

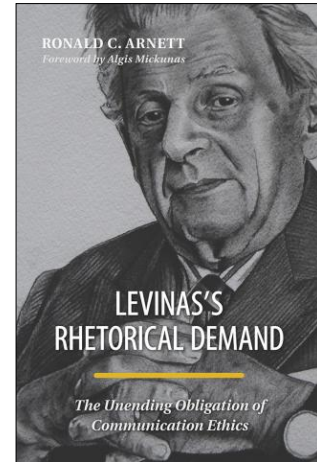
Ronald C. Arnett, **Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics**, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017, 308 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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With the publication of **Levinas's Rhetorical Demand: The Unending Obligation of Communication Ethics**, author Ronald C. Arnett takes the reader on a rather extensive excursion through the thinking of noted 20th-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as it relates to the subject of ethics and his view that it constitutes first philosophy, as opposed to that of others, especially Martin Heidegger, for whom ontological concerns are more deserving of the distinction. In pouring over his critical examination, one cannot help but be impressed with Arnett's command of Levinas's thinking and the depth into which he goes in articulating it. How the examination informs one of the pragmatic aspects of "doing" ethics, however, is a different matter and something not altogether apparent. A reader is left largely adrift in this respect. Further exploration of this concern is one to which this review reverts following a more extensive overview of the actual contents of his book and what Professor Arnett ostensibly seeks to accomplish.



The foreword to the volume is by Algis Mickunas, one of Professor Arnett's former professors and a significant Levinasian scholar in his own right. The primary contribution of the Foreword appears to be an illumination of the sources of Levinas's views and how those origins, in turn, shaped his understanding of human communication, as well as the notions he espouses in respect to what it means to behave ethically as a response to what he repeatedly refers to as the "immemorial call" to responsibility for another (or to employ his language, "the Other") that induces in one the sense of obligation in the biblical sense of being, or at least assuming the persona of, a "brother's keeper." This view is perhaps most clearly articulated in Arnett's introduction (see pp. 8–9 especially).

Following his introduction, in chapter 1, "Primordial Gesture: The Difficult Freedom of Communication Ethics," and the first of 10 overall, Arnett accents "10 gestures" indicative of what he refers to as the primordial "call to responsibility" (p. 20) that lie at the base of Levinas's ethics, and which he characterizes as "a communicative gesture leaning toward the Other in responsibility within a unity of contraries of a universal mandate ignited and implemented in the particular" (p. 38). The overview that Arnett provides in this chapter is central to much of what else he has to say about the conception of ethics that evolved in Levinas's thinking over time and what led him to view ethics as "first philosophy," the central theme in much of what he had to say about them as a focus in his account of many facets of human behavior. The remainder of Arnett's examination of Levinas's view of ethics centers on sources of influence that were instrumental in shaping it. Unfortunately, the evolution is not something Arnett considers in a systematic manner or how the various influences he notes converged, as well as diverged, at given points in Levinas's life. Rather, much of the content of the remaining chapters, 2 through 9

especially, has an "interesting, albeit often esoteric, things to know about Emmanuel Levinas" flavor. For one concerned with how Levinas's understanding and articulation of ethics can affect his or her behavior in positive way, however, Arnett's approach and account are likely to be at least opaque, if not something of a disappointment.

In chapter 2, "Footprints and Echoes," Arnett marshals a good deal of biographical material to show how Levinas, in many respects, came to view the world and the place ethics have come to occupy in it. The focus in chapter 3, "The Commencement of Responsibility: The Enigma of the Face," shifts largely to the subject of how Mordechai Chouchani, a sort of mysterious peripatetic of Levinas's acquaintance, entered his and others' lives, and played a significant role in shaping his views concerning responsibility for "the Other" as key both to understanding and appreciating ethics as "first philosophy." In chapter 4, "Proper Names: Saying, Said, and the Trace," Arnett explores in abbreviated fashion the contributions of philosophers about whom Levinas wrote in one of his books (also entitled *Proper Names*) that illustrate "Levinas's project" (p. 92). With chapter 5, "The Impersonal and the Sacred: Igniting Personal Responsibility," Arnett devotes considerable attention to how Levinas's view of ethics stands in sharp contrast to the ones of Immanuel Kant and Gregory Bateson in regard to the personal versus impersonal aspects of what it means to behave ethically.

One can think of chapters 2–5 of Arnett's book as foundational to understanding what Levinas's thoughts concerning what ethics entail. The content in chapters 6–9 becomes less focused and more idiosyncratic. Chapter 6, "Imperfection: Ethics Disrupted by Justice," has as its ostensible function the demonstration of how "Levinas's understanding of ethics as first principle works in creative tension with his conception of justice"—more specifically, "human responsibility attends to ethics within the realm of proximity, and justice is responsive to the forgotten and marginalized" (p. 135). Arnett develops his thesis via a somewhat protracted examination of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*. Chapter 7, "Possession and Burden: Otherwise than Murdoch's Acquisition," indulges the reader in an actual case involving how the possession of private information involving an individual that had tragic consequences and what both the matter in question and the case, in turn, do to illuminate the Levinasian notion that "people bear witness to a justice that refuses to forget those not present at the table of discussion and decision making" (p. 174). Unfortunately, Arnett takes a long and somewhat tortuous route in getting to the point. In contrast, chapter 8, "The Ethical Parvenu: Unremitting Accountability," details a debate between Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger that for Levinas proved to be formative in his own thinking concerning the immemorial call to responsibility and "an unending obligation to and for the Other" (p. 196). In chapter 9, "Heidegger's Rectorate Address: Being as Mistaken Direction," serves as a not-altogether-coherent, let alone exhaustive, account of Levinas's separation from Heidegger's views and actions in the realm of ethics. However, the treatment is largely a biographical account of something that occurred in the latter's life, not the former's.

The final chapter, "Adieu to Levinas: The Unending Rhetoric of the Face," reconstructs much of the content of Jacques Derrida's reflections upon the passing of Emmanuel Levinas, Arnett's interpretations of it, and his own thoughts concerning the significance of his seeming intellectual hero's contributions to the study of ethics, as well as the meaning of his life more generally. Arnett's development of chapter 10 brings his book to a fitting end.

Although Professor Arnett's obviously extensive work in preparing his book, as well as his command of detail concerning Levinasian ethics, as I previously mentioned, are impressive, upon completing my reading of it, I found myself somewhat unsatisfied in at least three respects: the failure of the author to identify the audience he most sought to reach, as well as why; a not especially clear or logical organizational structure relating to a sufficiently articulated set of cognitive and/or behavioral objectives; and the absence of any systematic discussion of the value of knowing what the book reveals. In moving toward the conclusion of the review, let me elaborate each concern in more detail.

First, it appears that Arnett, in developing his book, assumed at the outset a readership consisting of individuals who already know a great deal about ethics, scholarly inquiries into the subject, and Levinas's scholarship in particular—in short, people fairly sophisticated and knowledgeable in the subject matter to which he attends. This may or may not have been the case, but whether or not it was, something in the preface or introduction informing prospective readers concerning for whom the volume was designed to appeal, as well as what sort of background in the subject matter would be useful for them to have, would have been desirable.

Second, in the absence of any discussion of what specific outcomes the author would like to see accrue from one's reading his book, it is difficult to judge the appropriateness of the overall organization of content. Each chapter individually has a clear organizational structure. However, the 10 that comprise the full work do not. At least, I had difficulty discerning why the chapters appear in the order that they do. At the very least, some discussion of the overall organizational structure of the chapters and the specific rationale underlying it would possibly have helped me better understand how what I was reading at any given point related to what I had read previously and how that, in turn, would be useful for engaging what was yet to come.

Finally, in returning to the pragmatic value of reading the book, I would have appreciated an effort on Professor Arnett's part to help readers envision and appreciate what he would like them to know or be better able to do that would be useful to them in positive respects as a result of having invested the time and energy required to move from cover to cover. Despite this and the two preceding concerns, I close with the observation that there is more to commend Professor Arnett's discussion of *Levinas's Rhetorical Demand* than about which to be concerned.