



# The Problem with Levinas

*Simon Critchley*

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Levinas's idea of ethics as a relation of responsibility to the other person has become a highly influential and recognizable position across a wide range of academic and non-academic fields. Simon Critchley's aim in this book is to provide a less familiar, more troubling, and (hopefully) truer account of Levinas's work. A new dramatic method for reading Levinas is proposed, where the fundamental problem of his work is seen as the attempt to escape from the tragedy of Heidegger's philosophy and the way in which that philosophy shaped political events in the last century. Extensive and careful attention is paid to Levinas' fascinating but often overlooked work from the 1930s, where the proximity to Heidegger becomes clearer. Levinas's problem is very simple: how to escape from the tragic fatality of being as described by Heidegger. Levinas's later work is a series of attempts to answer that problem through claims about ethical selfhood and a series of phenomenological experiences, especially erotic relations and the relation to the child. These claims are analyzed in the book through close textual readings. Critchley reveals the problem with Levinas's answer to his own philosophical question and suggests a number of criticisms, particular concerning the question of gender. In the final, speculative part of the book, another answer to Levinas's problem is explored through a reading of the *Song of Songs* and the lens of mystical love.

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