Levinas begins the preface of Totality and Infinity with a question. He asks if we are not duped by morality. One does not have to read very far—or very slowly—in Totality and Infinity to recognize that Levinas is addressing specifically what he calls the conception of morality that is based on the pure subjectivism of the I and that his answer to the question is that such a morality is indeed refuted not only by war, but also by the totality revealed by war and what he calls “objective necessities” (Tel, xiv; TI, 25). War can be said to call for a suspension of this morality because it seems that the only reasonable course of action to take in war is that winning takes precedence over everything else. Furthermore, Levinas recognizes that there is a thin line between times of war and times of peace, that what is called peacetime is often only the pursuit of war by means other than outright attack, and that the suspension of morality is thereby quickly extended beyond war to politics generally. Politics in this context is understood as “the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means” (Tel, ix; TI, 21). In other words, the problem which Levinas addresses at the outset of Totality and Infinity is that of the subordination of moral considerations to brute politics. It is not a new problem, but it is one that has a particular urgency after a century in which chivalry in war would appear to be
not so much dead as absurd. As his solution to this problem Levinas proposes an alternative conception of morality, what one might call an ethics of alterity, that he claims cannot be directly challenged by the need to fight wars or win political battles. That is to say, it cannot be simply overwhelmed or obscured by the totalizing forces identified by the philosophy of history in which modern thought has, at least since Hegel, put its faith. But how does such an ethics withstand calculative reason and the pressures of war?

My primary aim in this essay is to explore Levinas' answer to this question. It is a question Levinas himself invites when he takes up "eschatology," which is his one word answer. Levinas asks whether war does not refute eschatology just as it refutes morality (Tel, xii; TI, 24). Most interpretations of Levinas seem not to give any particular prominence to the question of war's challenge to morality, as if it were a pretext for his return to the question of ethics, but not its central inspiration. These interpretations find support not only in the fact that Levinas does little to identify what he means by a morality based on the pure subjectivism of the I, but also, and more significantly, in the fact that eschatology is barely mentioned in Totality and Infinity outside of the preface. That eschatology, which perhaps by definition is always untimely, was particularly unsuited for the philosophical climate of the last forty years may also help to explain why it has been largely ignored in reconstructions of his thought. The further fact that Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics," the main exception to this general neglect of Levinas' eschatology, subjects it to rigorous scrutiny may also help to explain why relatively few others were drawn to it. Part of my task in this essay is to dispel some of the concerns associated with Derrida's essay, concerns that arise in part from the failure of some of Derrida's readers to recognize his interpretive strategies. But the philosophical climate has changed. This is nowhere more obvious than in Derrida's recent discussions of messianism, particularly in its political dimension. However, there are dangers in a political messianism and at the end of this essay I will ask whether Levinas does not succumb to them when he lends his support to the rhetoric of Zionism.

Levinas shows himself to be well aware of the philosopher's tendency to dismiss eschatology as mere opinion, arbitrary, and without evidence. Eschatology in Levinas is introduced not as a doctrine but as a vision: "the eschatological vision." A vision can be understood as something that takes one away from the world, but the eschatological vision consummates moral experience (Tel, xii; TI, 23). It is not a spiritual relationship; it leads to action. To see is already to act. That is why, in spite of Levinas' suspicion of the priority philosophy accords to sight,