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Response to Nathan Bracher's review of **Samuel Moyn**, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 268. \$29.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4394-7.

Response by Samuel Moyn, Columbia University.

Thanks to Nathan Bracher for his review of my book, and to the editors for their invitation to respond. The tenor of the review's praise of what I have written, and the accuracy of its rendition of what I covered, could leave no author dissatisfied. I should turn, therefore, directly to Professor Bracher's reservations. He offers a smaller criticism and a larger one.

The smaller one takes issue with questions my account—in a short and late part of my book—of Emmanuel Levinas's turn to ethics (pp. 219-37). But before addressing this argument, readers need to know what I was trying to accomplish in that section. Levinas's ethics have been universally said to flow from Nazi persecution or from the Holocaust experience; some do not hesitate to present his thought as if it were the exclusive and necessary inference from those terrible events. I began, many years ago now, interested in testing this claim. For not only had there been no general history of Levinas's intellectual development, no one had located exactly when Levinas became a moralist and defined ethics as first philosophy.

I was initially surprised when I turned to this problem. For the fact is that there are more continuities between Levinas's interwar and immediate postwar thought—at neither time did Levinas champion ethics and, when he wrote about the Jewish tradition, did not characterize it as a source of ethics—than between his immediate postwar thought and his turn, in the 1950s, to moral philosophy. Now one might explain this latter development in many different fashions; for example, as the Holocaust's delayed but nevertheless direct effect. But everyone should agree it is a historical problem to be studied and solved. Why the timing? What does the timing reveal about the thought?

The solution I propose in the book, as Professor Bracher accurately recounts, is to link the decisive moment in which Levinas became an ethical thinker to the critical historical moment when it actually took place: the Cold War. And so I undertake, as elsewhere in my book, a detailed chronological reading of Levinas's texts of the era against the backdrop of contextual investigations of the philosophy of the same period. And it turns out that lots of people were, at that precise moment, making ethical turns. While I never deny the relevance of the Holocaust to the evolution of Levinas's outlook (doubting only that the one exclusively and necessarily compels the other without more), I do contend that the Holocaust only took on its distinctive philosophical meaning for Levinas in historical context and after a space of some years. The same, I argue, is true of his renowned interpretation of the Jewish tradition, which also crystallized in the early Cold War era.

Professor Bracher is unhappy that I call Judith Shklar (1928-92) to my aid in thinking through these issues. But readers should know why I do so. Today, historiography has turned away from the project of importing Cold War Marxists and their "ideology of history" to moralistically denouncing their irresponsible apologies for violence. Correspondingly, their enemies—most especially Albert Camus but there are others—are now looked upon with great favor. The works of Tony Judt are the leading examples of this contemporary reversal and Professor Bracher has added a wonderful installment to this genre in his recent book on François Mauriac's historical vision. I cited Judith Shklar not because she is

not herself a historical personage but because her little-known first book, *After Utopia* (1957), helps sees a way beyond the common dichotomies scholars have inherited from the Cold War and now simply reversed.

For her part, Shklar was well aware of the deficiencies of the ideology of history. A Jew who fled with her bourgeois parents from the Soviet Union (she later became a Harvard professor of government), Shklar rejected Cold War Marxism in no uncertain terms.[1] But if she hardly took the Hegelian-Marxist side in the debate, she did not see this rejection obviating critical evaluation of the alternative she found on offer from Camus and a host of European religious existentialists. She undoubtedly never read Levinas, a cipher at the time she wrote. But the historical information she provided about the contending alternatives of her time should be read by anyone interested in the philosophical field of the age *as a field*, with rival positions that embraced and deserved one another. Were the “ideology of history” and the “ideology of morality” two sides of the same coin? So neither Shklar’s historical contemporaneity with the bipolar debate or her critique of Cold War moralism distinguishes her as a commentator: it is the intellectual plausibility of her attempt to step outside the alternatives and to see the field as a field that does.

It was this field, I argue, that explains the general shape of the position that Levinas took, with the individualized characteristics that mark all personal affiliations. Levinas’s politics are now amongst the hottest topics in the humanities disciplines. I am far from the first to wonder about their viability: some of his own most fervent followers do so.[2] But my concern in the book, as a historian, is to understand why it was in the Cold War that he came to the particular understanding of the relationship of the moral life and the political life that he did. There is no space here to enter the details of this contested subject. It is nonetheless clear that Levinas, through his 1961 masterwork, *Totality and Infinity*, did not see morality and politics as mutually exclusive—a simplistic and mistaken reading of his doctrine, and not the one my book defends. But it is equally clear that he saw politics as an argumentative, and perhaps substantive, second step after morals. Our political relationship to the city is posterior—at least analytically—to our moral relationship to “the other.” Thus, while Professor Bracher’s brief rendition of one Levinas essay is correct so far as it goes, it misses the point actually at issue. The problem is not that Levinas left out politics as a necessary inference or additional step after or on the basis of primordial ethics; *the problem is that he insisted on these very things*—as if interpersonal ethics were not a domain of collective politics, as if dyadic morality required separate and prior inquiry, as if social coexistence were not as primordial as anything else in human experience.

Now Professor Bracher is correct that I cannot resist implying, in my book, that this commonly shared thesis of the Cold War age about the relationship of morality and politics is mistaken. But my main goal, as befits a historian, is simply to discover the circumstances in which Levinas developed it, whatever its philosophical viability. And I stand by my historicist attempts—of which even fans of the thesis of the priority of morality might want to know—to recover important dimensions of Levinas’s discovery and deployment of the position. Gabriel Marcel was no “minor member” of the philosophic community of the era; and indeed Levinas, who met him in the interwar period, was a devoted member of his circle. Just as important, my book recovers a hitherto unnoticed intervention by Levinas into the celebrated tangle between Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre of 1952 as well as Levinas’s initial exercises in commentary on Israeli politics. Both, I argue, harmonized with his overall commitment to seeing morality as prior—again, analytically at least—to politics.

These rejoinders to Professor Bracher’s smaller criticism may serve, however, only to amplify the significance of his larger one. Briefly, Professor Bracher is nervous about the very enterprise of historical contextualization of thought as a (let alone the) key to its meaning. In this sense, his complaint about my Cold War contextualization of Levinas’s ethics turn is part and parcel of a more

general skepticism about the historical study of philosophy. And this larger criticism—it is a doubt about the operating premises of all historians—may seem much more difficult to meet.

It should first be noted, however, that many of the claims Professor Bracher wonders about were not intended in the spirit he received them. I spend much of my book, for example, praising Martin Heidegger for his philosophical breakthroughs and defending his students against the suggestion—made by some prosecutorial intellectual historians—that they simply fell under the unseemly thrall of an evil but charismatic personality. In fact, as any reader of the book will recognize, my opinion of Heidegger's philosophy (not, of course, Heidegger as a human being or as a political actor) is far more favorable than Professor Bracher's apparently is, and it would therefore be inconsistent of me to treat acknowledgment of Heidegger's great contributions as problematic all by itself. Instead, the passages in my book noting Levinas's early enthusiasm for Heidegger were intended to rebut the suggestion by some of Levinas's most sympathetic readers who have pretended that his respect for Heidegger as a young man must have been superficial, concealing a deeper rejection of his teacher in some incipient or anticipatory form, even if it only surfaced in his texts much later. In contrast, I see no reason for shame or apology in this early allegiance. So Professor Bracher reads far too much into my thesis about Levinas's philosophy in claiming that I see "religious" or even "irrational" activity in Levinas's thought at every step, for, as I clearly state in my introduction, truth as much as falsehood requires followers to spread (p. 6).

In his most challenging paragraph, Professor Bracher expresses an escalating series of conceptually distinct reservations about the historical method in intellectual history or even as such. I actually would agree with him that my book "reduces" Levinas's work to a core concept or figure of thought; it does not purport to cover the totality of his philosophy, much less the lived drama of his existence. The reason for the first omission is simply selectivity—surely justifiable in any writing, and there is much left out of my book—and the reason for the second the paucity of evidence. More important, and more positively, I set out to write the history of concept in twentieth-century European thought: the topic that my title announces and a project that ended up requiring an optic far wider than any single philosopher or any personal body of work. Hopefully, the losses in these decisions are offset by the gains.

In the end, the most serious challenge Professor Bracher poses in his astute comments is not about this or that act of historical understanding in my book, or even about the project of conceptual history. It is about historical understanding as such. "An archeology of terms and concepts," he writes, "implicitly posits historicism and historicists as the eminent repositories of truth." The response to this objection is twofold, part concessive and part offensive. As Professor Bracher acknowledges, I state time and again (for example, pp. 19-20 and 239) that I am aware of the difference between genesis and validity; claims do not become any more false than they already are—or more true—for having their historical origins uncovered. That does not make historical arguments useless, however. For they can direct analysts towards what might be more local and temporary about claims they once felt to be overpowering and self-evident. And in fact, it was Levinas's own opinion that, at the end of the day, history is a necessary addition to, and not a distracting subtraction from, the enterprise of deciding which claims to view as potentially compelling for good and for keeps and which to begin to treat skeptically as dispensable artifacts of their place and time.

After a final note of gratitude to Professor Bracher for his attentive reading and perceptive commentary, I can conclude, therefore, by citing Levinas himself on this point (from p. 19 of my book): "There is a place for a philological history [that] understands a doctrine as a literary *product*, bearing the imprint of the influences undergone by the author. ... A philological history of philosophy is even more legitimate if it distrusts abusive and ignorant interpretations, if the impartiality of its method allows the rethinking of a philosophy, on the basis of objective information, and the establishment of everything it is mistaken to ignore if one would dare to interpret a philosopher." I thought it was time, in writing my book, to

“dare” to interpret Levinas himself, even if in the end I managed only a first step, and saved the last word on the truth of his arguments for others.

NOTES

[1] On her circuitous migration, see Judith N. Shklar, “A Life of Learning,” Charles Homer Haskins lecture 1989, ACLS Occasional Paper No. 9, rpt. in Bernard Yack, ed., *Liberalism without Illusions: Essays on Liberal Theory and the Political Vision of Judith N. Shklar* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[2] See, for example, in a large and growing literature, Simon Critchley, “Five Problems in Levinas’s View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them,” *Political Theory* 32, 2 (February 2004): 172-85

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