Chapter 1
Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?*

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Abstract In our present-day Western society, there has been an increasing tendency towards individualism and indifference and away from altruism and empathy. This has led to a resurgence of ethical concerns in contemporary Continental philosophy. Following the thinking of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, ethics has come to be defined in terms of a disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others. Levinas claims that taking care of others in need is not a free, rational decision, but a fundamental responsibility that is pre-consciously felt. We are passively obligated before we can actively choose to help. Levinas therefore argues that the needy other incapacitates our normal selfish ways, and that this ‘radical passivity’ enables us to recognize our inherent responsibility towards others in need. Levinas’s own thinking on this subject is not unambiguous, however. While his early works stress the fact that we cannot care for others if we do not first take care of ourselves, his later works focus exclusively on the other as the locus of our ethical responsibility. Following this line of thinking, a false opposition has emerged between an absolutized egoism and a crushing altruism that threatens to undermine the recent resurgence of ethical concerns. For how can we continue to care for others if we fail to recognize the duties we have towards ourselves? Moreover, what is the moral significance of responsible action if it is not freely chosen but passively imposed? The first part of this chapter attempts to introduce and problematize radical passivity with the aid of Kant’s practical philosophy. The second part follows renowned Levinas scholar Roger Burggraeve’s suggestion that the paradoxical dynamics at work in radical passivity can best be explained by tracing Jean Wahl’s influence on Levinas.

What is radical passivity? Why is radical passivity potentially an ethical problem, while Levinas presents it as the ethical solution? Those readers familiar with Levinas’s thought might object to this very line of questioning – arguing that radical passivity is neither a solution nor a (philosophical) problem but rather a moral/
aesthetic and mystical (i.e. highly religiously inflected) notion brought about by the very proximity of the other person. While I would concur with this assessment, radical passivity nevertheless presents itself as either a problem or solution when conceived within a critical framework in which we reflect upon the conditions of possibility of ethical agency. Levinas would say that egotistical freedom – that serves the needs of the self at the expense of the other – is the problem and that radical passivity – as an incapacitation of that freedom – is a solution. Radical passivity, therefore, potentially becomes a problem when we question Levinas’s premise that ethical action cannot be based on the freedom of the individual. In other words, by employing this line of questioning I want to assess the moral significance of the inversion of the traditional conception of agency associated with freedom of choice.

In order to be able to introduce and problematize the notion of radical passivity, the first part of this paper will sketch the deployment of ethical subjectivity in Levinas’s works. I shall consider to what extent a Kantian perspective can aid such a problematization. The second part will explore Roger Burggraeve’s suggestion that the dynamics at play in Levinas can be best understood by excavating the influence of Jean Wahl on Levinas’s thought. While the first part consists in an introduction and problematization of radical passivity, the second part attempts to understand the moral worth of and paradoxical forces at work in a radically passive agent – as analysed by Burggraeve.

Introduction and Problematization

What Is Radical Passivity?

The last few decades have witnessed a decisive ethical turn in literary, cultural and (Continental) philosophical discourses. This ‘recentering of the ethical’ followed rather uneasily from ‘the decentering of the subject’, that is, from the critique of the ideal, autonomous and sovereign subject (cf. Garber et al. 2000: viii–ix). For how is ethics to be recentred without its centre, without moral agency understood as sovereign rational autonomy?

Disenchanted with Man, wary of falling into the trap of moralizing liberalism, with no desire to resurrect the unprecedentedly arrogant and self-righteous transcendental Ego – discovered by Rousseau and reaching its apotheosis in Husserl’s phenomenology of consciousness – the kind of ethical philosophy that has come to occupy the centre stage in recent times has sworn allegiance to its post-humanist legacy. To do so, it had to find a way to radically disrupt ethical agency – an ethics in which the agent is characterized by a radical passivity and should therefore be written under erasure. This ethical agent has found its most exemplary if not most influential articulation in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.