transgressing boundaries in infection. All are “contagion”; our essence (should that word still be legitimate at all) is just another illness.

Nietzsche, to be sure, suggests that humanity is a mere rash on the earth. But he is not very pleased with the fact: der Mensch ist (darum) etwas, das überwendet werden muß. Krell’s book, by contrast, not only shows that the human essence is merely a disease like any other, but in its good humored clarity refuses to even be troubled by this fact. That such an awful truth can be broached with such quiet good humor is, I think, a crucial sign of the times—a sign that we really are beyond modernity, that we have gone someplace where what bothered moderns (including Nietzsche) is quite all right with us. For the good humor, this essential emotional tone, which Krell’s book sustains on every single page, is not his alone. It is, like his insights themselves, wholly, wholesomely, contagious.

John McCumber
Northwestern University

The Demands of Ethical Life: Levinas and Moral Theory


The papers in the two collections under review here span some thirty years, from 1969 to the present, though the majority were written and published during the mid-1980s and early 1990s. The first collection, entitled Beyond, 1 comprises a series of studies treating key themes and texts in the philosophy of the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. Although twelve of the fifteen essays have been previously published, and over half of these will be well known to anyone currently engaged in Levinas research or scholarship, there is still a wealth of fresh insight and analysis to be found here. The centerpiece of the volume is a close reading of chapter one of Otherwise than Being or beyond Essence, in which Peperzak sets out the main problematic and structure of the text. Other essays take up such diverse topics as Levinas’ Judaism, his relation to the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger, as well as to Kant and Hegel, his conceptions of responsibility, society, technology, and nature, and the relation between religion and morality. The essays are notable for their uniform clarity of expression and deft presentation of complex points of interpretation, but even more so for the pervasive generosity of spirit that marks Peperzak’s writing both as a commentator and as an original thinker.
The second collection, entitled *Before Ethics*, presents eight essays which were written independently of one another, but which together provide an outline and defense of the principle elements of a phenomenological ethics. Beginning from a diagnosis of the state of ethical theory today, Peperzak points to the inadequacies of both utilitarianism and Kantianism and proposes instead an ethics that emerges from an “originary and immediate experience of moral obligation” (*BE*, 43)—namely, from the face to face relation at the heart of Levinas’ philosophy. Because of the central role given to Levinas’ thought in the positive project of this second set of essays, it is possible to read the two collections as complementing one another within the framework of a sustained reflection on the problems of ethical life today, or as Peperzak puts it at the end of *Before Ethics*, on the possibility in our time “of becoming humanly oriented” (*BE*, 117). That a certain humanism is at stake in Peperzak’s presentation of the task of ethics, and perhaps unavoidably so, is an issue that will be taken up below. First, however, I want to consider each collection on its own terms, looking at the way in which *Before Ethics* prepares the ground for a turn from modern moral philosophy to a Levinasian inspired ethics of the Other, and then at the lines of interpretation advanced in *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*.

Like a number of contemporary thinkers, Peperzak is as dissatisfied with utilitarian and Kantian forms of ethical theory as he is wary of a too easy relativism with regard to the fundamental questions of morality. His criticisms of modern moral theory receive their fullest development in the first and last chapters of *Before Ethics*, while chapters two through five provide methodological and philosophical arguments in support of an ethics based on the encounter with another human being, and chapters six and seven treat particular problems concerning human rights and the question of individual responsibility.

Against utilitarianism, Peperzak notes the familiar complaints concerning the inadequacy of its treatment of issues of justice and obligation, and the difficulties attending the move from the agent’s pursuit of her own happiness to a requirement to seek the happiness of everyone. His own critique, however, is concerned primarily with the inadequacies of the utilitarian conception of happiness, which he claims is “formal and subjectivistic” and therefore simply too thin to capture the very distinct pleasures, joys, satisfactions, and affections that are constitutive of human lives (*BE*, 103–4). While it seems an overstatement to claim that most utilitarian theories treat pleasures as “qualitatively homogenous” (*BE*, 104; cf. *BE*, 50), Peperzak is nonetheless right to admonish such theories for failing to take seriously the task of giving a rich, phenomenologically based description of hedonic experience and for thinking that the commitment to an empirical method necessitates a restriction of the discussion of happiness to a calculation of the volumes and intensities of pleasurable states.