CHAPTER FIVE

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: "We are all responsible for all, for all men before all, and I more than all the others."¹

Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*²

The present chapter examines the life of Emmanuel Levinas; the following chapter examines his account of "the face of the Other" in relation to Etty Hillesum’s diaries and letters. The twentieth century Lithuanian-born, French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is one of the pivotal figures across the humanities today.³ His life was grounded in


² *Ethique et infini* (E.T., *Ethics and Infinity*) was a series of conversations between Levinas and Philippe Nemo, originally broadcast on French radio. They arguably provide a solid review and entry point to Levinas’s work.

an intellectual Judaic heritage and with his phenomenological training he insisted on the primacy of ethics (éthique) in philosophical investigation.\(^4\) Levinas searched for his own voice in the history of philosophy, and he explored the ways in which Plotinus, Descartes, Husserl, and Heidegger encountered the question of transcendence.\(^5\) In Levinas's writings the question of transcendence is found in relation to our worldly, subjective relationship to “the Other” (l'Autrui, l'Autre).\(^6\) With his work Totalité et infini (E.T., Totality and Infinity),\(^7\) he arguably positioned his thinking in the context of the pre-Socratic philosophers, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Leibniz, and Spinoza. Levinas centered his explorations on the interpersonal as the basis of transcendence, and he reflected on the rights of the individual person, on the idea of peace, and on the dialogic nature

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\(^4\) Levinas, Ethics and Infinity. Sean Hand, Emmanuel Levinas (New York, NY: Routledge, the Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 1.

