NICHOLAS BUNNIN

INTRODUCTION

The articles in this volume are drawn from an event in China marking the centenary of the birth of Emmanuel Lévinas. They show the capacity of Chinese philosophers, in this case specialists in phenomenology and French philosophy, to contribute along with leading Western scholars to the perplexing task of assessing a deeply original contemporary philosopher. Among the many reasons for the contributors to appreciate Lévinas are his transmission of the thought of Husserl and Heidegger to France; his spiritual transformation of their phenomenology; his reflective response to the iconic horrors of modern life, exemplified by the Holocaust; his rejection of totalizing political and cultural conceptions of ourselves that he considered to be a source of these catastrophes; his profoundly original Talmudic studies; and his reinterpretation of the thought of Maimonides about our response to the otherness and face of Jehovah in his radical analysis of the otherness and face of human beings. In addition, reading Lévinas can lead us to see each of his major predecessors in a new light. All of these features have stimulated a rich diversity of response to his methodology and doctrines, including fascinating and serious objections as well as critical explications and applications.

For Chinese philosophers there are special reasons to pursue an interest in Lévinas, centering on his regard for ethics, rather than Husserlian epistemology or Heideggerian ontology, as first philosophy. Although terminology and methods differ, this move can be compared to the search for a moral metaphysics in the works of Xiong Shili and Mou Zongsan, two twentieth-century philosophers who provide modern distillations of this theme from Chinese philosophy in their contemporary Neo-Confucianism. Along with Lévinas, they hold that questions of human value lie at the heart of our conception of reality rather than in a separate domain supplementing a value-free account of what there is. Whatever the methodological problems of coping with it, the world from this perspective is a single world that is ethical and natural rather than two worlds that defy unification. In this way, inherited dichotomies of fact and value or metaphysics and

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morals are viewed as providing an inherently flawed grounding for social and individual self-understanding. With their attempts to combine ethics with metaphysics as first philosophy, Lévinas, Xiong, and Mou raise questions about conceiving ourselves, our history, our institutions, and our world, questions that open vistas and domains that are often hidden or distorted from other standpoints. For Chinese philosophers critically exploring territory opened by Emmanuel Lévinas, the terrain, for all of Lévinas's originality, might have a certain welcoming familiarity.

It is important, nevertheless, to recognize that the aim of fusing morality and metaphysics has been contested since the formative beginnings of Chinese philosophy. While the *Dao* for Confucians is both metaphysical and moral, the *Dao* for Daoists is fundamental reality that is indifferent to human conceptions of value. The Daoist injunction is to live naturally and spontaneously rather than living according to codes, principles, or laws that are mistakenly supposed to be inherent in the *Dao*. They hold that ethical rules cannot capture the creativity required for persons to lead their lives. Creativity in practice is recognized by both Confucians and Daoists in their interpretations of the *Book of Changes*, but the Daoist understanding of this creativity does not lead to a Confucian moral metaphysics. To understand either Lévinas or Confucian accounts of morality and metaphysics, we must grasp the questions they were addressing in the intellectual context of their thought. To compare their views, we must understand the differences as well as the similarities of their intellectual cultures.

Although Lévinas worked in the phenomenological tradition, analytic philosophers who recognize the importance of other approaches to philosophy can also be stimulated by his views to use their own methods to explore the consequences of placing ethics and metaphysics as fundamental to all philosophy. Simon Blackburn has argued that metaphysics historically has been shaped by a succession of fundamental concerns, including logic, religion, science, and language.¹ From this perspective, a metaphysics with ethics as its most basic concern can be seen as an intelligible goal rather than a beckoning mirage that leads us only to confusion.

In considering the possibility of analytic as well as phenomenological and contemporary Neo-Confucian approaches to establishing a moral metaphysics and by examining critical responses to such projects within Chinese, phenomenological, and analytic philosophy, we find that questions about comparative philosophy recur at every stage, however historically or culturally close or distant the philosophers or doctrines that we discuss. We have problems of comparison whether we are considering Lévinas and Heidegger, Confucians and Daoists, or Lévinas and Mou Zongsan. In all of these cases, we must

determine how to find our way among strikingly different philosophical aims, methods, doctrines, conceptions of rigor, and standards of argument.

Jiyuan Yu and I have proposed “saving the phenomena” as an Aristotelian method in comparative philosophy, with philosophical goals that go beyond the achievements of comparative intellectual history.² The phenomena to be saved are both the common views and the views of the wise on philosophical topics. Aristotle argued that dialogue is the best way to conserve the important contribution that conflicting views can make to complex and many-sided philosophical truth. Aristotle aimed at the truth and sought to use philosophical argument to reconcile different views in order to achieve an objective account of reality rather than as a compromise removing tensions among disputants without regard to truth. Because he was pursuing truth, his own creative philosophical engagement could lead him beyond the positions that he surveyed. I recommend this method again, but because the way forward in comparative philosophy remains fairly murky, I hope that readers will also explore other methods of achieving philosophical ends through comparison.

Chinese philosophers will also be interested in the key role of Kant’s account of “nothing” as a stimulus to Lévinas’s rejection of Husserl’s phenomenology. For Husserl, intentional experience involves the act of thinking (*noesis*) and the object of thought (*noema*), but Lévinas argued that because of their absolute alterity the Other and God are not objects for us and hence cannot be brought within the scope of Husserl’s analysis. In this, he was inspired by Kant’s discussion of Nothing in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.³ Kant distinguished four senses of Nothing: First, an empty concept without object (*ens rationis*), such as a noumenon; second, an empty object of a concept (*nihil privativum*), such as a shadow or cold; third, an empty intuition without an object (*ens imaginarium*), such as space or time; and fourth, an empty object without a concept (*nihil negativum*), such as an impossible object like a two-sided rectilinear figure. We speak of “nothing” where for the reasons specified we lack a concept with an object. We should also note that according to Kant the transcendental unity of apperception,⁴ the “I think” that accompanied all my representations, is not an object and is certainly not a Cartesian substance, but a mode of presenting objects.

Lévinas took Kant’s account of a noumenon as an *ens rationis* as a starting point to express his disquiet with Husserl’s phenomenology, which could be employed where we have *noesis* and *noema* as the phenomenological counterparts of Kantian concept and object. In assessing the consequences of Lévinas’s way of dealing with acts of thinking that lack a *noema*, we can explore other ways that

terms without an object can be meaningful as part of a more general strategy of dealing with meaning in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. Lévinas can be approached radically in this regard through the account of language games in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,⁵ but philosophers can also explore non-Wittgensteinian approaches to dealing with meaning and transcendence. Further, nothingness can be examined through Chinese traditions of immanence, as examined by Wang Liping in this volume, especially the claims that being originates from nonbeing and gives rise to the myriad things and that nonbeing is unformed matter, where matter rather than form is the fundamental source of change and transformation.

Lévinas's fundamental theme of the priority of the other over the self in ethics, metaphysics, and the rest of philosophy can be discussed in relation to distinctive Chinese explorations of the philosophical problems of the self and other as well as against the background of Lévinas's Western predecessors and contemporaries. At a time when Chinese philosophers continue to explore Confucian and other traditional responses to Western liberal thought, Lévinas offers an appreciation of liberal values that is grounded in religion rather than in the enlightenment. Chinese philosophers should also attend to the ways in which Lévinas differs from Carl Schmitt⁶ and Leo Strauss,⁷ two virulently antiliberal theorists with a current following in China.

The volume contains explicitly comparative discussions of Lévinas within the context of modern European philosophy. Jacques Taminiaux explores a post-Heideggerian approach to issues of phenomenology through a comparison of Lévinas and Heidegger. Wang Tangjia focuses on concepts of death in Lévinas and Heidegger, but also compares their accounts with Confucian and Daoist treatments of death. Wang Liping compares Lévinas and Bergson on transcendence and immanence and relates his discussion to Chinese explorations of the theme of immanence and transcendence. A comparative approach within phenomenology or between phenomenology and Lévinas's metaphysics is a recurrent feature of virtually of the articles. Readers can ponder similarities and differences in method and results that arise in considering Lévinas from comparative perspectives involving philosophers close to him and philosophers distant from him in time and philosophical culture.

Questions about the relations of Lévinas's metaphysics to phenomenology and his replacement of epistemology or ontology by ethics as first philosophy are a primary focus of articles by Dachun Yang, Mo Weimin, and Wang Heng, but these themes are also addressed by many others in this volume. Dachun Yang's discussion of intentional-

ity, temporality, and subjectivity in Lévinas includes a comparison of theories of man in Lévinas and Confucianism.

For Lévinas, the consequences of seeing ethics and metaphysics as first philosophy are remarkably deep, rich, and manifold, but several articles test these claims as well as expounding them. Du Xiaozhen explores Lévinas's relation to Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion and the religious origin of Lévinas's account of the other and his commitment to alterity rather than being, the other rather than the self, as fundamental. Simon Critchley suggests an alternative secular psychoanalytic interpretation of these issues, and his views of Lévinas's understanding of the subject are accompanied by Mo Weimin's study of the subject in Lévinas and Marie-Anne Lescourret's discussion of subjectivity and desire. The central themes of time and death, as newly understood by Lévinas, are discussed by Wang Heng and Shang Jie. Ambiguities in Lévinas's relations to modernity and his critique of liberalism are examined by Sun Xiangchen and Robert Bernasconi. Dorian Wiszniewski discusses the importance of Lévinas's notion of the space of communicativity for architecture.

For technical rather than intellectual reasons, five articles on Lévinas that are part of the same project have been published separately in "Lévinas for Chinese Philosophy," a special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*.⁸ Feng Jun provides an assessment of Lévinas's ethics. Jiang Yi considers Lévinas's concept of infinity from a Chinese perspective. Wu Xiaoming reexamines central features of Mengzi's ethics from a Lévinasian standpoint. Giovanni Levi explores ethical conceptions of calm in Lévinas and Zhuangzi. Lin Ma traces implications for the possibility of understanding non-Western cultures of Lévinas's account of sense in terms of Judaic prophetic religion instead of Greek philosophy.

The Hangzhou International Conference on Emmanuel Lévinas, the source of the articles collected in this volume, took place on September 11–13, 2006 as a joint project of Zhejiang University, the Philosophy Summer School in China and the Lévinas Ethical Legacy Foundation (USA), with further support from the French Embassy in Beijing. We welcomed the cooperation provided by the Forum for European Philosophy (UK), the Association pour la Célébration du Centenaire d'Emmanuel Lévinas (France), and the Raïssa and Emmanuel Lévinas Center-MOFET (Israel). The conference was organized by Professor Dachun Yang (Zhejiang University), Dr. Nicholas Bunnin (University of Oxford), and Professor Simon Critchley (New School for Social Research). We invited a selection of leading Chinese and international philosophers who have already contributed to the study of Lévinas, but also drew together a number of excellent younger scholars who have only recently embarked on

their study of his thought. The success of the conference planted seeds of further philosophical exchanges among participants, but we also hope that the articles in this volume will carry resonances of the fresh discoveries and convivial relations that characterized the conference sessions themselves to encourage further serious investigations of Lévinas's thought among a wider circle of scholars both in China and elsewhere in the world. To further this aim, Renmin University of China Press has published *A Century with Lévinas or the Destiny of the Other*, a volume of the conference articles in Chinese.⁹

I conclude by expressing my deep appreciation to my coeditors Dachun Yang and Linyu Gu, to Chung-ying Cheng, and to our contributors. Dachun Yang initiated this Lévinas project with Simon Critchley and me. He hosted the Hangzhou conference and was the main editor of the Renmin University of China Press volume. Linyu Gu has worked tirelessly in editing the English versions of the articles with me. As editor of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Chung-ying Cheng has offered valuable guidance toward the publication of this supplement to his journal. It has been a delight to work with them and with our contributors.

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ENDNOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, 152–55 (B131–35).
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953).
6. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George D. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
7. Leo Strauss, *Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).
8. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 35, issue 4, December 2008.
9. Dachun Yang, Nicholas Bunnin, and Simon Critchley, eds., *A Century with Lévinas or the Destiny of the Other* [*Lieweinasi de shiji huo tazhe de mingyun*] (Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2008).