1. In the Name of God

In the discussion which followed Levinas' presentation at Louvain of the paper entitled "The Name of God in Certain Talmudic Texts," Antoine Vergote points out that Levinas had said that the revelation of the name of God is a relation that is irreducible to knowledge but had denied that ethical responsibility before another human being is a relation. Was Levinas not therefore inconsistent when he maintained that the divine revelation can be equated with (se ramène à) human responsibility? Levinas replies by distinguishing two senses of "relation." As ordinarily understood a relation is a compresence of at least two terms. But God is not present as a term. Each of God's names is a proper name subsumed under the common name Name. His proper names—namely, El or Eloha or Elohim (God), Shaddai (Almighty), Dayyan (Judge), Rachum (Merciful), Hannun (Gracious), Tzaddik (Righteous), Adonai (My Lord), etc.—name modes of God's presence, but that presence is not a presence of a term. It is a proximity (shekinah) in an absence and separation denoted by the words "holy," "saini," "kadosh." Hence the revelation of the name of God and ethical responsibility before the other is no ordinary relation. It is not a relation to a term, so it is not a knowledge. It is an extraordinary and absolute Relation, but not absolute knowledge.

Any difficulties that arise from Levinas' word "Relation" taken in this
sense will arise too once we ask, as it is the chief purpose of the present essay to ask, about the relation between the conception of philosophy expounded in, for example, *Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence* and the conception of philosophy that this book says is traditionally associated with that name. In this book Levinas epitomizes his conception of philosophy as “the wisdom of love at the service of love.” On his understanding of the traditional acceptance of the word “philosophy,” the wisdom (σοφία), of which the name of philosophy says that it is the love or desire, is a virtue ultimately grounded in a theoretical or practical knowledge of the highest kinds of being: sameness and difference, one and many, etc.

For at least three reasons it would be injudicious to yield to the temptation to epigrammatize Levinas’ philosophy of philosophy by saying that in it the priority ascribed traditionally to the kind is shifted to kindness. First, because what Levinas understands by absolute responsibility and goodness beyond being is not benevolence or any other natural disposition. Second, because the “-ness” of kindness and goodness means that they too are each a kind, whether a lower kind or the highest, like that of which the common name is “the Name” and under which are assembled the different modalities or attributes of which the proper names are El, Elohim, Adonai, Shaddai, etc. Third, because the virtue of wisdom as understood in traditional philosophy is concerned not only with being, the kinds into which it is divided and how the highest of these are related to each other—it is concerned not only with such objects of theoretical knowledge, but also with objectives of action such as the Platonic Good beyond being and the Neo-Platonic One. Anyone reading Levinas’ writings with a view to determining how his conception of philosophy as the wisdom of love in the service of love relates to traditional philosophy as ontology will be struck by the frequency with which he draws upon philosophers of Platonic and Neo-Platonic lineage. This lineage includes Kant, for instance, as made manifest in the use Levinas makes of Husserl’s phrase “Ideas in a Kantian sense.” The Ideas here referred to are said by Kant himself to be derivatives of Ideas in a Platonic sense. The Ideas in both of these senses admit of a teleological interpretation, with Plato’s Good yielding in Kant the notion of a Highest Good consisting in happiness in proportion to virtue. That is to say, there are elements in the philosophies of Plato and Kant that permit assimilation to the philosophy of Aristotle. It is not in such assimilation that Levinas perceives glimpses of philosophy as wisdom of love. Such eschatological interpretation of Ideas is typical of philosophy understood as love of wisdom. Even so, if the latter understanding of philosophy is represented by Aristotle, it should