



Levinas's Politics

Justice, Mercy, Universality

Annabel Herzog

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“Critics of Levinas’s ethics as apolitical, anti-political, or even irrelevant for politics should be silenced once and for all by Annabel Herzog’s fascinating, rich, and compelling account of politics and social philosophy in Levinas’s Talmudic commentaries and other occasional writings. Herzog exhibits a consummate grasp of Levinas’s thought and tells a subtle story about the way Levinas wrestles with the complexities of, and interactions between, ethics, politics, and social thought. The book is also a delight to read. Herzog has given us one of the most illuminating and important books on Levinas in many years.” —Michael Morgan, Indiana University

Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) was a French philosopher known for his radical ethics and for his contribution to Jewish thought in his commentaries on Talmudic sources. In *Levinas’s Politics*, Annabel Herzog confronts a major difficulty in Levinas’s philosophy: the relationship between ethics and politics. Levinas’s ethics describes the encounter with the other, that is, with any other human being. For Levinas, the face-to-face encounter is a relationship in which the ego is commanded by a transcendent and unquestionable order to take responsibility for the other person. Politics, on the other hand, presupposes at least three people: the ego, the other, and any third party. Among three people, nothing can be transcendent; on the contrary, everything must be negotiated.

Against the conventional view of Levinas’s conception of the political as the interruption and collapse of the ethical, Herzog argues that in the Talmudic readings, Levinas constructed politics positively. She shows that Levinas’s Talmudic readings embody a pragmatism that complements, revises, and challenges the extreme ethical analyses he offers in his phenomenological works—*Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being*, and *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Her analysis illuminates Levinas’s explanations of the relationship between ethics and politics: ethics is the foundation of justice; justice contains a necessary violence that must be moderated by mercy; and justice, general laws, and national aspirations must be linked in an attempt to “improve universality itself.”

Annabel Herzog teaches political theory in the School of Political Science at the University of Haifa, Israel.

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