Time and History as Parameters of Liberation: 
Some Indications from Levinas and Nāgārjuna

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Abstract

‘Historicity’, the realisation that cultural values, religious beliefs and scientific ideas are historically conditioned, transformed the study of religions in the 19th and 20th centuries. The fusion of ontology, phenomenology and hermeneutics revealed an existential dimension of historicity, which was expressed innovatively – if enigmatically – by the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas in his critiques of Husserl and Heidegger.

Underlying the concepts of history and narrative is the problem of understanding time. For Levinas, this is bound up with the encounter of self and other (in his terms: the entry of the Other into the Same, thereby opening a perspective on the Infinite and awakening consciousness). Unlike Heidegger, Levinas understood death on the basis of time, not vice-versa, and his explorations into the relationships of time, death and the other amount to a transformation of the presuppositions on which Christian faith and theology have been based for centuries.

Buddhism, seen through the prism of Nāgārjuna’s dialectic, deconstructs these presuppositions in an even more radical way; the question is, at what cost? Only a careful understanding of non-dualism and the two levels of truth, conventional and transcendent, prevents him from losing his foothold in history altogether and with it any basis for a liberation that issues in a viable ethic. The dialogue between these two radical accounts of liberation, one Jewish, the other Buddhist, stimulates Western Christianity to rid itself of anthropomorphisms and outmoded metaphysics and rediscover the life-structuring and identity-building stories which, in a comparative exchange with the Buddha-legend, could allow Christian and Buddhist ‘theologies’ to collaborate.

Under the influence of Christian liberation theology, but also in the socially engaged Buddhism originating in Southeast Asia, liberation means freeing the non-persons created by exploitative socio-economic conditions to realise their full human potential. It hardly needs to be documented here, however, that both Buddhism and Christianity have been complicit in the corruption and violence of political systems in Asia and the West. But they have also contributed much to deepening and broadening our understanding of liberation, as well as pioneering ways of making it happen in the lives of individuals and societies. They do this, however, within markedly different frameworks deriving from the Indian-Chinese and Hebrew-Greek cultures within which they arose and developed. Central to these differences is the understanding of history and its relevance to both processes of liberation and concepts of salvation. Underlying these differences are understandings of time itself as the matrix in which human existence plays itself out. What is the relevance of the past to the project of liberation? In what sense is its outcome to be anticipated in an as yet undetermined future? And in what does the present, where these questions are decided, actually consist?

Christianity inherited a Jewish narrative in which the universe had a beginning and looks forward to an end and in which responsible acts shape individual lives and determine their outcomes. Few have reflected as deeply about this as the Lithuanian
Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, one of the first to introduce the thought of Husserl and Heidegger to France, and a dedicated student of the Talmud. We shall try to discern the main lines of his often enigmatic thinking in the first part of this paper. Though it is my aim to let Levinas and Nāgārjuna speak for themselves as far as possible, their thought and language are notoriously difficult and any clarifications or interpretations are offered tentatively and are entirely my own.

Buddhism arose in the radically different context of Indian cosmology with its concept of definitive liberation (mokṣa) from a cycle of rebirth through all levels of being, from animals to gods (samsāra), determined by the cumulative outworking of our deeds (karma, from the root kr, 'to act'). The salient difference between this and the Jewish concept of creation is that this cosmic recycling is without beginning or end and in a way that is difficult to pin down is not even regarded as ‘real’.

Furthermore, left to ourselves we are ignorant (avidyā) of the fact that this is indeed our predicament. Liberation from it is called nirvāṇa (metaphorically, the blowing out of a flame, the flame of desire). It is neither a state to be experienced nor the reward of effort, but the radical extirpation of all that binds us to the illusion of being a self whose desires need to be fed. This scenario was transformed and transcended, though in fundamental continuity with tradition, by the philosopher-monk Nāgārjuna (ca. 200 CE). In the second part of the paper we shall reflect on his seemingly paradoxical formulations of non-dualism (advaita) and his radicalisation of the notion of ‘emptiness’ (śūnyatā) and the consequences of this for our understanding of time, and therefore of history. We shall see what the notions of time entertained by each tradition contribute to our understanding of history as the arena of liberation, but in such a way that liberation is immanent in history, not outside, above or beyond it.

Buddhists call this non-dualism (advaita), but Levinas shows that the Jewish conception of history inherited by Christianity is non-dualist in a different way, in that the divine transcendence is not ontological but ethical.

1. Time and Death in Levinas

In Levinas’s view, “Nothingness has defied Western thought”, and he echoes a remark in a purely formal context at the beginning of Hegel’s Logic:

Pure being is in fact nothing, neither more nor less than nothing … Consequently, being and nothingness have the same structure, they are identical. (Levinas 2000: 70, 74, emphasis in original)¹

With this, centuries of Western metaphysics, and the dependence of Christian theology on such metaphysics, are radically called into question. It is perhaps significant that the West’s inability to think nothingness (Droit 2003).

¹ As Jacques Rolland comments in his Postscript to this volume, Levinas’s aim was to re-examine Heidegger’s attempt to think the nothingness encountered in death. His emphasis is not on the equivalence of nothingness and being, but on the unknowability of the nothingness bound up with death and the resulting question mark: “whence comes our certainty that death is nothing other than nothing [rien d’autre que rien]”, 232. In order to do full justice to Levinas, one would have to engage with his major works (Levinas 1979; 1981), which is not possible within the compass of this paper. But the lecture notes collected in God, Death and Time are a mature restatement of the main themes of these difficult earlier works.
Whereas Heidegger’s ontology focuses on *my* death, Levinas is concerned above all with the death of the *other*:

Is not death something other than the dialectic of being and nothingness in the flow of time? Does the end, or negativity, exhaust the death of the other? The end is but a *moment* only of death … The relation with death, more ancient than any experience, is not the vision of being or nothingness … Death: a mortality as demanded by the duration of time. (Levinas 2000: 14-15; see also 51)2

As beings in time with an existential awareness of a beginning and an end of lived time, humans cannot avoid establishing a relationship to their individual past and to the wider, comprehensive past of the race and the world, which we call history; nor can they escape the need to anticipate a future for both. To take time seriously, indeed, brings to light the highly problematic relationship between the past, which subsists only in memory but feeds into the present, and a future which the past, passing through the always fleeting present, never fully determines. It is perhaps for this reason that so much traditional philosophy, rather than take history seriously, has set out on “the detour of eternity” or else it has constructed “an underlying but hidden logic to history, thereby once again reducing time to the fulfillment of what is retrospectively understood to be a preestablished pattern”.3

The medium of creative remembering is story, the construction by narrative of inhabitable worlds of meaning which, in the face of a subconscious anxiety about the very fact of an existence which involves an end, an anticipation of certain death, creates pasts pregnant with the promise of desirable futures. In this sense *Dasein* – ‘being there’, i.e. the human – is defined not only by its awareness of existing in the world but by being out ahead of itself in awaiting its end, a situation profoundly determined by the temporal.4 In Heideggerian terms: human existence, *Dasein*, is defined by an awareness of having been ‘thrown’ into the world (*Geworfenheit*), of finding itself caught up in the flow of time and destined for death (*Sein zum Tode*). This conception of the human is essentially dramatic; it has the character of expectation specific to a story. Heidegger went further and conceptualised a ‘primordial time’ which is prior to measurement, and which Levinas glosses thus: “In its ipseity, implicit in mineness, *Dasein* is only possible as mortal. An immortal person is a contradiction in terms” (Levinas 2000: 45; see 27).

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2 In other words, whereas Heidegger sought in death the key to understanding time, Levinas thinks death on the basis of time, see Rolland, Postscript, 232. It should be noted that we are dealing here and elsewhere with Levinas’s ‘take’ on Heidegger, which is not the only possible interpretation. This was pointed out to me by Joseph O’Leary, for whose warnings about not dabbling in Heidegger I am extremely grateful.

3 Richard A. Cohen, “Introduction: For the Unforeseeable Future”, in Levinas (2004: xvi-xvii); the reference is to philosophies of history such as those of “Hegel, Marx, Compte, Spencer and Spengler”, xvi. According to Cohen it was Bergson – one of the main influences on Levinas – who, acknowledging that being and time are inseparable, “construes time – duration; creative evolution; interpenetration of past, present and future; cumulative growth – as real and eternity as constructed”, xviii.

Levinas, who developed the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger in radical ways, also immersed himself in the study of Talmud, the Jewish tradition of commentary and interpretation (Gemara and Mishnah) of the Torah, the ‘story’ of the Jewish people’s dealings with G*d, which treasures and savours every last textual detail, however arbitrary and illogical the connections may seem to be (for examples, see Levinas 1994). “It is this infinite dialogue between philosophy and Judaism that constitutes Levinas’s work that accords him his universal power” (Malka 2006: 279). For him it is not, in the end, the ‘said’ (le dit), fixed in the text or even the spoken sentence, that is the true source, but the ‘saying’ (le dire), the act of constructing meaning even as it succumbs to the tyranny of time and slips away into the remembered past. The Talmudic tradition, Levinas shows, does not simply conserve what has been handed down, but is a continuous creation of meaning by retrieving, re-reading and newly interpreting the tradition, thereby preserving what he called the ‘sacred history’ of his people.  

For Levinas the apparently trivial and contradictory commentaries of the Rabbis on the biblical texts disclose traces of the infinite in the finite, the eternal in the temporal; indeed, only this perspective from the standpoint of the infinite, sub specie aeternitatis, gives us access to the ‘sacred history’ which the texts both conceal and reveal. It reckons with “Infinity in the finite”, for “There must be a singularity that could also be universal” (Levinas 2000: 85, 110). This is an acknowledgement of the particularity of historical events taken seriously as history – a relatively modern achievement – and at the same time an invitation to discern meanings that somehow transcend the events themselves, in short, a hermeneutic. Such a hermeneutic is immanent within any viable community of meaning which is continually engaged in interpreting the tradition to the community and ensuring that this ‘received’ self-interpretation is handed on to future generations. This effort of interpretation sustains a narrative which keeps alive the memory of the tradition’s autonomous centre – be it a religious epiphany or a military victory – from which its ‘deep story’ originates. The question remains whether such communities of meaning are accessible to one another, such is the intensity of their commitment to the ever-renewed interpretation of their founding events – divine revelation, the enlightenment of a Buddha, the descent of a god. Precisely this underlies the present-day problems of dialogue and collaboration: are these traditions able to survive rational scrutiny and are they in any way compatible with one another?

It is the element of anticipation, of waiting, of patience in lived time that according to Levinas conditions Heidegger’s Sorge.  

Inspired by Ernst Bloch, Levinas emphasises the future as the not-yet-come:

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5 I wish to thank my colleague at Australian Catholic University’s Centre for Interreligious Dialogue, Terry Veling, for directing my attention to this aspect of Levinas’s thought. My former colleague Hans Hermann Henrix, who knew Levinas personally, also gave me encouraging feedback; see the papers from a seminar with Levinas, edited by Henrix (1984), especially the concluding podium discussion with Levinas.

6 The temporal structure of Sorge is “A paradoxical simultaneity of diachrony”, which may be represented as the temporality of Da-sein:

The project: being-out-ahead-of oneself
The already: being-always-already-in-the-world (facticity)
The present: being-alongside-of (things),

Levinas (2000: 30).
Time is pure hope. It is even the birthplace of hope. … The world in history is unfinished; being is not yet. The end is utopia. Praxis is possible not by way of the end of history but by way of the utopian hope for that end. (Levinas 2000: 96, 98)

According to Cohen, Levinas’s “ethical conception of time” correlates with “person, society, and God”:

First, there is primordial time as moral time, the diachrony of one-for-the-other, the past, present, and future of the neighbour whose suffering, vulnerability, and mortality put the self into question … Then, as an exigency of moral time, there is the time of justice, time for all others … And finally there is the pure futurity of messianic time, the infinite time opened up by fecundity, the time of hope beyond the failures of the past, present, and foreseeable future, hope for generations yet unborn … (Cohen 2004: xxii–xxiii)

This gives us some indication the Jewish component in the Western conception of time; but it should also be apparent, without our having to document it at length, that the temporal horizons of the Christian beliefs in creation and redemption are determined by this context (for such documentation in a fuller context, see May 2014: chapter 5). With this in mind we now turn to the in many ways starkly contrasting Buddhist attempt to come to grips with the experience of temporality.

2. Time and Nothingness in Nāgarjuna

Although attempted descriptions of it unavoidably give this impression, nirvāṇa is not a state that could be experienced, yet nor is it – as is often supposed – mere annihilation or extinction. A famous passage from the Udāna simply states:

Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded. But since, monks, there is an unborn …, therefore the escape from this here [that] is born, become … is apparent. (Udāna 8, 3)

The play of negatives complemented by double negatives avoids any positive statement while at the same time asserting that nirvāṇa is more real than any conceivable reality. With unusual vehemence the Buddha repudiated nihilism (ucchedadīṭṭhi):

… some ascetics and Brahmins accuse me wrongly … saying that the ascetic Gotama is a nihilist, and preaches the annihilation, destruction and non-existence of an existing being. That is what I am not and do not affirm. Both previously and now I preach pain [dukkha] and the cessation of pain. (Majjhima-Nikāya 1, 135)

Nirvāṇa, in some of the earliest texts of the Pāli canon, is thus a kind of inbuilt counterpoint to the constructions we frantically undertake of a self and a world we
want to suppose are ‘real’; it is the antidote to the cravings for experience, fulfilment and existence itself, which continually arise within us.

This foundational Buddhist insight was definitively formulated by the great scholar-monk Nāgārjuna (2nd c. CE). Any attempt to substantialise the Real or objectify the Self (ātman) is radically undercut by the teaching on Emptiness (śūnyatā). At a time when various Buddhist schools of thought had emerged and, pressed by their Brahmin opponents, appeared to neglect the Buddha’s injunction not to speculate about theories (diṭṭhi), Nāgārjuna radicalised the concept of no-self (anātman, anattā) with daring, if sometimes dubious, logic, asserting boldly that there can be no such thing as either self-nature (svabhāva) or other-nature (parabhāva):

How is it possible for self-nature to take on the character of being made? For, indeed, self-nature refers to something which cannot be made and has no mutual correspondence with something else.\(^7\)

Hence, “separated from self-nature and other-nature, how could existence be? … If existence does not come to be …, then certainly non-existence does not also” (MMK 15, 4-5). One conclusion to be drawn from this is that there is no such thing as permanency (a temporal concept; indeed, for Nāgārjuna time itself, like all phenomena, is empty of inherent existence, MMK 11). If this is the case, however, in what does the continuity of the individual in rebirth consist, and what is the status of the whole endless cycle of becoming (samsāra)? This is the question put to Nāgārjuna by his opponent: “If all is śūnya and there is neither production nor destruction, then to whose abandonment (of defilements) or to whose extinction (of suffering) can nirvāṇa be attributed?” (MMK 25, 1). Nāgārjuna replies by reiterating his contention that his opponent has not even begun to grasp what śūnya (void, empty of self-existence) means: “nirvāṇa is not strictly in the nature of ordinary existence for, if it were, it would have the characteristics of old age and death” and “it would be subject to causality (samskṛta), for there is nowhere an existence that is not caused” (MMK 25, 4-5).

The teacher (Buddha) has taught the abandonment of the concepts of being and non-being. Therefore, nirvāṇa is properly neither (in the realm of) existence nor non-existence. (MMK 25, 10)

There is in fact no realm of existence, just as there is no realm of non-existence; hence, nirvāṇa cannot be said to belong to either; it is simply that which is “non-grasping and non-relational (so ‘pratītyānupādāya’)” (MMK 25, 9).

Samsāra (i.e., the empirical life-death cycle) is nothing essentially different from nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa is nothing essentially different from samsāra.

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\(^7\) Nāgārjuna, Mūla-Mādhyamika-Kārikā, 15, 2 (hereafter MMK). I have modified the English translation by attending to the German of Frauwallner (1935: 170-217). I have been as yet unable to consult the new translation by Siderits and Katsura. In order to do full justice to Nāgārjuna’s teaching, one would need to engage with works such as Waldenfels (1976); Kalupahana (1986); Streng (1967), but this would lead us too far afield. As with Levinas, I wish merely to ponder a few central teachings and their interconnections. Another seminal, though in my view reductionistic, approach to Nāgārjuna is Garfield (1995), and I am grateful to my former PhD student John Robinson for allowing me to see the draft Nāgārjuna chapter of his forthcoming thesis, which makes critical use of Garfield.
The limits (i.e., realm) of nirvāṇa are the limits of saṃsāra. Between the two, also, there is not the slightest difference whatsoever. (MMK 25, 19-20)

At first sight this seems to make nonsense of the principle of non-contradiction and to fly in the face of all experience and reason. Crucial to understanding it is the correct deployment of the doctrine of two truths, i.e. levels of truth appropriate to the conventions of everyday living (saṃvṛti-satya), which retain their validity even for liberated ones, and the knowledge of ultimate truth attained by the enlightened (paramārtha-satya).

Those who do not know the distinction between the two truths cannot understand the profound nature of the Buddha’s teaching.

Without relying on everyday common practices (i.e., relative truths), the absolute truth cannot be expressed. Without approaching the absolute truth, nirvāṇa cannot be attained. (MMK 24, 9-10)

In other words: the reification of the one implies nihilism with regard to the other; but Madhyamaka is precisely a ‘middle way’ between substantialism and nihilism, fully in accord with tradition. Hence the stringency of Nāgārjuna’s warning: “A wrongly conceived śūnyatā can ruin a slow-witted person. It is like a badly seized snake or a wrongly executed incantation” (MMK 24, 11). The framework for the teaching on the absolute emptiness (śūnyatā) at the heart of what the unenlightened take to be reality is relational or conditioned becoming (pratītya-saṃutpāda). Though often described as a ‘causal chain’, this is in fact a radical relationality designed to eliminate any notion of the inherent existence of anything – even Nāgārjuna’s thought, even nirvāṇa, even the Buddha and the Dharma. It is the positive formulation of the denial of self-nature (svabhāva) entailed by the teaching on no-self (anātman).

We declare that whatever is conditioned becoming [or: of relational origination] is śūnyatā. It is mere naming (i.e., thought construction) on some basis or other (praṇāptirūpadāya) and, indeed, is the middle path.

Any factor of experience (dharma) which does not participate in conditioned becoming cannot exist. Therefore, there is no factor of experience that is not empty (śūnya). (MMK 24, 18-19)

There is, then, absolutely no difference between the never-ending cycle of death and rebirth, saṃsāra, our immersion in which is the source of our dissatisfaction and suffering (duḥkha), and nirvāṇa, the opposite pole, as it were, of temporal existence and for that very reason ungraspable and ineffable. The traditional definition of nirvāṇa, though negative, is quite straightforward: “Whatever .. is the extinction of passion (lobha), of aversion (or anger, dosa), of confusion (moha), this is called Nirvāṇa” (Saṃyutta-Nikāya 4, 251). The key realisation, available only to those who by rigorous practice (MMK 26) achieve the breakthrough to liberation (mokṣa) from all attachment and illusion – and therefore only at the level of ultimate truth – is that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are non-dual with one another: each is the medium of the other, the one is attained only in and through the other. In the light of this, we may now look
again at our understandings of time and history and their bearing on practices of liberation.

3. History as the Arena of Liberation

Christian teaching, it might be said, exacerbated the dualism it inherited from Greek culture and philosophy, conceiving God and creation, mind and matter, spirit and body as somehow opposed and then striving to unite them conceptually. Buddhism, in contrast, by neutralising time and reducing ‘reality’ to an illusion generated by insatiable desire, reconfigured the world of knowledge and experience as itself void of substance, yet ultimately – because of the equivalence of samsāra and nirvāṇa as seen from the vantage point of ultimate truth – ‘real’. The resulting annihilation of time seems to imply a loss of history, more precisely: of the historicity inscribed in narrative, and with it any foundation for ethics and identity. If non-dualism (advaita) removes the basis for opposing realities, including good and evil, or even the more usual ethical dilemma of choosing between two goods, then what role is left for moral judgement? Here the principle of two truths is applied: ethics belongs to the conventional level of everyday living, and as such has its own integrity, but this may imply that at the level of ultimate truth one is somehow dispensed from ethics.8

This position – or better, non-position – seems to the non-Buddhist to have proved to be problematic as the magical and sexual practices of Indian Tantra flooded back into later Buddhism, notably in Tibet, and it became so again in the attitudes of certain Zen masters to the militarism of Japanese imperialism.9 As well as the loss of history and the loss of ethics, the Buddhist non-position seems – to Western Christian sensibility – to imply the loss of any concrete object for religious belief and devotion, for Buddhists will say that the plethora of Bodhisattvas and heavenly beings are as empty of substance as the Buddha himself (hence the famous Rinzai Zen saying: “If you meet the Buddha on the way, kill him”).10 The consequences of radical non-dualism do indeed involve the deconstruction of any transcendent reality and the reinterpretation of empirical experience as ‘empty’, yet from another point of view – that of enlightened ones – they entail the embrace of everything, just as it is (tathatā, ‘suchness’), in the peace of perfect equanimity. As the Zen saying has it: once (in the state of ignorance) I saw mountains and streams; then (after embarking on the discipline of the Buddha-way) I saw mountains and streams no more; now (having made the breakthrough to liberation from desire) I see mountains and streams again.

Quite independently of Buddhism, not least under the influence of Levinas’s radicalisation of Husserl’s phenomenology, it has become possible to think God

8 On this see the attempt to re-express Buddhist ethics in the categories of modern philosophy by Goodman (2009: 122-124): only the unwise imagine that the emptiness teaching absolves them from ethical concern; one is speaking not of moral nihilism but of a non-conceptual awareness; see also 151. The compassion of the enlightened has no need of moral obligation or ethical rules, see 202-205. We cannot go further here into Goodman’s ongoing debate with Keown (1992).

9 On the former, see Bapat and Mabbett (2008); on the latter, Victoria (1997).

10 The full saying from the Chinese Lin-chi (Jap. Rinzai) tradition of Ch’an (Jap. Zen) goes: “If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you meet the patriarchs, kill the patriarchs; if you meet the Arhats, kill the Arhats; if you meet your parents, kill your parents; if you meet your relatives, kill your relatives; then for the first time you will see clearly”. One is reminded of sayings of Jesus such as “it is not peace I have come to bring, but a sword” and “Anyone who prefers father or mother to me is not worthy of me” (Mt 10:34,37 par.). See Fritsch-Oppermann in Harris (2013: 41, n. 7).
without being, to postulate the good as ‘better than’ being, to give ethics priority over ontology (see, for example, Marion 1991). Levinas devotes a whole course of lectures to the consideration of Heidegger’s critique of ‘onto-theo-logy’, i.e. the ingrained Western tendency to think of God in terms of being, and attempts to show how God can be thought on the basis of ethics, ‘otherwise than being’, or, as he also says, as ‘better than being’: “… transcendence is ethical … What this signifies is not that ethics is a moment of being but rather that it is otherwise and better than being” (Levinas 2000: 223-224). In theology this means overcoming essentialism and reconceiving Christian doctrines without the reified metaphysics that has so often characterised them; this is strikingly illustrated in Knitter (2009), a remarkably honest book, but see also O’Leary (1985). This may well accord with the thought-world of the Bible at least as well as the metaphysical concepts which the early Greek and Latin theologians thought necessary in order to communicate Christian truth to the worlds of Hellenism and the Latin West.

Though understandable, it is a pity that a thinker of the stature of Paul Ricoeur was only marginally aware of the relevance of Buddhism for his philosophy of the self (see Ricoeur 1992: 139, n. 28; 296, n. 92; the same applies to Marion’s attempt to re-think God on the basis of the gift of love – the Bodhisattva ideal?). Much the same applies to Levinas, yet his thought, criticised by Ricoeur for being too one-sided in its privileging of the Other,11 contains many approximations to Buddhist insights. His insistence on the primacy of the ethical relationship, however, offers a radical challenge to both Christian and Buddhist presuppositions. The disquieting encounter with the Other in the Same (i.e. the self, awakened thereby to ethical awareness), mediated by the face – especially the eyes – of the other person, is for him the origin of time itself. This aspect of Levinas’s thought is perceptively and beautifully evoked by Palmisano (2012: 36-41). He also criticizes Levinas for lacking the quality of empathy (Einfühlung) that would make his ethical approach viable. In lectures delivered in 1946-47 Levinas already stated:

The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of a subject alone, but the intersubjective relation. The condition of time is in the rapport between humans or in history (cited by Rolland, Postscript, 230, from the later publication of these lectures by Cohen (1987)).

And even more clearly: “… it is in the relationship with another person that time is originally produced”, which is what prompts him “to think death on the basis of time rather than time on the basis of death, as Heidegger does” (Rolland, Postscript, 236).

The key to this central aspect of Levinas’s thought is that “Time, rather than the current of contents of consciousness, is the turning of the Same toward the Other” (Levinas 2000: 111). Time is not, as was so often assumed in the classical past, pure destruction – “quite the contrary” (Levinas 2000: 103) – and death is an authentic future, provided we understand that the death of the other affects me more than my...

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11 Ricoeur accuses Levinas of an understandable but one-sided hyperbole in suspending the evidence of self in order to ground otherness (the opposite of Husserl, who suspends the evidence of the other in order to ground the self), suggesting that I must already know that the other is a subject like me in order for Levinas’s primacy of the ethical to take effect; the ethical must be balanced with gnoseology, see Ricoeur (1992: 329-335). He goes on to acknowledge, nevertheless, the unique ethical force of Levinas’s philosophical excess (336-338).
own death, that “We encounter death in the face of the other” (Levinas 2000: 105). Our situation is thus not Heidegger’s Sorge but “a patient awaiting” (Levinas 2000: 115; see 139). We can think beyond being; meaning comes before knowledge (Levinas 2000: 126, 142).

In being as such, there cannot be meaning. Mortality renders meaningless the care that the me [moi] takes of its destiny. To posit oneself as ‘me’ [mot] persevering in its being, when death awaits, resembles an evasion in a world without exit. (Levinas 2000: 183)

To those who are familiar not only with the Buddhist teaching on not-self (anattā), but with the enigmatic restatements of it in the ‘Perfection of Wisdom’ (Prajñāpāramitā) tradition which Nāgārjuna systematised, these puzzling propositions begin to make sense. But in this Jewish rather than Indian context Levinas is able, not so much to derive ethics from God, as so much Western Christian philosophy has attempted to do, but to think God on the basis of ethics, of responsibility for the other, which is more akin to Jewish sensibility yet entails the deferral intrinsic to time:

Time would signify the difference of the Same and the Other. This difference is a nonindifference of the Same to the Other, and, in some way, of the Other in the Same. … We must therefore think time and the other together. (Levinas 2000: 141)

For Levinas, freedom is the uniqueness of responsibility, so that the ethical attitude is prior to freedom itself, prior to the bipolarity of Good and Evil, prior to ‘choosing’ God, and prior to ‘election’ by God (Levinas 2000: 176-177, 181). Encountering the Other, the Same (the I or self) is awakened to the Good and thus to consciousness, but this primordial awakening is not a consciousness ‘of’ anything, even of the Other: the Other within the Same is the diachrony of time, “a formalism of the void” (Levinas 2000: 210; see 208-209). Levinas likens this pure wakefulness to insomnia, and says that “the freedom of the Same is still only a waking dream” (Levinas 2000: 210). In short, “the infinite wakes thought up”, giving rise to a desire without hunger and without end, sans faim et aussi sans fin, a desire for what is beyond being: “This is transcendence and desire for the good”, for “transcendence is ethical” (Levinas 2000: 220-221, 223). It is at this precise point that Levinas reintroduces the idea of history:

All that goes on into the past is retained, recalled, or rediscovered in history. … For consciousness, the past is always a modification of a present: nothing could have come about without presenting itself. Transcendental subjectivity is the figure of this presence. (Levinas 2000: 211; the reference is no doubt to Husserl’s transcendental subject)

Buddhists, just as much as Christians, have struggled with the nature of time and the influence the Buddha-Dharma has on it: once the teachings on impermanence (anicca) and emptiness (śūnyatā) are thought through to the end, the concept of time and the possibility of change are compromised, so that theories of the
‘momentariness’ (kṣaṇa, ‘instant’) of phenomena had to be formulated.\textsuperscript{12} At the level of conventional language the temporal succession past-present-future cannot be avoided, and with it the concept of causality, even though, in a manoeuvre worthy of Hume, Nāgārjuna continually reinterprets this as relational conditioning: we have the concept ‘short’ only in relation to the concept ‘long’, and vice-versa (see Frauwallner 1935: 206; similarly the concepts beginning-middle-end, 208). The idea that the enlightened have entered a realm beyond both existence and non-existence, being and non-being, is terrifying to the uninitiated, but spells release to those who are free of all attachment.\textsuperscript{13} Levinas, as we have seen, comes very close to this, as does some Christian spiritual teaching. Impermanence, moreover, applies not only to self and world, but to knowledge itself: his own language and logic, asserts Nāgārjuna, pushing paradox to the limit, are without substance.\textsuperscript{14}

In conclusion one might venture the summary that, in the light of these Buddhist, Jewish and Christian reflections, liberation from history is not an option for spiritual practice, because the human is temporal, conditioned by time and given identity by narrative – unless it take place as liberation in history, painfully carried out with unremitting effort under the conditions imposed by temporal existence; but humankind may nevertheless look forward in some sense to the liberation of history in some scarcely conceivable yet hoped-for culmination.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{12} These were elaborated by the Sarvāstivāda and Sautrāntika schools and were fully formulated by Vasubandhu; see Frauwallner (1935: 101-109, with excerpts from the Abhidharmakośa; see 176-178 on the consequences of the ‘moment’ doctrine for causality).

\textsuperscript{13} Nāgārjuna, Ratnāvalī, 26, see Frauwallner (1935: 209).

\textsuperscript{14} Nāgārjuna debates this at length in his treatise on dialectical method, Vigrahayāvartanī, which we cannot go into here.

\textsuperscript{15} My colleague Anita Ray of Australian Catholic University’s Centre for Interreligious Dialogue made helpful comments on an earlier draft of this section.

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