Returning to the God-Talk after Atheism: Levinas and Bonhoeffer

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility of a new discourse on God after the "death of God," moving beyond traditional metaphysical and philosophical conceptions. Emmanuel Levinas offers a phenomenological approach that grounds the discourse on God in ethics, particularly in responsibility toward the Other. Levinas argues that human autonomy begins not with the self but with the Other, and that the presence of God is revealed through this ethical relationship. His radical ethics serve as a response to the history of violence and war perpetuated by Western metaphysics, which has traditionally assimilated God into the structure of subjective reason. In contrast, Dietrich Bonhoeffer rejects Levinas' idea of reaching God through the ethics of the Other. Bonhoeffer views ethics before faith as a barrier to understanding divine reality. For Bonhoeffer, the ethical path from human existence to God contradicts Christianity's approach from God to humanity. Bonhoeffer sees the relationship between ethics and faith as conflicted rather than complementary. This article examines whether Levinas' ethical discourse on God offers a viable approach to speaking of God in a post-religious era, assessing its validity through the theological differences between Levinas and Bonhoeffer.

Keywords

Emmanuel Levinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Onto-theology, Face of the other, God the Infinite, Christ existing as community

1. Introduction

After the death of God, Christianity called for a new God-discourse that went beyond a metaphysical and philosophical God. How can we speak of God in a different way than before? This question is also about the possibility of a world that has overcome violence, war, and discrimination.

This study focuses on Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological discussion of the possibility of a new discourse of God in an age of atheism. Levinas' discourse of God the Infinite emerged as a theological alternative to the bewilderment and emptiness caused by the absence of religion or the reality of the death of God. For Levinas, the discourse of God is intrinsically linked to our relationship with the Other. He emphasizes the ethics of the other, intending to advocate for an autonomous subject. Still, he argues that this autonomy does not begin with the self but with the other, and it is in the other that the presence of God is revealed. His radical ethic of responsibility has provided an opportunity to reflect on and subvert the history of war and violence that the totality of Western metaphysics, which has absorbed God into the structure of the subject's identification with the Infinite, has driven.

As many commentators have agreed, Bonhoeffer and Levinas share a noticeable similarity in their compelling approach to the radical encounter between self and other and an intensely critical stance toward philosophies and theological projects of sameness. However, there is a clear difference between the two: Bonhoeffer is totally opposed to Levinas' attempt to approach God from the ethics of the Other. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a theologian who argued for the incompatibility of Christianity and ethics. Bonhoeffer considers ethics to be preventing us from understanding the ultimate. He sees ethics as a path from human beings to God, the opposite of the Christian faith, which speaks of an exclusive path from God to human beings. Bonhoeffer, too, insists on the church's responsibility toward the other. Still, he does not see the orientation toward the other and the orientation toward God on the same track; rather, he sees them as opposites and in conflict. This key issue leads Levinas to ask whether it is valid within the Christian faith to propose the possibility of a God discourse from an ethical responsibility toward the other.

This article examines whether Levinas' discourse of God from the ethics of the Other makes it possible to discourse about God in a post-religious age and its validity through the differences between Levinas and Bonhoeffer. How does the possibility of the existence of the Other, which is not subsumed by the totality of reason, open up, and does a self shaped by the Other truly make an encounter with the Infinite divine Other possible? These are the central questions this article seeks to answer.

For this purpose, I reconstruct the ethical discourse on God through Levinas' phenomenology in section 2. In section 3, I focus on how Bonhoeffer explains an authentic encounter with God in the godless age. In section 4, I critically examine whether the concept of God as the Infinite being in Levinas' discourse is valid as a Christian discourse in the era of secularization through Bonhoeffer's theology. The conclusion of section 5 will identify the problems with Levinas' God-talk from Bonhoeffer's perspective and evaluate the relevance of Levinas' understanding of God within Christian theology.

2. God-Talk in Levinas' Philosophy

2.1. Criticism of Onto-theology

Levinas starts his exploration of new possibilities for discussing God by critiquing Heidegger's onto-theology. Onto-theology is a term that encapsulates Heidegger's critical stance towards Western philosophy. In the Introduction to *What is Metaphysics?*, entitled "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics," he states in the following way:

[…] metaphysics represents the beingness [Seiendheit] of beings in a twofold manner: in the first place, the totality of beings as such with an eye to their most universal traits (on katholou, koinon); but at the same time also the totality of beings as such in the sense of the highest and therefore divine being (on katholou, akrotaton, theion). In the metaphysics of Aristotle, the unconcealedness of beings as such is specifically developed in this twofold manner […].

According to its essence, metaphysics is at the same time both ontology in the narrower sense, and theology.[1]

In the Western metaphysical tradition, God is the unifying center that grants coherence to the whole of beings; thus, metaphysics is described as onto-theo-logy.[2] Why, then, does Heidegger insist that metaphysics inevitably leads to onto-theology? This question is crucial for understanding how God became central in philosophical discourse.

Heidegger discusses metaphysics as the inquiry into 'beings as beings,' considering it as the thought process that seeks the most general and universal grounds for the existence of beings. In other words, metaphysics is the thought that provides the grounds for knowledge and existence and explores causes, grounds, and conditions of possibility. At this point, God becomes the first cause and the ultimate ground. According to Heidegger, metaphysics inevitably posits God in its effort to unify all beings and explore their ground. As a fundamental way of understanding and explaining beings, metaphysics cannot avoid introducing God as the ultimate cause or ground during this exploration. In this process, God becomes the ultimate cause of existence and the center that grants meaning to all beings. Therefore, metaphysics converges into onto-theology because, in its quest to find the ground for all beings, it requires an ultimate and highest ground, God. God becomes an integral part of philosophical inquiry. As a result, God, as the self-causing, ultimate cause of all existence, is seen as a being that cannot truly be worshipped. Regarding the onto-theological God, Heidegger says as follows:

[*Causa sui*] is the right name for the God of philosophy. [Hu]man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. Before the *causa sui*, [Hu]man can neither fall to his knees in aw nor can he play music and dance before this God. The god-less thinking which must abandon the God of philosophy, God as *causa sui*, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.[3]

However, the significant problem is that this metaphysical concept of God is absorbed into the structure of human subjectivity. This means that God loses its unique character and is reduced to the subject's identity structure. Heidegger explains this through the concept of representationalism. Heidegger's idea of representationalism refers to how human beings engage with the world through mental representations. Representation (*Vorstellung*) means setting beings before humans. Through representational activities, consciousness reabsorbs differences into identity. In representationalism, the world is perceived and understood by creating internal images or concepts of external objects. When humans see the world through representation, the world appears before them according to the representation order. Therefore, to represent means to handle and manipulate the world that emerges through such representation. Through representation, humans become the subjects that ground the world,

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1   Martin Heidegger, Introduction to "What is metaphysics?", trans. Groth, https://wagner.edu/psychology/files/2013/01/Heidegger-What-Is-Metaphysics-Translation-GROTH.pdf

2   Martin Heidegger, *Schellings Abhandlung über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit*[1809], trans. Cho Sang-wook (Seoul:Dongmunseon, 1997), 77

3   Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72.

and the world becomes the object that humans can handle.[4] Heidegger criticizes this mode of thinking because it limits the possibility of encountering something entirely different or other, as it reduces everything to what can be represented and controlled by the subject. Even God descends merely to a conceptual God that humans can control by human consciousness and representation. Heidegger's ontology highlights the 'difference' between being(*Sein*) and beings(*Seiendes*), which traditional metaphysics often overlooked. For him, it is essential to explore the possibility of 'non-representational thinking' to allow for the encounter with the wholly other.

Levinas agrees with Heidegger's idea that metaphysics is onto-theology and pursues non-representational thinking. However, a significant difference exists between them. Levinas argues that Heidegger's distinction in ontology lies in the separation between being and beings. For Levinas, the problem is that Heidegger simply distinguishes between the two, not separates. Levinas criticizes Heidegger for always having a being intertwined with beings. For Heidegger, it is impossible to think of being without beings because being can only be approached through understanding the being of beings. For Heidegger, 'being' means the state in which beings are arranged within the network of all beings; therefore, while 'being' and 'beings' can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Levinas saw Heidegger's view of the inseparable relationship between being and beings as a limit, indicating that Heidegger had not entirely escaped ontological egocentrism. Furthermore, he seriously criticizes Heidegger for subordinating the entity to the relationship with being, thereby inevitably leading ontology to another power, imperialistic domination, and tyranny:

Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.[5]

While Heidegger was content with distinguishing between being and beings, Levinas further separated the two. Heidegger sought to think 'beyond beings to being,' while Levinas sought the possibility of thinking 'beyond being itself, in a different dimension from being.' Levinas argues, "Being should be understood as independent of beings, and thus, beings as thrown entities can never become the master of being."[6] He calls this anonymous existence as "existing without existents."[7]

2.2. Responsible Subject for the Other

Levinas' critique of Western philosophy centers on his discontent with the tradition of ontological reductionism, which seeks to subsume the other into the same through an overarching concept of being. According to Levinas, this approach neutralizes the distinctiveness

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4   "Heidegger's representationalism," The Free Library, accessed May 18, 2025, https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Heidegger%27s+representationalism.-a020083186

5   Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 46-47.

6   Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other,* trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 29.

7   Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 29.

of individual entities by categorizing them within a single, unified framework. Essentially, any entity, no matter how unique, is classified merely as a manifestation of the broader category of "being." While aiding in the intellectual comprehension of existence, this process ultimately homogenizes entities, obliterating their meaningful differences. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas argues that Western philosophy, dominated by this ontological reductionism, fails to honor entities' alterity or otherness.[8] Instead, it reduces them to mere objects of knowledge that can be comprehensively understood within a totality. The "middle and neutral term"[9] Levinas mentions refers to this overarching concept of being, which facilitates the intellectual grasp of entities but at the cost of erasing their unique qualities.

Levinas proposes a radical shift from this ontological framework to one that prioritizes ethical relationships. In his view, true selfhood is not about subsuming the other into a pre-existing category but recognizing and responding to the other in their radical alterity. The face-to-face encounter with the other becomes a foundational ethical moment where the self is called to responsibility.[10] He emphasizes that the self exists in a state of ethical obligation to the other rather than dominating or subsuming the other within a conceptual framework.

This approach challenges traditional notions of 'intentionality' and 'totality', advocating responsibility for others. This responsibility is not something assumed after ethical deliberation but is intrinsic to the encounter with the other. Therefore, the self finds itself already bound in responsibility to the Other without making a moral decision to bind itself. For Levinas, responsibility is intrinsic to the self and not something added to it. It is not dependent on will or decision but rather enabled by the encounter with the other. It is abstract to speak of the self independently of its responsibility to the other. Levinas argues that ethics arises from the revelation of this responsibility, regardless of who the self or the other is or whether this fact is reflected upon or acted upon. Responsibility is passive and non-voluntary; the genesis of responsibility is not in taking responsibility but in the self already being conditioned by the responsibility revealed in the other's face.

2.3. God and ethics for others

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas gives precise indications of how we can think about our relationship with God. However, the relationship does not deal primarily with objective knowledge but with the relationship with the other: "The dimension of the divine opens up from the human face."[11] This means that a direct understanding of God through theoretical elaborations is inadequate or impossible. Levinas says:

God rises to his supreme and ultimate presence as correlative to the justice rendered unto men. The direct comprehension of God is impossible for a look directed upon him, not because our intelligence is limited, but because the relation with infinity respects the total Transcendence

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8   Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.
9   Ibid.
10   Ibid., 48-52.
11   Ibid., 78.

of the other without being bewitched by it, and because our possibility of welcoming him in man goes further than the comprehension that thematizes and encompasses its object.[12]

When we responsibly commit to others, we can experience transcendence—a profound sense of something greater than ourselves—that begins within us and extends Infinitely beyond. In this view, the other person encourages us to move beyond our selfishness and embrace a higher, transcendent aspiration. By doing so, we can make the divine visible, free from abstract ideas and theological constraints. This is the only possibility we have to make God visible. Levinas points to the human relationship as the possible and appropriate way to have a knowledge of the divine, saying that "there can be no "knowledge" of God separated from the relationship with men [*humans*]."[13] Understanding and expressing the idea of God comes through the opportunities created by ethical relationships. In this sense, we can speak of ethics as the vision of God and "spiritual optics."[14] The intersubjective relations become an epistemic place for the understanding of God. Humans' face-to-face relationships are configured as events with meanings that cannot be synthesized theoretically. Epistemological efforts to elaborate on categories that evidence the intelligibility of God when they dispense with ethics are only empty and formal concepts: "Without the signification they draw from ethics theological concepts remain empty and formal frameworks."[15] Levinas' interest shifts to considering how to think and speak of God without relying on the concept of being.

2.4. God the Infinite

Levinas argues that the best way to refer to God is through the concept of the Infinite. The idea of the Infinite, Levinas takes it from Descartes, is the one that most visibilizes the meaning of God. Just as the idea of infinity is not produced in the spontaneity of consciousness, so is the idea of God: "God's existence that matters to us here, but rather the breakup of consciousness, which is not a repression into the unconscious but a sobering or a waking up [réveil] that shakes the "dogmatic slumber" that sleeps at the bottom of all consciousness resting upon the object."[16] Levinas emphasizes the difference between the Infinite and the finite. The finite doesn't encompass the Infinite and isn't introjected by it; on the other hand, the Infinite doesn't negate the finite. The Infinite is present in the finite but does not allow itself to be encompassed or assimilated by it.

The impossibility of consciousness producing the idea of the Infinite means a mortal blow to intentional consciousness. Consciousness, usually active and present, becomes "a passivity more passive than any passivity" when faced with the Infinite.[17] This passive consciousness, limited in intentionality, is impacted by the Infinite, causing it to suffer because it cannot comprehend or ignore it. The idea of the Infinite disrupts and transforms consciousness. Levinas

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12   Ibid.
13   Ibid.
14   Ibid.
15   Ibid.
16   Levians, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, California: Standford University Press, 1998), 63.
17   Ibid., 64.

calls this disruption "the traumatism of the awakening."[18] Traumatism, however, cannot prevent subjectivity from maintaining relations with the transcendent. The subjectivity that endures the trauma of the Infinite is called upon to maintain a relationship with it. Levinas proposes that Desire is capable of concretizing this extraordinary relationship. For him, Desire means a possible thought capable of thinking more than it can: "Passivity, or passion in which Desire is recognized, in which the "*more in the less*" awakens with its most ardent, most noble, and most ancient flame, a thought destined to think more than it thinks."[19] This Desire doesn't guarantee a jouissance and is always unfulfilled. The self is always open to desire, leading to frustration. Desire is for something distant and unattainable. When desiring the Infinite or God, which remains separate, we are ordered to desire "the Other," which is ultimately Undesirable. This means the ethical turn by the Infinite.

Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond. In this ethical turn about, in this reference [renvoi] from the Desirable to the Undesirable, in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being.[20]

Desiring self-subjectivity means seeking others and taking responsibility for them. Consequently, the meaning of God can be found in ethics toward others. Levinas claims that the true significance of God lies in ethics. While he acknowledges the limitations of ethics, he upholds their importance. Levinas introduces the idea of responsibility for others as an absolute value, surpassing being and knowledge. This responsibility is not guided by will but arises passively through ethical interactions with others. Consequently, Levinas emphasizes the importance of ethical relationships through personal encounters, independent of context. This contrasts sharply with Bonhoeffer's philosophy, which underscores the role of will in various social situations.

3. God-Talk in Bonhoeffer's Theology

3.1. Encountering Others

Just as Levinas develops his account of responsibility for the other from his critique of the ontology of idealism, Bonhoeffer also frames his understanding of collective and relational personhood through a critique of idealism. Bonhoeffer critiques idealism, which conceives persons primarily as rational beings who enter the ethical realm solely by virtue of their universal reason. This echoes Levinas's assertion that idealism diminishes differences between entities by merging them into rational understanding. Bonhoeffer uses the categories of "I" and "You," providing what is missing in idealist thinking—the expression of concrete personhood confronting the self in time and space. Bonhoeffer defines the "You" as "the other who places

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18   Levians, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 66.
19   Ibid., 67.
20   Ibid., 69.

me before an ethical decision."[21] Thus, personhood and responsibility are intertwined, with the real person being the ethical person—the one concretely addressed by a "You" in the entirety of their being in the moment: "The I comes into being only in relation to the You; only in response to a demand does responsibility arise."[22]

Bonhoeffer's account of responsible personhood mirrors Levinas's thought, in that both accounts cut off the idealist tendency to reduce the other person to the same of the self. However, this similarity between Bonhoeffer and Levinas is only superficial. Bonhoeffer stresses that a genuine encounter with the other can only occur within a relationship with the person of Christ, which is realized as the collective person of the church.

3.2. Christ's Personhood

Bonhoeffer discovers the genuine way for a human being to meet the other from Christ's personhood rather than the encounter with another person. Even though Bonhoeffer, like Levinas, emphasizes concrete interpersonal encounters in his accounts of sociality and responsibility, he maintains that Christ's mediation always constructs these encounters. In other words, if the subject of an authentic encounter with others can be neither the knowing "I" of idealism, which nullifies the difference of the other, nor an ethical "You" as individualism, which absolutizes the difference of the other, it can be found through a mediator of God's revelation. Bonhoeffer claims that a genuine relationship with other human beings happens" 'through' something which exists…everything depends, therefore, on the interpretation of 'through.'"[23] For Bonhoeffer, this mediator can only be Jesus Christ, who plays the role of mediator between "I" and the other. Only through Christ does my neighbor meet me as one who claims me in an absolute way from a position outside my existence. Without Christ, even my neighbor is no more than a possibility of self-assertion for me through "bearing the claim of the other."[24]

The boundary as a limit that cannot be violated in the meeting of I and "You" is not the absolutized "You," but Christ. The You becomes a limit that the I cannot violate through Christ, namely, the genuine boundary (*granz*) in the Christological sense. In any case, the I cannot have the immediacy of the other as it appears in idealism. The I can confront You only in this way as mediated by Christ. Only one Mediator, Christ, can face human beings toward the other. Bonhoeffer notes, "[Christ] stands between us and God, and for that very reason, he stands between us and all other men and things. He is the Mediator, not only between God and man, but between man and man, between man and reality."[25] Bonhoeffer emphasizes that all encounters with the other should be mediated through Christ. He continues, "since his coming man has no immediate relationship of his own anymore to anything, neither to God nor to the

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21   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, vol I of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 52.

22   Ibid., 54.

23   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*, vol II of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 106.

24   Christiane Tietz, "Christology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Michael Mawson, Philip G. Ziegler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 157.

25   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1960), 85.

world; Christ wants to be the mediator."[26]

Human personhood is thus ultimately defined in reference to the encounter with the person of Christ. If personhood is basically defined through the encounter with the person of Christ, it should be noted that Christ exists as a community. Christ, an act of revelation and reconciliation by God, is the collective person of the new human race. In his person, Christ embodies a new social relationship between God and humanity and between human beings. If Adam is the representative of the collectivity of sin, then by contrast, Christ is a collective being who personalizes the new humanity. The sin of humanity, represented by Adam, can only be superseded by a collective person called Christ, who exists as a community.[27] For Bonhoeffer, Christ as a collective person is the basis on which the crucifixion can be a vicarious death for all humankind. Through sin, humans fell into extreme isolation and were bound by a common chain of sin, but in Christ's vicarious death, both individual isolation and collective bonds were sublated. God restored community with human beings through the vicarious death of Christ on the cross.

3.3. Church as Christ's Collective Personhood

For Bonhoeffer, the church is the new community of humanity established by Christ's action as our vicarious representative.[28] Bonhoeffer equates Christ's collective person with the church.[29] He says, "in the resurrection of Jesus Christ his death is revealed as the *death of death* itself" [italics added], while "the human body became the resurrection-body, and the humanity-of-Adam became the church of Christ."[30]

Christ signifies the church community in which the revelation of God takes place. For Bonhoeffer, the church community is the very presence of Christ. Christ is present as a person, and the church community as a person is identified with Christ. Therefore, the way of encountering revelation, mediated through Christ, takes place in the community. Bonhoeffer says, "Christ can never be thought of in his being in himself, but only in his relationship to me. That in turn means that Christ can only be conceived of existentially, viz. in the community."[31] Here, the relational range of Jesus Christ extends from me to the community's horizon. Christ stands between me and God (continuity), between me and myself (existentiality), and between me and my neighbor (communality).

For Bonhoeffer, the I-You encounter does not just happen on an individual level but at the level of the community as a social and collective person. God's revelation exists as a personal community beyond the individual dimension. The community is constituted and completed through the person of Christ, and individuals manifest themselves as new beings in this

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26   Ibid.

27   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church, vol. I of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 121.

28   Ibid., 155.

29   Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 127.

30   Ibid., 151-152.

31   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. William Collins Sons (New York: Harper One, 2009), 47.

community. In his Book *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer expands on the concept of responsibility, grounding it in the revelation of love within the church. He writes, "God's love liberates human perception, which has been clouded and led astray by the love of self, for the clear recognition of reality, the neighbor, and the world; thus, and only thus, is one readied to perceive and undertake genuine responsibility."[32] For Bonhoeffer, genuine and responsible personhood is brought into being through the love of God, as revealed in the redeemed existence within the church community. The church can be identified with Christ's personhood because Christ joins with the church in his person. For Bonhoeffer, the church community is where the revelation of Christ exists. The church is the place where God's will is established in history, where God's reality and the world's reality are integrated. God's transcendence and immanence are integrated into one and are not separate in the church.

4. Ethical collective personhood beyond the individual other

Bonhoeffer aims to liberate theology from metaphysics by exposing its self-imprisoning tendencies and failure to overcome the subject-object split. He critiques post-Kantianism, which merges traditional ontology and ideology with the act-being dialectic. Bonhoeffer rejects post-Kantianism's self-centered approach to relationships and dismantles the harm caused by modern self-centered thinking, which has distorted the understanding of God and others.

However, Bonhoeffer disagrees with the proposal to dismiss self-identity and replace it with other-centered ethics. Bonhoeffer sees that speaking of the other-as-person and the person-as-other cannot solve the continuing challenge raised by the transcendental tradition's paradigm of subject and object. This is because other-centered philosophy, including dialogicalism and I-You personalism, is unable to secure the continuity of human togetherness. If the person's encounter with God is replaced with an encounter with the other, "then what occurs is not the overcoming of the absolute claim per se to master the world but the inversion of the absolute claim from the I to the encountering other."[33] The other-centered approach absolutizes the demands of the other as you. This is simply to transfer the absolute position of the "I" in idealism to the "You." Such an absolutization of the other is nothing more than a repetition of the Idealist tradition, which made the I absolute. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, Levinas's concept of sociality, emphasizing the responsibility for the other, remains entrenched in idealism because it overlooks the role of divine agency in social interactions. This critique is most evident in Bonhoeffer's inaugural lecture at the University of Berlin. The text is long, but I will quote it.

Hence the I posits the other as absolute, acknowledges that other as its concrete, absolute boundary only to have its own absolute essence ultimately returned to it through that absolute You. [After all, since I myself posit the claim of the You as absolute, I could just as easily relativize it,] and thus with my own possibilities I remain the master of the other person as well. Although

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32   Bonhoeffer, *Ethics, vol VI of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott. Minneapolis (MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 242.

33   Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 79.

Grisebach's intentions are certainly worthy of serious attention, he cannot carry them out by these means. Here, however, we find ourselves in the very midst of the critique of what philosophy can even call the boundary of the human being. We must raise one significant objection against the attempt to understand the human being on the basis of his limits [rather than from that of his possibilities]. The boundary by which the human being limits himself remains a self-drawn boundary, that is, a boundary the human person essentially has already crossed, a boundary that person must already have stood beyond in the first place in order to draw it. The boundary is thus the absolute possibility that turns against itself. By limiting my own possibilities in thought—and I really cannot limit them in any other way in philosophy—I demonstrate through the very possibility of limitation the infinity of my possibilities, from which I can no longer go back.[34]

Bonhoeffer criticizes the I-You personalism of Grisebach as a kind of Other-centered approach, for it "[makes] the Thou absolute in place of the I and [gives] it a position which can only be God's."[35] I-You personalism is no different from ontological idealism, for the I still controls the other. This means that other-centered philosophy, as a rejection of the universal subject, is entirely influenced by *cor curvum in se*. From Bonhoeffer's point of view, even though other-centered philosophy seems to succeed in overcoming the transcendent subject, it returns to the problem of the modern self by absolutizing the other.

Bonhoeffer's critique of Grisebach's ideas can extend to Levinas's position, which fails to acknowledge the need for divine transcendence to escape self-enclosure. Levinas insists on a subject mediated through the Other and stresses that the basis of perception is not the consciousness of the self but the Other, who is not subordinated by the reason and judgment of the self. For him, the other is just a counterpart who calls the subject to unconditional hospitality. From Bonhoeffer's view, however, the claim of the other's priority is nothing but replacing the self with the other. It, therefore, cannot be an authentic alternative to the modern self. Although Bonhoeffer shares common ground with the philosophers of otherness in trying to bring down the modern self, he does not reduce the self to the other as they do. The transfer of the subject to the other is not regarded as a solution to the problem of the self-incurred mind of *cor curvum in se*. Bonhoeffer considers that the other cannot be a place to encounter the Absolute because the other is identified with the self in the sense that it is also an incurved atomistic entity. In essence, thought cannot impose limits on itself from within, as any such limits are intrinsic to thought. Since philosophy relies solely on the "I's" own thinking, it cannot establish its own boundaries, even in its most rigorous attempts, like those of Grisebach.

According to Bonhoeffer, true personhood is not achieved by simply hearing the command of the other or by adhering to moral laws. Attempting to align oneself with the truth through the command of the other is akin to justifying oneself by following the Law. Rather, Bonhoeffer

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34　Bonhoeffer, "The Anthropological Question," *in vol Ⅹ of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works: Bonhoeffer, Barcelona, Berlin, New York: 1928-1931* , trans. Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 399.

35　Bonhoeffer, "The Inaugural Lecture: Man In Contemporary Philosophy And Theology" in *No Rusty Swords*, 59.

asserts the radical severance between Christianity and ethics, arguing that "Christianity and ethics have absolutely nothing to do with each other. There is no Christian ethic."[36] 78 Bonhoeffer claims that Christianity is fundamentally amoral, meaning that Christianity and ethics are initially incompatible and quite different. This is because Christianity focuses on the unique path from God to humans. In contrast, ethics centers on the path from humans to God, emphasizing the encounter between the holy God and the righteous human. Essentially, the Christian message highlights grace, while ethics emphasizes righteousness.[37]

Bonhoeffer, thus, proposes a genuine alternative beyond the other-centered ethic in the collective and communal other, not in the isolated and individual other. Christ as a community is Bonhoeffer's response to refuting the other's individualistic social atomism and to realizing the encounter with the absolute other and the grace of revelation in the concept of the Christian person. Bonhoeffer's concept of Christological personhood has a collective dimension, including a comprehensive scope of others beyond the individual. Bonhoeffer's Christology eventually pursues the ethics of the others through Christ as the community. The collective personality of the "other" is demanded of the ethical decision of "responsibility" through Christ. Bonhoeffer says this is an "ethical collective person."[38] Bonhoeffer explains that through "ethical collective persons," the Christian person formed between God and an individual is an adaptable concept between God and community and even between God and all humankind. Bonhoeffer forms a Christian ethical framework that allows us to discuss "the responsibility of the community" beyond "individual responsibility" by presenting the collective person as the genuine way of facing the other.

5. Conclusion

Levinas' philosophy emphasizes an ethics of responsibility toward the Other, which creates a point of contact with God as the Infinite. In this framework, the Other holds a crucial position because the way one thinks and speaks about God is made possible through ethics for the Other. God is not an entity that humans can directly face or represent. However, when we act justly for our vulnerable neighbors, we open up the possibility of thinking and speaking about the non-representable God. Justice for the Other is not merely an indirect consequence of encountering God; rather, the act itself constitutes the encounter with God. Therefore, for Levinas, discourse about God can only be expressed ethically. His understanding of God contributes positively to overcoming the limitations of traditional Western metaphysics, which has often framed God as the cause and beings as mere effects.

From Bonhoeffer's perspective on the face of the Other, Levinas' understanding of God centered on the Other remains problematic. Bonhoeffer argues that it is impossible to position the Other as an absolute limit to oneself. If one can establish the Other as an absolute

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36 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," in *The Bonhoeffer Reader* (Minneapolis, MN : Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014), 78.

37 Ibid., 77.

38 Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 118.

boundary, one can also relativize the Other in the same way. The notion that humans can set an insurmountable limit from within themselves inherently includes the possibility of crossing that limit. Consequently, if Levinas' concept of the absolute externality of the Other is distorted, his discourse on God as the Infinite, based on the possibility of thinking and speaking about God through the Other, loses its persuasive power.

Bonhoeffer's rejection of the Other as an impassable barrier stems from his reflection on the human condition of sin. The inclination to dispose of the Other within one's own authority—referred to as the "incurved mind [*cor curvum in se*]"—symbolizes humanity's sinful state, represented by Adam. In this state, Adam can only conceptualize an insurmountable boundary but is powerless against the temptation to realize the transgression that is presented before humans. Thus, if, as does Levinas,[39] the external mediation between the I and You isn't posited, the human other is nothing but an angelic or abstract being. Without the mediation of Christ, the emphasis on the ethical transcendence of the other would lapse into impotent idealism, which is indifferent to the oppressive historical conditions of human existence and incapable of changing the world for the better.

Also, the unconditional primacy of the Other would fail to provide an adequate account of God's revelation because the other's ethical claim is immediately identified and absolutized with God's absolute claim. The absolute primacy of the Other to the self is simply to pretend the absolute position of the I to the Other since the identified self would, in fact, establish the absolute position of the other. Such others inverted from the I are inadequate in explicating the revelation of God, for the other, who is regarded as a bearer of God's revelation, still remains in the hegemony of the I. What emerges in the ethics of the other is not the disappearance of the absolute claim but rather the return of the egocentric self, which is disguised as the other. This means that the other-centered encounter cannot be an alternative way of recognizing revelation. Therefore, Bonhoeffer asserts that a genuine relationship with the Other cannot arise from one's own decision and will to establish the Other as a limit; rather, it must be given from an external source. He finds this external source in the collective personhood of Jesus Christ, revealed to humanity through divine revelation.

Bonhoeffer's critique of Levinas exposes a significant structural difference in theological discourse. While Levinas posits that the possibility of God-talk emerges through encounters with the Other, Bonhoeffer argues that the genuine encounter with the Other necessitates Christ as divine revelation. In other words, for Levinas, God appears as a "trace" following an encounter with the Other.[40] In contrast, for Bonhoeffer, God is understood as a priority request for an authentic encounter with the Other, realized through the intercession of Christ and made real through the church.

Bonhoeffer's view that Christ is the prerequisite for encountering the Other and exists as a collective personhood within the community marks a crucial distinction from Levinas'

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39   Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.
40   Levians, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, 64.

understanding of the Other and God as the Infinite. This difference leads to distinct approaches to the ethical life in Christianity. Levinas argues that human autonomy can only be truly free when an external command guides it. For him, this command is realized through the universal teachings of the Torah, which do not merely signify rules but rather point to an idea granted by the authority of the Infinite outside oneself. In this sense, Levinas sees the ethical life of human responsibility toward the Other as something grounded in the universal teachings of the Law, Torah.

However, Bonhoeffer does not locate the ethical possibility for the Other in human actions as a response to legal commandments. Instead, he asserts that God is first and foremost invoked for an authentic encounter with the Other, realized through the intercession of Christ and made real through the church. He says that the ethics of the Other is only able to speak through "the exclusive path from God to human beings from within God's own compassionate love"[41] toward human beings as sinners. In this sense, Bonhoeffer saw the ethics of the Law as a path of self-righteousness from human existence toward God, a path that challenges the authority vested in God alone. Ethical behavior is not a command that arises from outside but an action that flows from the freedom of human existence to stand alone in the world, a freedom that can only be enjoyed through an encounter with the Other through the freedom of Christ, not through commandment or Law.

Bonhoeffer's understanding of encountering the Other through Christ extends beyond individual relationships into a communal reality. The community manifests Christ's collective personhood. Contrary to Levinas' claim that the encounter with God comes from transcendence and an ineffable individual otherness, Bonhoeffer sees God as the living and animating spirit within the concrete history of the community. As a finite entity, the community contains the revelation of the Infinite without losing its distinct characteristics. Through the concept of community, Bonhoeffer overturns traditional ontological and metaphysical notions of God, relating divine revelation to the world without compromising God's freedom. The community's finite nature embodies the Infinite's revelation while maintaining its distinct identity. From this perspective, the individual, abstract, and transcendent nature of Levinas' discourse on God gains the new potential to be expanded into a communal, realistic, and relational understanding of God through Bonhoeffer's Christ-centered ethics of the Other.

Acknowledgement

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41   Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Basic Questions of a Christian Ethic," 77.

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