Radical Passivity
Preface

Levinas’s ethical metaphysics is essentially a meditation on what makes ethical agency possible – that which enables us to act in the interest of another, to put the well-being of another before our own. This line of questioning found its inception and drew its inspiration from the mass atrocities that occurred during the Second World War. The Holocaust, like the Cambodian genocide, or those in Rwanda and Srebrenica, exemplifies what have come to be known as the ‘never again’ situations. After these events, we looked back each time, with varying degrees of incomprehension, horror, anger and shame, asking ourselves how we could possibly have let it all happen again. And yet, atrocity crimes are still rampant. After Rwanda (1994) and Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), came Kosovo (1999) and Darfur (2003). In our present-day world, hate crimes motivated by racial, sexual, or other prejudice, and mass hate such as genocide and terror, are on the rise (think, for example, of Burma, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and North Korea). A critical revaluation of the conditions of possibility of ethical agency is therefore more necessary than ever. This volume is committed to the possibility of ‘never again’. It is dedicated to all the victims – living and dead – of what Levinas calls the ‘sober, Cain-like coldness’ at the root of all crime against humanity, as much as every singular crime against another human being.

The scholars featured deserve a special word of thanks for their invaluable contribution and commitment to rethinking the conditions of the possibility of ‘never again’: Luc Anckaert, Bettina Bergo, Joachim Duyndam, Seán Hand, Al Lingis, Ad Peperzak, Anya Topolski and Peter Zeillinger.

This collection of essays follows from a colloquium organized by myself and hosted by the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, the Netherlands on 24 November 2006. I would like to thank the Academie for its generous organizational and financial support of the event. It would not have been possible without the enthusiastic assistance of the following individuals: Koen Brams and Hanneke Grootenboer (for their unreserved support of the idea and its realization) and Anne Vangronsveld (for the coordination and organization of the colloquium).

I would further like to thank Fritz Schmuhl at Springer for his wholehearted support and encouragement, David Levey at the University of South Africa for his expert language redaction, and Nina Botha at the University of Pretoria for her invaluable assistance in compiling the index.
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 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
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