prolific year" for Heidegger? Richardson says he does and Levinas right at that moment let him have it: "In 1943 my parents were in one concentration camp and I was in another. It was a very prolific year, indeed." At that point, Richardson tells us, Levinas "turned on his heels and walked away. He was gone" (1995, p. 125).[2]

What a moment! What an encounter! What an I-saying! How dramatic! We might even say traumatic, if we remember Levinas's constant employment of that word in *Otherwise Than Being* and the ethical meaning he gives to it. So much of what Levinas says about trauma, about ethical responsibility, time, anarchy, in that tortured and tortuous text, *Otherwise Than Being*, could have become crystallized in that definitely dramatic, possibly traumatic encounter wherein Levinas says I. To say the least, this could have been for Richardson a stunning, even to use one of so many metaphors from *Otherwise Than Being*, a dizzying realization of the otherness to him of Levinas's own life and own tragic experiences and suffering.

Levinas's I-saying here could have caused Richardson to freeze in his tracks, another metaphor from *Otherwise Than Being*. How could 1943 be so different for Levinas, for his parents, as it was for Heidegger or for him? How could he have written about 1943 without thinking about the immense amount of suffering being borne by millions of people at that time? Did he? Forced to confront Levinas's suffering and that of his parents, he could have felt the entire weight of injustice as somehow--quite unfairly but real at the same time--as his responsibility. He could have felt responsibility for suffering he himself could not possibly have caused and then truly had to grapple with the heavy weight of what Levinas calls over and over again in *Otherwise Than Being* anarchy, the anarchical nature of ethical responsibility, that begins somehow before your own time. Of course since Richardson was a Catholic priest and Levinas and his parents were Jewish, this anarchical ethical responsibility could have opened time itself far beyond 1943 or even all the years of Nazism, war, and Holocaust. He could have felt the entire weight of centuries of Christian hatred of and violence toward Jews as somehow his responsibility. Of course how could he be responsible for Christian violence toward Jewish communities centuries before he was born? And yet the anarchical nature of ethical responsibility presses down on the self sometimes making it hard to breathe, as if somehow all the victims from the past are inside your own skin, as Levinas says in *Otherwise Than Being*. All this incredible vocabulary of this powerful, second great work of Levinas, with its recurrent metaphors that evoke suffering and even violence so much that Paul Ricoeur famously and rightly called them "verbal terrorism", could have struck Richardson as he thought about this encounter for years and wrote about it thirty years later (Ricoeur, 2004,

1 See Richardson's essay in *Ethics As First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion*, ed. Adriaan Peperzak (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 123-31.

2 It is important to note that this is Richardson's second recounting of this incident and that this second one is very different from the first account. In the much earlier account, in 1965, Levinas simply says that in 1943 "I was in one of the concentration camps" and makes no reference to his parents. Why the different versions and which one is what Levinas actually said? These are important questions perhaps never to be fully answered. It is highly likely that Levinas's parents and brothers along with the great majority of the Jewish community of Kaunas or Kovno were murdered in or very near Kaunas in the early, "Holocaust by bullets" phase in the horrible summer and fall of 1941. It is possible, though highly unlikely, that Levinas believed in 1962 that his parents were alive and in a camp in 1943. I find it much more likely that Richardson's own memory of the conversation changed over the decades. Levinas's son Michael recently publicly opposed the founding of a center in Kaunas named in honor of Levinas since his father and his children were aware that their family had been murdered by German soldiers and by Lithuanian partisans in the "*Shoah par balles*" and that Levinas had vowed never to return either to Germany or to Lithuania because of the massacre of his birth family. I discuss traces of this Holocaust by bullets horror in Levinas's philosophy in an article forthcoming later this year in *The Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies*. Adam Newton discusses Richardson's earlier version as well as his reactions to hearing Richardson in 1993 in his 2001 book *The Fence and the Neighbor*. I thank the fine Levinas scholar Oona Ajzenstat for reminding me of these passages in Newton's book.

p. 84). Could Richardson have felt that all these suffering others had a hold on him that could be described as traumatic? Could he have felt taken hostage by these ethical responsibilities beyond his own time and his own choosing? Could he have felt these responsibilities as an invasion of his very self, as an absolute exposure to the outside, even as an "exposure of exposedness" as Levinas says in *Otherwise Than Being*? Could he have felt no escape, no way out of these responsibilities, like Adam in the garden when God comes looking, to employ yet another metaphor from *Otherwise Than Being*? Could he have felt all these inescapable ethical responsibilities as an obsession? Could he have even felt all these anarchical, unchosen ethical responsibilities to all these others inside his own skin as a persecution? All these extreme and tortuous metaphors from *Otherwise Than Being* could have come to Richardson--who was, after all, a good and close reader of *Otherwise Than Being*--as he thought about for many years his amazing encounter with Levinas when Levinas said I.

This dramatic encounter with Levinas and his I-saying could have been traumatic for Richardson in precisely the ethical meaning of that term as Levinas develops it in *Otherwise Than Being*. It could have provoked within Richardson what Levinas calls in *Otherwise Than Being* "the denucleation of the ego," where the center of the self is broken up, hollowed out, forever disturbed, unable to return to itself as it was, always prevented from returning by these inescapable and anarchical ethical responsibilities that make the return to self, Levinas claims, impossible, a continual delay, an inevitable deferral. Inescapable ethical responsibilities beyond the self's own choosing, willing, even beyond the self's own time make the self's return to itself, as Levinas says, "an interminable detour.[3]

We have no idea how Richardson reacted to Levinas's I-saying immediately after their dramatic encounter in 1962. Did Richardson then feel the encounter as a traumatic hold on him that brought down upon him like an avalanche all the hyperbolic and even terroristic vocabulary of anarchical responsibility that Levinas articulates in *Otherwise Than Being*? We cannot say. We have nothing from Richardson from that time. What we do have is the talk Richardson gave at the conference in 1993 and the essay version published in 1995 with the title "The Irresponsible Subject." So does this essay follow the Levinasian script from *Otherwise Than Being* we have just imaginatively put forth? Does he testify to the traumatic ethical hold provoked in him by the I-saying of Levinas's radical otherness? Does he describe his own *Otherwise Than Being*-like dizzying and disorienting sense of ethical responsibility beyond his own willing and choosing? Does he talk about how the overwhelming sense of anarchical ethical responsibility emptied out the ego, interrupted any attempt to return to himself, made this return impossible, made every return an interminable detour? Is this what happened when Levinas not only met but confronted, face to face, a Jesuit, Heideggerian, and a Lacanian at a party and--so rarely for him--spoke his own I of suffering?

Nothing, actually, could be further from the truth. Despite the *Otherwise Than Being* script one can easily imagine for this psychoanalytic reader of both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, there is in Richardson's essay no evidence of this whatsoever. Indeed, if the essay shows anything it shows that the subject even when it is addressed in a radical way by radical otherness, can quite easily fend off that radical otherness, absorb it back into the same, and return to itself quite easily and securely. It is almost as if in recalling this encounter and writing about it in his own way, on his own terms, he is enacting a radical refusal of Levinas's hyperbolic, anarchical ethical responsibility and enacting and putting on display the self's strong power--even in the face of radical alterity--to return to itself securely, comfortingly, and completely.

There are several ways in which Richardson in his essay both refutes Levinas's radical ethics and returns safely to himself. No interminable delay for him! I will analyze several ways in which this return to subject/self happens in the essay. Some of them are quite astonishing, and in some ways even alarming, haunting. I will start with the central and the most important way in which the return to the subject happens. This central way or path of return involves Richardson's own view of the main point or issue he needs to analyze, come to understand, in the Levinas story he recounts. What is it in this encounter with Levinas he remembers from so many years ago, what is it that calls for thinking, to use the language of Heidegger? Is it something to do with Levinas's I-saying of his radical alterity? With Levinas's suffering and that of his family? Not at all. Richardson makes absolutely clear what this incident calls him to think about. The matter for thinking here is perfectly obvious: how could Levinas, the great philosopher of ethical responsibility to other people, possibly have been so rude to him? "My question is," says Richardson, "who did that?" and by that he says he means the entire drama "beginning with the poke on the back down to the turning away" (1995, p. 125). The matter that calls for thinking is: who is "this angry man?" Who is this ethical philosopher who had been so courteous to him as an examiner at the defense and now was this rude and angry man? There seems to be, Richardson says, "two dimensions in the same person." How in the world do we think the "discrepancy" between the two dimensions within Levinas? That is the central question that must be thought here! Lucky for all of us that Richardson is not only a Heidegger scholar but a Lacanian psychoanalyst so he is well equipped to explain what he calls the "eruption" of Levinas's unconscious on that day at that very moment. The eruption of the unconscious explains those two dimensions Levinas showed by being both so kind and so rude on that day, the ethical philosopher of the Other and also the irresponsible subject at the same time. Levinas's direct I-saying on that day prompts Richardson to return to his Lacanian self so placidly and completely: "what better way can we find to explain the discrepancy between the two dimensions we have seen of the one Emmanuel Levinas than the psychoanalytic one I am suggesting, which accepts the hypothesis of an irresponsible subject?" (1995, p. 129).

Another way in which Richardson enacts the comforting return to self is when he wonders what exactly upset Levinas so much at that moment? Could it be horrible memories of his own camp experiences or horrible images of a much more horrible place where his parents were when they were murdered or the bitterness Levinas expressed in 1955 when he stated about the era of the Nazi horror that "the world has learned nothing and forgotten everything"? (1990, p 147). Oh, heavens no! It was the word prolific that got to him. The unconscious is structured like a language, he reminds us, and Levinas's reaction was "so explosive" because "the unconscious functions like that, through the power of words." It was the word 'prolific' that "threw him into a skid" (1995, p. 125). Fortunately, Richardson has already told us that he didn't mean anything by that word and was just trying to choose among busy,

3 See the important late essay on the way to *OTB* titled "No Identity" in *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 149.

productive, etc., and thought to himself at the time: "How about prolific..Let's go with it and get on with it." He could never have imagined such a simple choice of words would cause "the residual anger of many years [to] descend on the head of a young man," but that is of course, as Richardson reminds us, how the unconscious works!

Another obvious way Richardson returns to himself so comfortingly is his treatment here of the huge issue of Heidegger's Nazism. Richardson does not use the word Nazism but refers to Heidegger's "political involvement," which he says was "shattering" to Levinas. But what exactly is "shattering" to Levinas about Heidegger's political involvement? Was it that Heidegger never renounced Nazism? That he still supported it and publicly wore the swastika in, say, 1943? That he never made a statement definitively condemning the Nazi genocide against the Jewish communities of Europe? No. What was shattering to Levinas, according to Richardson, was "the debacle of 1933" (1995, p. 126). With those few words Richardson returns to that comforting view put forward by Heidegger himself that his support for Hitler was an 11-month blunder so early in the Nazi era. And who in 1995 could still believe that? And yet that is the comforting view Richardson somehow is able to return to here even in this essay that enables him to think what it was that was "shattering" to Levinas about Heidegger's "political involvement" even as he recounts his face to face personal encounter with Heidegger's most powerful Jewish critic who tells him quite directly of his own suffering.

Yet another way in which Richardson is able to return to himself in a comforting way is what he says here about Levinas's view of violence. He explains that at the time of their encounter he took Levinas's rudeness and anger not only as an "unnecessary act of violence," but as violence "as he uses that term." While it is possible that in Levinasian terms rudeness and anger in certain circumstances could be considered violence, Levinas thinks violence not in one way but in so many different ways that Oona Ajzenstat wisely writes of the "violences upon violences" throughout his work (Ajzenstat, 2001, p. 317). What is more, certainly the most frequent and most important way he thinks violence is through real physical violence, as in murder. The very face, he says over and over again, calls me to nonviolence while at the same time tempting me to murder, inciting in me the desire to murder. There are actually several striking passages in Levinas's masterful early work, *Totality and Infinity*, about murder. To cite only one: "Murder, at the origin of death, reveals a cruel world, but one to the scale of human relations" (1969, p. 236). But here Richardson gives himself a radically reduced version of Levinas's complex and frequently haunted language about violence that is comforting to him. Levinas's own philosophy conceives of violence not through all the horrors and murders happening, say, in 1943, but in terms of what Levinas actually did to him. Richardson gives himself a view of Levinas on violence that returns him to his own comforting view that what Levinas did to him with that powerful I-saying at that party was not just rude but "an unnecessary act of violence as he uses that term."

The last two ways we will discuss that Richardson is able to return to himself are inter-related. They are probably the most astonishing, troubling, perhaps even haunting ways. They are perhaps the most revealing of the subject's ability to encounter even radical, painful difference and still fend it off and return to itself. These two inter-related ways or paths of return occur when Richardson discusses Levinas's parents and when he discusses anti-Semitism.

Remember that this entire incident at the party Richardson is recounting involves Levinas I-saying and talking, very unusually, about himself and his parents. Levinas, of course, according to Richardson in 1993 mentioned his parents in a concentration camp in 1943 during the horror years of the Holocaust. Richardson's interest in his parents, however, lies elsewhere: "What his early relations with his mother and father were like, I have no idea–all pertinent psychoanalytic questions remain unanswered" (1995, p. 126). So when Richardson turns to the topic of Levinas' parents, the only way he can think this is to return to psychoanalytic questions about the family dynamics, a return that enables him at the same time to turn away from what Levinas himself has just told him about his parents: their suffering as Jews in a camp during the year of horror of 1943. If Levinas had actually said or written something about his relations with them, that could have given Richardson something to which to turn his attention. What Levinas is actually telling him, something about his parents' suffering before they were murdered, which he surely knows about when he writes the essay since Levinas of course dedicated *Otherwise Than Being* to his murdered parents, brothers, and in-laws, and to the millions of other victims of Nazi anti-Semitism, Richardson simply does not turn to or make a matter for thinking, not even for a second.

Even more astonishing, perhaps even more disturbing, is what Richardson says when he turns to the question of Levinas's life and anti-Semitism, how he even with this topic manages the return to self. He says of Levinas's life: "I am aware of no anecdotes, such as we have in the case of Freud, that tell of any concrete experiences of anti-Semitism" (1995, p. 126). Presumably, Richardson here is calling back to himself specific incidents of anti-Semitic prejudice and hostility Freud recounts in his 1924 "Autobiographical Study." Freud's statements about anti-Semitic incidents he experienced and that Richardson is already familiar with are what count as "concrete anti-Semitic experiences" and since Levinas does not recount similar experiences in the way Freud does Richardson can say, astonishing nearly everyone, "I am aware of no anecdotes. . .of any concrete experiences of anti-Semitism" in Levinas's life. He is able to say this about a person who has told him personally about his own experiences in a Nazi concentration camp and told him personally about his parents' being in a Nazi concentration camp. He has said this about a person whose parents, brothers, in-laws, and countless other relatives and friends were murdered in the Holocaust and who would certainly have been murdered by the Nazis had they won the war. But all this doesn't count as concrete anti-Semitic experiences. Because Levinas's experiences are not like the anti-Semitic experience Freud recounts and that Richardson is already familiar with, he can return to his comforting view of Levinas's life. Richardson's return to self and the self's ability to fend off even Levinas's radical otherness is so complete that he can say of Levinas, this philosopher whose personal history is so filled with violence and suffering that he has rightly been called a prophet of the murdered people: "I am aware of no anecdotes . . . that tell of any concrete experiences of anti-Semitism."

In the years after that 1962 encounter with Richardson in Leuven, Levinas would go on to describe the ethical relation with otherness even more radically than he did in *Totality and Infinity*. He would go on to write a text so insistent about its argument about the anarchical nature of ethical responsibility that makes the return to self an impossible detour so dramatically, with such power and urgency, that Susan Handelman calls the text "battering" (1991, p. 342). Terry Velers compares it to "a red hot iron." (2014, p. 87). Levinas also in this incredible second major text, *Otherwise Than Being*, employs that ominously terroristic, as Ricouer says, vocabulary almost entirely absent from *Totality*

and Infinity, a vocabulary super-charged with echoes or traces of violence if not even horror: hostage, exposure, obsession, trauma, other in one's skin, persecution. He also gave this extraordinary text an extraordinary dedication, dedicated at once to "those who were closest among the six million" and to all people murdered by "the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism." Then in Hebrew, even more personally, the individual names of those closest to him who were murdered by the Nazis, the names of his parents, his two brothers, and his wife's parents. This dedication in this very different, second major work is certainly the most powerful I-saying Levinas ever gave all us, though of course he did not use the I.

What happened when Levinas met a Jesuit, Heideggerian, and Lacanian psychoanalyst at a party in 1962? That might be the joke, but it is not really the question. The question is: what happened to Richardson when he encountered not only the Levinas of 1962 who had just published *Totality and Infinity* but also the even more radical Levinas of *Otherwise Than Being*, the Levinas of anarchy, hostage, trauma, obsession, persecution, and of that moving, mournful dedication? What happened when Richardson grappled with not only his party memories of Levinas but also with the Levinas of *Totality and Infinity* and even of *Otherwise Than Being*? Was Richardson's encounter with these multiple Levinases traumatic for him in the way Levinas uses the word trauma in *Otherwise Than Being*?

If we return to Richardson's talk (which I heard and have never forgotten) at that great conference in 1993 and to his 1995 essay with that question in mind, the answer you come to is a rather definitive no. Somehow no. Despite the torrent of insistent, battering rhetoric that is *Otherwise Than Being* about the subject's anarchic responsibilities beyond one's own choosing, even beyond one's own time that interrupt the subject's return to itself and make it impossible, a continual detour, the self actually has an amazing ability to fend off the potentially challenging nature even of radical otherness and to return to itself. Richardson' essay about that famous encounter with Levinas puts on display this amazing power of the self to return to itself in an absolutely fascinating, sometimes astounding, perhaps even frightening way.

That amazing ability of the self to encounter radical otherness and not experience vertigo, shock, absolute exposure, interruption, denucleation, and to be able to reduce otherness to more of the same and to return to itself, that is what Richardson's essay depicts rather perfectly. And isn't that reducing power of the self to fend off radical otherness and return complacently to itself, isn't that what Levinas, even before *Totality and Infinity* and all the way through it and all the way to *Otherwise Than Being* and beyond, is always writing about, is always warning us about?

The journey beyond the self to genuine encounter with genuine otherness is Abraham's journey out with no return, what Levinas calls "an absolute adventure" (1969, p. 305). But he always contrasts this with the journey of Odysseus, the journey without adventure, not the journey out but the journey whose point is always to return. Even in "Ethics and Spirit" in 1952 he warns us that The Odyssey with its journey home dominates western literature because "ultimately the West discovers the universe within itself" (1990, p. 10). In *Totality and Infinity* he tells us that Abraham's journey out, that genuine encounter with genuine otherness, does not happen automatically. The self has to be opened to the adventure: we realize the relation to the other "only in the measure we effect it. . . Alterity is possible only starting from me" (p. 40). Again, remarkably, "Only an I can respond to the injunction of a face" (p. 305). But Levinas also says over and over again that the self does not so much as have but is a power to refuse the absolute adventure and remain at home, to reduce all otherness to more of the same, and live in such a way that all journeys are journeys home. The self can "suspend" the alterity of the encounter with the other. In a world in which I resist adventure and merely sojourn home, "alterity falls under my powers" (p. 38). I can return to myself so completely, Levinas warns us, that the alterity of the other "vanishes" (p. 42). At this point, Levinas tells us in *Totality and Infinity*, "the shock of the encounter with the other is deadened" (p. 42). This dead life, this refusal of absolute adventure, this journey home, this return to self, is what Levinas is always warning us about. Sometimes he calls it the reduction of the other to more of the same, sometimes he calls it totality, sometimes he refers to it as a very negative freedom that "denotes remaining the same in the midst of the other" (p. 45). Sometimes he refers to it as violence, sometimes tyranny, and sometimes he calls it "the imperialism of the same" (p. 39).

We have no idea how Richardson responded at the time to Levinas' I-saying directly to him, face to face, in 1962, or what it did to him, inside him. We will never know. All we know is Richardson's famous or infamous talk in 1993 and his essay two years later. We can see so clearly in the essay so many ways Richardson's brilliant mind and all of its considerable powers of conceptuality enabled him to resist, fend off and deaden the otherness of Levinas even when Levinas—so rare for him—spoke his I directly. Richardson's amazing cognitive ability to do that brings him safely and securely home in so many ways. And in so many ways, Richardson does, performs in the talk and the essay, exactly what Levinas in so many ways over so many years and across so many texts has warned us about.

I have come to think of Richardson's unforgettable talk and his essay for myself, and perhaps only for myself, as the return of the irresponsible subject. Levinas may have thought them, the talk and the essay, Levinas perhaps may even have felt them, as potentially violent moments in the always unfolding history of the imperialism of the same.

The continuing history of the imperialism of the same is a fitting way to understand what Newton rightly called the "haunting afterlife" of Richardson's talk in the form of Charles Scott's offensive "Letter to Bill Richardson" published in the Festschrift volume in honor of Richardson in 1995 (Newton, 2001, p. 3). Here Scott applauds Richardson for the way he employed his "hard, psychological investigation and judgment" to Levinas's rude actions at that party, that "disconcerting occurrence of everyday psychopathology." This Scott relates to original sin, and he believes Richardson was relating this to original sin as well in his essay, but Levinas just couldn't or wouldn't understand this basic truth about all of us. By relating Levinas's actions at the party to original sin, Scott says, Richardson was suggesting:

> an opening beyond the limits of such judgment, an openness to a fallenness from God that cuts through all of our lives and gives them definite division from the Source of life and redemption. This fallenness can be experienced as a kind of madness, a living despair that cannot recognize itself in its own enactment, particularly in the enactments that seem wise and good and responsible. I took you to be suggesting that no one, including Levinas, could eliminate the error that seams our lives and that we need reference to something beyond what Levinas can think to account for his and our lapse: his lapse opened beyond what he could see and perhaps beyond what he was willing to know (2001, pp. 2-3).

That Levinas's rare I-saying at a party in 1962 could lead to Richardson's 1993 talk and subsequent paper, where he performs so thoroughly the return to self in so many ways, is remarkable, and perhaps even haunting enough. That it then provokes another brilliant philosophical mind to read all of this through the Christian concept of original sin which the stubborn Jew Levinas cannot, perhaps will not know, this is perhaps more more of the same, more return of the irresponsible subject, than one can bear. Can we never free ourselves from the history of the imperialism of the same?

Perhaps the entire adventure of the present essay, from Levinas's I-saying in 1962 to Richardson's talk and essay and Scott's Letter, shows us something about why in the past thirty years or so there has been such an incredible, overwhelming turn to Levinas's ethical philosophy of otherness. We need his philosophy more than ever, need to read it well and internalize its radicality, if we are ever to escape this horrible history of the imperialism of the same, a history which Levinas, more than anyone else, has helped us to understand.

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