

Terence Holden

Levinas, Messianism and Parody.

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To clear up an important potential confusion, this is a treatment of Levinas' philosophy as a "parody of messianism", not a treatment of the form of parody itself. Holden's aim seems to be the role that *indirectness* plays in late Levinasian philosophy, as opposed to the "eschatology of straightforwardness" (93) Holden locates in *Totality and Infinity* and earlier. *Otherwise than Being* in particular is meant to represent a shift in focus towards a weak messianism that parodies Levinas' earlier, stronger eschatological tendencies.

'Parody' is definitely Holden's word, and it is an interesting one. It is meant to bridge the gap between messianic and non-messianic readings of Levinas, and perhaps even stand in as the ultimate meaning of Levinas' messianism. "Messianism ... is the dynamic of salvation in which the dynamic of sanctification is 'garbed'" (58). So, a more explicit title might be *Levinas, Messianism and its Parody*—the wolf of sanctification (read: humanism) must be garbed in the sheepskin of salvation (read: Judaism, Marxism, and others). Were this 'parody' not to be in place I would reify the human in masculinity or femininity, slaves or citizens, or even (such as in facism) in the individual. Messianism, or at least messianism in a Levinasian mode, functions as parody of these reifications by way of delay, insofar as it places the completion of humanity in the future. There is irony here: the final word on the human is ... to wait for the final word. Holden argues that 'humanity' is to be postponed (and achieved only in a perhaps-never-to-arrive salvation) and thus positions messianism as a perpetually penultimate answer to totality. The Messiah is, in short, the human as a parody of itself.

These possibilities for messianism are fascinating, and Holden traces 'the parody of messianism' through a wide range of ideas that cannot be done justice here. Yet, there are two incredible difficulties that Holden must face. The first has to do with his thinking of parody itself. It would seem *obviousness* is necessary component of parody, (a "reveal") and it is unclear that Levinas, were he to be taken as parody, is at all obvious about it. In some way Levinas would have to indicate, with a wink, that a parody is taking place, and Holden seems unable to (or uninterested in) producing a proof text in this regard. It is certainly the case that, were there a parodical aspect to Levinas or to messianism, few people have or will be able to notice it. This implies a paradox: Levinas would have to be so good at parody that nobody has (yet) noticed, which means he makes for very bad parody.

Be that as it may there is a second, more troublesome, difficulty. Just as "parody" is in the title and yet receives no explicit treatment, the status of the name "Levinas" warrants some pause. It could well be the case that that Levinas invites parodical reading (he certainly invites allegory, parody's cousin), but the more worrying possibility here is that Holden is attempting to create "Levinas" himself as a parodical messiah of Continental philosophy. The difficulties with the text multiply around his reading of Levinas' own words. Some of the key conceptual terms of this book (ambivalence, indirectness, and parody especially) are read on top of each other to

such a degree that they become hard to follow, especially if one is trying to establish whether they originate in Levinas, his commentators or Holden himself (e.g., at 146, the metaphor “stay of execution” is contrived by Holden in one sentence and then made to appear as a straightforward gloss Levinas’ “vigilance” in the next, 122ff. sees a tangle of Lukacs, Weber, Marx, Hegel, and Adorno in a chapter ostensibly about Levinasian messianism, etc.).

Part of the issue is scope. We see connections with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Hegel, Derrida, Deleuze, de Beauvoir, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Althusser, Sartre, Adorno, Benjamin, Durkheim, Weber, etc. For Holden, Levinas is “a principal representative of Continental philosophy,” and while this is all for the good, in that it mitigates a dogmatic, narrow view of Levinas, the danger is always present that these connections (and especially the commentators through whom Holden makes these connections) stand in Levinas’ stead. With some exceptions, Levinas’ philosophy appears by way of summary or commentary. All of this is complicated by the fact that Holden attempts a novel reading of Levinas’ authorship, where he asserts that messianism is less important in his late work than in his early work. While Holden makes his position clear against a sizable group of Levinas’ readers who would likely disagree with him, he does not give adequate evidence as to why one should prefer his reading over others.

The reading itself is counter-intuitive, which I might indicate by one small, but decisive example. On *hineni* (the “Here I am, send me!” of Isaiah 6:8, a reference fundamental to strong messianic readings), Holden picks up on the term “hypocrisy” from Chapter VI of *Otherwise than Being* to state: “Rather than serving to inspire the individual towards Cohen’s messianic task of the self-perfection and self-sanctification of the human, we have in Levinas inscribed within the relation with the other a spirit of resignation to hypocrisy and inevitable betrayal” (192). It seems simply a misreading to speak of this passage as expressing resignation—the “hypocrisy” to which Holden refers is “denounced” only as my “ears are forewarned of being’s essence.” And it is precisely Levinas’ task here to call for a “breakdown of essence”, a *beyond* of essence, such that the so-called hypocrisy of *hineni* is no longer heard. But Holden passes by the reference to the “beyond of essence,” moving instead to assert the figures of politeness and hospitality (both conceived as ritual *praxis*) as inevitable consequences of the “hypocrisy” of electing oneself to ethics. Levinas makes clear that without *hineni* one could not have politeness, but I doubt he would support the converse. Surely one can have recourse to impoliteness and yet be ethically responsible in Levinasian terms.

Despite these difficulties, Holden captures an important (and often ignored) insight, as to the indirectness of Levinas’ thinking of ethics and social life. To read Levinas as a parody or even the figure of the Messiah as a parodical figure is bold. The most philosophically compelling implication is that the various models of philosophical history and political theology known as “messianism,” can only end as parodies, or at least can always be read as parodies. And certain actual messianic movements, such as that of Shabbatai Zevi, seem to reveal the tragic-comic stakes of a strong messianic claim. Messianism reveals an exploitable weakness in ethical and social life – it extirpates totality from ethical and social orders, and not the obvious totality of war but the nefarious, slippery totality of reciprocity. And parody does seem to alleviate some of the paradoxes within Levinas’ ethics of which his readers are acutely aware, that there is always someone else who could come before me, that postponement and misdirection seem inevitably at play, and that obligations are ceaseless and yet must be bearable.

Holden begins his argument by considering the absurd counter-claim that there is no such thing as messianism in the first place (1). Perhaps the more challenging question, one which Holden ignores but is implicit in his wide reading of Continental philosophers, is whether philosophical messianism would itself constitute a tradition, if not the tradition of Continental philosophy itself. Yet ‘tradition’ is a site of ambivalence for Holden, an ambivalence that is pronounced when it comes to his (admirably thorough) reading of Levinas’ Judaism, and he certainly does not want a Levinas who is dogmatically Jewish (nor dogmatically ‘Greek’, for that matter). Yet, the dilemma between having and not having a tradition is separable from the question of Levinas’ Judaism. Holden cites Bergo to establish a non-traditional basis for Levinas’ ethics, but reads this as “non-Jewish” whereas Bergo also mentions a ‘traditional sense’ of secularism as well. Hence there is lack of clarity between philosophical messianism, messianism in Judaism (no mention of Christian messianism here,) and the role of messianism in post-Enlightenment Continental and especially Jewish Continental thought.

There is one interesting thread that remains untouched by these concerns. At times it appears as if Holden seeks to rejuvenate Levinas by way of the possibility of a feminine eschatology. The figure of femininity, liberated from *Totality and Infinity* would return as a new holiness. In an evocative final footnote, Holden refers to the Talmudic commentary “Beyond Memory” (215). Following Levinas’ suggestion of a messianic salvation from slavery by way of God’s own words to Abaraham that “In all that Sarah says to you, obey her voice. (Gen 27:12) [sic],” Holden goes further, citing the “possible” eschatology of the subordination of masculine to feminine out of Levinasian sources. There is a kind of counter-eschatology of the feminine suggested here that is both compelling and provocative, and deserves further attention.

It seems Holden, and Levinas for that matter, aren’t really discussing parody at all. If Holden seeks to explore the ambivalence of Levinas’ “messianism of straightforwardness,” he would be better served by the concept of indirectness. A parody is indirect, but philosophy can be indirect without becoming parody.

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