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Benda Hofmeyr  
Editor

Radical Passivity

Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas

This volume includes critical approaches to radical passivity from a variety of perspectives (both critical and favourable) covering the entire scope of Levinas's oeuvre, including both his philosophical as well as his so-called spiritual works or *Talmudic Readings*. The contributing authors speak with widely diverse voices, which will hopefully appeal to a diversified and interdisciplinary readership. This collection will certainly be of interest to an expert academic audience in a wide variety of disciplines, including Philosophical Ethics (or Practical Philosophy), Philosophical Anthropology, Social and Political Philosophy, Religious Studies, Literary Studies, Applied Ethics, Theology, Judaic Studies, etcetera. It is also likely to appeal to people outside of academia interested in that which makes ethical agency possible. The host of featured authors (from Canada, America, the Netherlands, Belgium, England, Austria and South Africa) and their varied perspectives accord this work an assured international appeal. All the contributions have been subjected to extensive peer and editorial review.

Benda Hofmeyr  
Pretoria, South Africa  
July 2008

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## Contributors

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**Seán Hand** Seán Hand is Professor of French and Head of the Department of French Studies, University of Warwick.



## Chapter 1

# Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?\*

Benda Hofmeyr

**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/

\* This essay was written for the colloquium, *Radical Passivity: Rethinking Ethical Agency in Levinas* organized by myself and hosted by the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht (NL) on 24 November 2006. It was subsequently published in 2007 in the *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26(3): 150–167. It is reprinted here in slightly modified form with the permission of the author.

