

## Was Levinas an Antiphilosopher?

Archi-ethics and the Jewish Experience of the Prisoner

*Matthew R. McLennan*

*Deniz Guvenc*

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie  
française et de langue française, Vol XXIII, No 2 (2015) pp 84-97

Vol XXIII, No 2 (2015)  
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)  
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2015.690  
[www.jffp.org](http://www.jffp.org)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh  
as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the  
University of Pittsburgh Press

# Was Levinas an Antiphilosopher?

---

## Archi-ethics and the Jewish Experience of the Prisoner

*Matthew R. McLennan*

Saint Paul University

*Deniz Guvenc*

University of Ottawa

This paper explores Levinas's *Carnets de captivité* and *Écrits sur la captivité* in light of Badiou's category of "antiphilosophy." We make four movements here: first, a description of what antiphilosophy is; second, an explanation of why the category of antiphilosophy is important to a reading of Levinas; third, an exposition of the antiphilosophical elements of the *Carnets* and *Écrits* on captivity; fourth, we situate our reading of the notebooks within the larger context of Levinas's post-captivity work. Our reading of Levinas on and from captivity is not the first. In particular, it is preceded by Seán Hand's "Salvation through Literature: Levinas's *Carnets de Captivité*" and Howard Caygill's "Levinas's Prison Notebooks."<sup>1</sup> Both articles offer accounts of how to read the notebooks. The former makes the claim that the notebooks are "an intense inner reflection" that serves as a "metaethical resistance to [...] philosophical totality", specifically that of Heidegger.<sup>2</sup> The latter provides a detailed overview of the biographical and historical contexts relevant to the writing and posthumous publication of the *Carnets*. We accept the claims of both of these readings (they focus on different aspects of these writings), but we do more to connect the *Carnets de captivité* and *Écrits sur la captivité* to the rest of Levinas's later work and to account for their philosophical importance.

### What is Antiphilosophy?

The category of antiphilosophy is best understood by dividing it into two sets of criteria: "strict conditions" and "common themes/outlying criteria." The strict conditions of antiphilosophy are those which Badiou

claims to be explicitly manifest in each antiphilosopher he names. As for the “common themes,” there is a higher degree of variance in the form and quality of the criteria under consideration: they appear to linger in the background. These two types of criteria can be gleaned from Badiou’s texts through slightly different methods: while the strict conditions are generally enumerated and schematized at the beginning of an essay or chapter in order to structure it or to set up its coordinates, the “common themes” are often found as less formal supplementary commentary in the bodies of texts and serve to bolster the main argument. We begin by outlining three strict criteria, which are as follows:

a) Dethroning the role, conditions, limits, and possibilities of truth. As Bruno Bosteels notes in the introduction to *Wittgenstein’s Antiphilosophy*, Lacan—Badiou’s definitional antiphilosopher—holds onto a notion of truth, and this is what distinguishes his work from sophistry. Where the sophist is content to subordinate truth to the rule, rendering it a mere effect of language—thereby destroying it—the antiphilosopher always accords a role to truth, albeit dethroned and only half-sayable.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Badiou’s antiphilosopher “often delves into the resources that sophisticates exploit as well.”<sup>4</sup>

b) Defacing the image of philosophy as essentially and primarily propositional, discursive, and theoretical. Philosophy is exposed as an act which is in some sense insufficient: the antiphilosopher shows the “truths” of philosophy to be externally motivated and not self-grounding. This can consist in exposing desires which underlie or motivate philosophy and philosophers, as in the case of Nietzsche and Lacan, rendering the strictly discursive appearance of philosophy null.

c) Emphasis on a “radically new act”—an act heterogeneous to the categories of philosophy, which, in turn, seeks to show or expose in some way non-thought, i.e., that which the propositions of science and philosophy cannot express.<sup>5</sup> The antiphilosopher “disparage[s] the philosopher’s act in the name of another act, one that would be far more radical than anything the metaphysical search for truth could ever hope to deliver.”<sup>6</sup> This new act overcomes the philosophical act affirmatively: it takes up and privileges the beyond, the Real, the mystical. This act may be called philosophical, but is “more honestly, supraphilosophical or even aphilosophical.”<sup>7</sup>

These three conditions make up the necessary elements for any antiphilosophy. It should be noted that the thinkers that Badiou nominates are not necessarily *always* antiphilosophical; rather, they have antiphilosophical moments. Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, for example, is taken as a supreme work of antiphilosophy; *Philosophical Investigations*, on the other hand, slips into sophistry. This relation, or rather, this demarcation of the line between antiphilosophy and sophistry is thin; it can, however, be further clarified with recourse to the "common themes" or outlying criteria of antiphilosophy.

### Common Themes

Taken in conjunction, these previous three points—the deposing of the category of truth, the discovery of the philosophical act underlying philosophy, and the affirmation of a radically new act—lead to a concept of the "remainder": that which is not accounted for in thinking. The "idea of the 'remainder' can be found in every antiphilosophy"; in fact, it is with the remainder that "antiphilosophy deposes philosophy: by *showing* what its theoretical pretention has missed and which in the end is nothing less than the real."<sup>8</sup> The remainder serves to shake the philosopher's epistemology: often, it is not something which simply has yet to be thought, but that which *cannot* be thought from within philosophy, within any given social/historical context. The remainder is what the antiphilosopher attempts to present, or at least trace, in order to show the limits of truth, the proposition, discourse, theory, and so on. Thus the idea of the remainder is an identifier of antiphilosophy *in potentia*.

Unfortunately, the discussion of the remainder often takes the form of a "striking misogyny which characterizes all antiphilosophers."<sup>9</sup> While the question of Levinas's misogyny reaches much further than the scope of this paper, suffice it to say at this point that misogyny generally takes the form either of subordinating the other to the same (feminine to the masculine) or otherwise essentializing the feminine in or as a mysterious 'dark continent'.<sup>10</sup> In either case, the masculine voice is presupposed as the foundation from which the feminine is derived. Badiou gives some examples from the personal lives of the antiphilosophers, which often bleed through into their writing: "Pascal (did he ever notice one other than his sister?), Rousseau (*Émile's* Sophie!), Kierkegaard (the neurosis of marriage!)," and so on.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, there is the relationship that antiphilosophers have, in the last instance, to philosophy proper. Badiou tells us that "there is in antiphilosophy a movement of putting itself to death, or silencing itself, so that something may be bequeathed to philosophy."<sup>12</sup> This self-effacement can take many forms: "Nietzsche's madness," "Wittgenstein's strange labyrinth," "Lacan's final muteness."<sup>13</sup> This is akin to saying that antiphilosophers proceed from their own lives, their own existential

situations, outward toward philosophy's failure to think. Philosophy, however, always recuperates the remainder in the end: antiphilosophy is in a sense always a willful martyr to a reformed philosophy.

### Why Antiphilosophy?

Now that we have discussed what it is, let us turn our attention to what it does: What does antiphilosophy give us that philosophy does not? Why concern ourselves with the nomination and categorization of antiphilosophers, rather than simply engage with their ideas philosophically?

The clearest answer Badiou provides can be found in the preface to *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*. There he argues that antiphilosophy serves to awaken philosophers to two specific points they often miss: the historical contingency of philosophical thinking, and the authoritarian nature of philosophical claims.<sup>14</sup>

The historical contingency of philosophy is tied to the historical movement of its truth conditions. The conditions of philosophy—art, politics, science, and love—are the genres in which truths can appropriate or manifest. Truths are functions of events, and events are subtractive—an irruption of the void into the regular course of being. Since an event is wholly unthinkable from the point of view of the situation which precedes it (the situation which gets interrupted by the event), it follows that philosophy cannot produce truths of its own: strictly speaking, there are no events in philosophy. In fact, all philosophy can do is think the compossibility of its four truth conditions: the task of philosophy is to discover or extract from the historical event the eternal and universal laws that govern each and every event. It is often through the “suturing” of philosophy to one of its four conditions (to the detriment of the others) that this fact of historical contingency is forgotten, and this forgetting leads to disaster. A prime example is Heidegger's suture to poetry (art), leading through nostalgic valorization of a more “pure” historical moment, to his eventual Nazism.<sup>15</sup>

In drawing attention to the historicity of thought, the antiphilosopher reminds the philosopher of the dangers of suture and the scope of philosophy. This is done, in part, through the same movement which alerts the philosopher to the authoritarian voice of philosophy itself—the second “function” of antiphilosophy for the philosopher. By vigorously submitting one's own existence, one's own body, to the work at hand, the antiphilosopher draws attention to the “seductive” and “violent” element present in any philosophy insofar as it beckons others to follow, criticizes contemporaries, and so on. In putting one's life at stake against the “throes of philosophy,” the antiphilosopher “chooses the philosophers whom he hopes to make into the canonical examples of the empty and vain shell of a

word that for him is philosophy.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, there is always another philosopher who, for the antiphilosopher, is the culmination or foundation of contemporary thought: “Pascal against Descartes, Rousseau against the Encyclopedists, Kierkegaard against Hegel, Nietzsche against Plato, Lacan against Althusser.”<sup>17</sup> As we will see below, the philosopher who determines contemporary thought for Levinas is Heidegger.

Thus far we have defined both the coordinates and the function of antiphilosophy as it is described by Badiou. We now turn to our reading of Levinas’s *Carnets de captivité* and *Écrits sur la captivité*.

## Captivity

In the *Carnets de captivité* and the *Écrits sur la captivité*, Levinas sketches an antiphilosophical program according to Badiou’s strict criteria – and while the antiphilosophical character of the writings according to the non-strict, outlying criteria is less conclusive, there are some clues to suggest that they are also pertinent, in some measure, when applied to Levinas.<sup>18</sup>

Recall that the strict criteria of antiphilosophy are: a) a critique of philosophy’s statements; a deposing of the category of truth, a critique of philosophy as theory; b) the unmasking of a non-philosophical act at the bottom of philosophy’s statements; c) the affirmative overcoming of philosophy through a non- or supra-philosophical act, often also called philosophical. Our hypothesis is that Levinas’s prison writings sketch precisely such a program upstream of his later, mature thought – which, to repeat, is not to discount and in no way precludes the hermeneutical importance of his other writings in also building the antiphilosophical reading.

First, our claim is that in the writings from and about captivity Levinas deposes the category of truth and overcomes philosophy affirmatively (fulfilling strict categories a) and c)) by privileging an ontic category with particular ontological import – namely, being Jewish, or the being-Jewish of the prisoner of war. Since the “Jewish experience of the prisoner” is an experience of radical hope, a kind of passive act or active passivity undergirding yet simultaneously outstripping the statements of the Jewish philosopher – or, as it were, the Jewish journal-keeper – the ethical thus deposes the category of truth.<sup>19</sup> This is because radical hope emerges in the spiritual transition of the Jewish POW to complete passivity with respect to God – becoming a child, putting oneself completely in God’s hands.<sup>20</sup> The relation to God is thus the ethical relation *par excellence*, inasmuch as it is a deliverance of oneself entirely into radical alterity. It is, moreover, a relation of radical “*paternité*” – the situation of the child under the authority of the father is one where “un autre existe pour vous.”<sup>21</sup> As for philosophy itself, Levinas states explicitly that it is “*initialement morale*” and thus a) being-Jewish is eminently philosophical and b) *Dasein* and *je suis* insufficiently

so.<sup>22</sup> This is the gesture that overcomes philosophy affirmatively. Levinas's own "philosophy", being moral, is in Badiou's terms *archi-ethical*.<sup>23</sup>

Thus far, we have argued in broad terms for the pertinence of strict criteria a) and c)—deposing the category of truth and uncovering the non-philosophical act—in reading Levinas's writings from and about captivity. The details now need to be filled in.

A persistent theme in the *Carnets de captivité* is the falling away of curtains and veils – symbolizing the nudity of human existence, laid bare in wartime but in particular by the experience of the POW camps. With French bourgeois life having been suspended by a completely different, flattened and impoverished order, one in which the POWs could nonetheless survive with a modicum of dignity and ethical integrity, the camps indicated the inessential nature of pre-war life and thus hinted at a) the crisis of pre-war bourgeois sociality and b) the possibility of a reorganized society.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, the experience of the prisoner of war camps was paradoxically liberating. It was an experience that pierced the veil of pre-war *doxa* and, we may fairly reconstruct from Levinas's entries, spurred him to think the *archi-ethical*, essentially erotic conditions of sociality in a radically liberated way.

So far so good: to this extent, Levinas and other Jewish prisoners of war participated in a general destiny of imprisonment with other POWs, and this had a liberating effect on all.<sup>25</sup> One might speak in Badiou's fashion of an event that punctures a hole in knowledge— in this case, a form of life beyond what the prevailing wisdom deemed possible or even thinkable, which had, by subtraction, made itself manifest in and through the POW camps. Following Badiou, one might also speak of this truth as being, in principle, universal in its address. The challenge arises however in connection with Levinas's insistence, sketched here and there in the *Carnets*, that he begin methodologically not from *Dasein* or even the *je suis*, but rather from the *je-suis-juif* – "I am a Jew" – as an ontological category.<sup>26</sup> The *je-suis-juif*, over and above the *je suis*, involves creation, paternity, election and persecution. Levinas's methodological commitment to the *je-suis-juif* is, effectively, a declaration that the particularity of his ontic condition as a Jew and as a Jewish prisoner has ontological import – that the Jew in general, and the Jewish prisoner of war in particular, begin from a place of privilege in thinking the universal through the falling of the social curtain. Thus Judaism stands as the site of "une nouvelle interprétation de l'homme et de sa subjectivité."<sup>27</sup>

Note that this appears to be the stark opposite to the program of the great antiphilosopher Paul, who in Badiou's construction founds universalism precisely in declaring the indifference of ontic, cultural-legal categories (Jew or Greek, man or woman, circumcised or uncircumcised).<sup>28</sup>

Note also that in starting from the *je-suis-juif*, Levinas is departing from Heidegger on ontological and methodological as well as national-political

grounds.<sup>29</sup> The choice is stark: start from *Dasein* or start from Judaism.<sup>30</sup> One must be cautious here however in reading Levinas as a thinker of the Jewish nation. He does not pose the Jewish nation as a mirror to Heidegger's Germany, and it is precisely Heidegger's specificity to have thought "la nation comme accès au réel."<sup>31</sup> A recently published letter from Levinas to Maurice Blanchot from 1948, on the occasion of the founding of the state of Israel, bears this out by detailing Levinas's "réticences."<sup>32</sup>

This tension between the particular and the universal in Judaism, between interstitial wandering and state power, was of course not Levinas's discovery; it was already explored for instance in Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, which had appeared at the outset of the war. The novelty of Levinas's writings on captivity was to have posed, against Sartre for instance, the figure of the Jew and the ontological category of being-Jewish in terms of their primordial and universal significance: namely, the extent to which they speak to the impossibility of fleeing one's own condition. While particularly acute in the ontic case of the Jew harassed by anti-Semitism in general and Hitlerism in particular, this condition speaks quite broadly to the natural state of the human soul. Levinas will in another context say quite plainly that the human soul is "perhaps naturally Jewish."<sup>33</sup>

In drawing ontological implications from Jewish facticity, Levinas notes how the Jewish POWs were set apart from the rest.<sup>34</sup> This already complicates the notion of a universal experience of incarceration. But a deeper, intra-Jewish epistemological challenge emerges in his radio address to *La voix d'Israël*. Speaking of the "Jewish experience of the prisoner" – and note, not of the "experience of the Jewish prisoner" – he states that Jewish prisoners of war such as himself did not play the first role in the wartime drama of European Judaism.<sup>35</sup> This unenviable role went to those who were interred in the death camps and – though he does not state it explicitly – actually lived the drama to its limit in being sacrificed. The epistemological challenge arises in connection with Levinas's claim that the Jewish POW's experience was an authentically "Jewish experience" when it was not, by his own admission, the limit experience of Jewish incarceration during the war. Precisely this challenge persisted, albeit in a highly pernicious form when, in the 1980s, Robert Faurisson built his Holocaust denial on the shoddy reasoning that, since the only authentic witness to the gas chambers would be someone killed in the gas chambers, there were in fact no gas chambers (this line of reasoning being explored and all but demolished by Lyotard in *The Differend*).

This epistemological problem is mitigated by the fact that, since Jewish POWs were segregated and heard whispers of news about the death camps, they underwent something of a perpetually deferred experience of the fate reserved for the deportees: "Tout se passait comme si quelque chose se préparait pour eux, mais s'ajournait toujours."<sup>36</sup> Levinas invokes Abraham and Isaac on the road to Isaac's ordained sacrifice in illustration of this

condition; he imagines the three days' journey and its pregnant silences.<sup>37</sup> Precisely as with Abraham and Isaac, an interval emerged between the Jewish POW and his future suffering. Where the interval was experienced as supportable, it took on a properly Judaic cast. "Dans cet intervalle, se glisse la méditation; c'est là que la vie spirituelle commence."<sup>38</sup> In the worst period of the war, when the Allies were on the defensive, the Jewish POW found himself alone with God, completely in his hands, and radically passive.<sup>39</sup> What is Judaism after all, asks Levinas? It is a condition of radical hope: "avant l'espoir, au fond de la désespérance – de la douleur en bonheur; la découverte dans la souffrance même des signes d'élection."<sup>40</sup> Levinas claims that he has confidence in God: "Non pas qu'il fera tout selon mon désir. Mais je sais qu'en dernier ressort j'aurai affaire à Lui. C'est cela la confiance. Je suis entre ses mains. La douleur – peut aller à l'infini. Elle a quelque chose d'enivrant – car en elle se fait ma passivité au sein de Dieu et mon élection."<sup>41</sup> And elsewhere: "Et c'est là aussi ... dans ce découragement que personne ne aurait comprendre – que se révèle la présence divine. Situation du « subir » pur ou il y a une élection au sens de ... l'amour d'une personne qui vous effleure {caresse}. Ou plutôt révélation d'un ordre différent de l'ordre naturel – réel malgré tous les échecs ds [sic] l'ordre naturel. – Ivresse de cette souffrance inutile, de cette passivité pur par laquelle on devient comme le fils de Dieu. Enfance."<sup>42</sup> Thus the Jewish POW, finding God in the interval between his imprisonment and his slaughter, has an authentically "Jewish experience" of being a prisoner – especially considering that, as Levinas puts in the notebooks, he finds in persecution the original sense of Judaism, "son émotion initiale. Non pas persécution quelconque – persécution absolue, qui pourchasse l'être de partout pour l'enfermer dans le fait nu de son existence."<sup>43</sup> Note the temporality that this implies; the Jew, through divine election and hope, is in a position of rupture with any modern metaphysics of the pure present.

The radical hope of the Jewish prisoner is specifically a hope that the weak will triumph over the strong. Elsewhere Levinas will say that "c'est cela tout le j[udaïsme]."<sup>44</sup> Retrospectively, the succumbing of the strong – or at least, those making war in the name of the strong – to the weak bears out his radical hope – even taking account of the horrors of the Shoah. Anticipating the Pauline challenge, Levinas claims that "tout le christianisme" is already contained in this Judaic discovery of radical hope, which historically speaking predates it.<sup>45</sup>

The Jewish prisoner's awakened spirituality is, moreover, an act of life-changing import. As Levinas puts it, his Judaism is like a sliver in the flesh; certainly he could live without it, but if so then his life would be deprived of "son acuité et de sa lucidité vigilante. Comme si on était émasculé. Ou retombé en enfance."<sup>46</sup> Finally, Levinas speaks of "Le néant de l'assimilé," where we are tempted to read "assimilated Jew."<sup>47</sup>

So far what we have described fits nicely into Badiou's strict categories a) and c). What about b), the lashing of philosophy as the propaganda of a non-philosophical act? While this is less clear, a case can be made in the writings from and about captivity that Levinas positions himself against a variously implicit and explicit anti-Semitic tradition of philosophical abstraction rooted in Greek thought but, in his own day, continued by Heidegger.

Thus in the writings from and on captivity, Levinas a) deposes the category of truth in favor of the archi-ethical; b) lashes philosophy, in the figure of Heidegger, the Greeks and anti-Semitic universalism, for serving the interests of the nation and obscuring the ethical nature of the human, ontological condition; c) overcomes philosophy affirmatively through the radical abnegation required by being-Jewish.<sup>48</sup>

Regarding Badiou's outlying criteria – for example, the link between antiphilosophy and misogyny – we can only speculate. Take for instance one of his entries, where the feminine is cast as the category of the not-I, the other that is prior to any other. On one hand, the feminine emerges as the dark continent Badiou describes; on the other hand, that continent is—properly speaking—ethics. To speak of “Levinas's misogyny” in this connection would be simplistic.<sup>49</sup>

### Antiphilosophy Beyond Jewish Captivity

Before we attempt to tie the knot of Levinas's work in relation to the category of antiphilosophy, we must address this question: why doesn't Badiou himself name Levinas an antiphilosopher? In what follows, we attempt only a partial answer for the sake of time and coherence.

Badiou's most explicit remarks on Levinas can be found in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.<sup>50</sup> Against Badiou's reading of Levinas, we offer one small conjecture: that Badiou conflates the Other with God, thereby mistakenly understanding Levinas's God to be an ontotheological God. Based on this reading, Badiou dismisses Levinasian ethics on two fronts: one being that it is sutured to theology, and the other that it leads to a weak politics.<sup>51</sup>

Badiou claims that we do not necessarily have an experience of the other as Other; that the other “always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true.”<sup>52</sup> In light of this lack of guarantee of the properly ethical experience, Badiou moves to the claim that “ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience”; furthermore, this principle is “quite obviously the ethical name for God.”<sup>53</sup>

However, this critique already rests on the movement of totalizing or thematizing the Other within the Same, which Levinas painstakingly attempts to avoid. As Simon Critchley makes clear, “there is no simple and radical overcoming of ontological or logocentric language through the

ethical saying of the otherwise than Being, rather the ethical is the momentary interruption of the *logos*.”<sup>54</sup> Precisely by attributing a kind of Heideggerian poetic-ontology to Levinas, wherein the twisting of language reveals the “beyond” of Being, Badiou fundamentally mischaracterizes the *gesture* Levinas makes: a gesture, or an act, which *interrupts* the logocentric delimitation of Being. It is this act which Derrida recognizes and receives. For Derrida, to “pay homage” to Levinas by returning this gift would be ultimately to desecrate his ethical project: he must instead efface Levinas, just as Levinas effaced himself, so as not to strip his existence of the interruptive/disruptive power it held.<sup>55</sup> Badiou’s hasty equivocation—or rather, the equivocation he attributes to Levinas—of God with the Other, thus “completes the circle of restitution” and refuses the gift Levinas gives.<sup>56</sup>

Ironically, Badiou himself does claim that Levinas has no philosophy—only an ethics.<sup>57</sup> Although *prima facie* this seems to echo the language he uses to describe other antiphilosophers, Badiou divests himself of the means to recognize Levinas’s antiphilosophical gesture through a totalizing, ontological discourse. Levinas’s is an antiphilosophy that brushes up next to theology without accepting or relying on the mysticism therein—does this not describe Kierkegaard, Pascal, Saint Paul? As Hilary Putnam eloquently stated in relation to Levinas, “the position of the traditional Jew is one of feeling a profound experience of a God (s)he has *not* had a numinous experience of.”<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

To recap our brief intervention, Levinas’s *Carnets de captivité* and *Écrits sur la captivité* lend themselves to an antiphilosophical reading of his ethical project. We have argued that Levinas fulfills the three criteria of antiphilosophy—the deposing of the category of truth, the discovery of the non-philosophical act, and the insistence on a radically new act—first and foremost through his election of the position of the Jew against *Dasein* or *je suis*. The ethical thus deposes truth; starting from the Jewish position at once exposes the non-philosophical ontological starting point while simultaneously affirming a new, ethical one.

We also briefly speculated upon where Levinas stands with respect to the “outlying criteria” of antiphilosophy. Though the misogynistic elements of his philosophy were merely highlighted, we argued that Levinas meets the other two criteria: the presentation of a remainder and the self-effacement or martyrdom native to any antiphilosophy. The presentation of the remainder, of course, resides in his phenomenological description of the Other, while self-effacement culminates in such statements as his lack of authority to really “speak of the Jewish experience of imprisonment” to the extent that the “true” witnesses died in captivity.

The relationship of the *Carnets* and *Écrits* to the category of antiphilosophy sheds light on the ways in which Judaism is apparently decisive in Levinas’s philosophical trajectory. While by no means ruling out

a broader reading of Levinas's works in these terms, the writings from and about captivity illustrate and encapsulate the idea that the "Jewish experience of the prisoner," thus the Jewish experience more generally, has primordial and universal ontological import. Inasmuch as this experience is eminently and above all ethical, these writings present us with the figure of a Levinas engaged in a valorization of the *archi-ethical* over the Greek/German philosophy of abstract universalism figured by Heidegger. It remains to be explored, however, why notwithstanding the plausibility of an antiphilosophical reading, Levinas has not played a role in Badiou's antiphilosophical canon – and why his comments on Levinas have been variously ambivalent, strained, and generally unsatisfactory.

---

<sup>1</sup> Seán Hand, "Salvation through Literature: Levinas's *Carnets de Captivité*," *Levinas Studies*, Vol. 8 (2013): 45-65. Howard Caygill, "Levinas's Prison Notebooks," *Radical Philosophy* 160 (2010): 27-35. To add to our brief description: this article explores the explicitly literary themes evoked in the notebooks, such as the *felix culpa* and its relation to theism. As such it diverges from, but agrees with our project. For a brief example, one might note the antiphilosophical flirtation with literary forms, exemplified perhaps by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

<sup>2</sup> Hand, "Salvation through Literature," 47, 65.

<sup>3</sup> Bruno Bosteels, "Introduction," in Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy* (London & New York: Verso, 2011), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 75.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 80.

<sup>6</sup> Bosteels, "Introduction," in *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> See Tina Chanter, "Antigone's Dilemma," in *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1991: 130-146. This essay concretely lays out the difficulties and points of divergence surrounding feminist readings of Levinas himself, as well as Derrida's appropriation of him.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, "Who is Nietzsche?," *Pli* vol.11 (2001): 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 68.

- <sup>15</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999): 33-40.
- <sup>16</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 69.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> All translations from the *Carnets* are our own.
- <sup>19</sup> À propos Lyotard, James Williams introduces the notion of “active passivity” which we argue could also be used to characterize Levinas’s Judaism. James Williams, *Lyotard and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
- <sup>20</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*, eds. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Bernard Grasset/IMEC, 2009), 154.
- <sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 133.
- <sup>22</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 168.
- <sup>23</sup> We here introduce a half-neologism. As Bosteels notes in the Introduction to *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, “the antiphilosophical act [is] ‘archipolitical’ in the case of Nietzsche; ‘archiaesthetic’ in the case of Wittgenstein; and ‘archiscientific’ in the case of Lacan” (38).
- <sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 70, 137.
- <sup>25</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 209.
- <sup>26</sup> Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, 21-22.
- <sup>27</sup> These are the words of Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier in their “Preface” to *Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*.
- <sup>28</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- <sup>29</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 22.
- <sup>30</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 75.
- <sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 105.
- <sup>32</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Etre juif, suivi d'une Lettre à Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2015).
- <sup>33</sup> Levinas, *Etre juif*, 60-61.
- <sup>34</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 210.
- <sup>35</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 209.
- <sup>36</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 210.
- <sup>37</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 211.
- <sup>38</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 211.
- <sup>39</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 211-212.
- <sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 213.

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 154.

<sup>42</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 179-180.

<sup>44</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 139.

<sup>45</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 213.

<sup>46</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> Levinas, *Carnets de captivité*, 111.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* Against Greek universalism (op. cit. 51), Levinas states explicitly that anti-Semitism is, or uses, the power of abstraction (58).

<sup>49</sup> Rather, we direct your attention to the chapter “Levinas and the Feminine” of the *Re-Reading Levinas* volume, which, among other excellent works, contains the previously cited Chanter essay. The essays therein are much more rigorous than any analysis we could provide here.

<sup>50</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2012). Badiou also engages with Levinas in his book *In Praise of Love*. There, he repeats part of the same criticism found in *Ethics*: that Levinas’s Other is ultimately an ontotheological God. He does, however, note a fundamental distinction between a phenomenological *experience* and an ontological or eventual *encounter*. This distinction appears to be a general criticism of phenomenology, and other than the remark that there is “nothing particularly ethical about love as such,” fails to address Levinas’s notion of the ethical “experience” in detail. See Alain Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (Serpent’s Tail, 2012), 23-26.

<sup>51</sup> On the general lack of rigour Badiou displays in his reading of Levinas, see Stephen Minister, *De-facing the Other: Reason, Ethics, & Politics after Difference* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012), 31-37. For Badiou’s suggestion of Levinas’s suture to love, see Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 67.

<sup>52</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 65.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Simon Critchley, “Bois—Derrida’s Final Word on Levinas,” in *Re-reading Levinas*, 175.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, “At this very moment in this work here I am,” in *Re-reading Levinas*, 11-48.

<sup>56</sup> Critchley, “Bois,” 165.

<sup>57</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Hilary Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Critchley and Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47.