

Title	The importance of the concept of 'sainteté' in the 'Ethics' of Emmanuel Lévinas
Sub Title	
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学倫理学研究会
Publication year	2009
Jtitle	エティカ (Ethica). Vol.2, (2009.) ,p.130-
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	欧文要旨
Genre	
URL	https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AA12362999-20090000-0130

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The importance of the concept of ‘sainteté’ in the ‘Ethics’ of Emmanuel Lévinas

Akiko MURAKAMI

Though Lévinas is known for his ethics of ‘the Other,’ he describes his major interest to be concerned with “the saintliness of the saintly.” This paper tries to account for Lévinasian ‘Ethics’ by interpreting this religious term, ‘la sainteté.’

Based on his own position that religious terms can have plural meanings and can embody a rather complex structure, this paper treats both his philosophical and religious works published after 1963, from when Lévinas has been focusing on how to talk about the relation to ‘the Other’ without damaging ‘the saintliness’ of ‘the Other.’

The investigation proceeds in four steps. First, contrary to Derrida’s understanding, we interpret ‘sainteté’ as connected to the term ‘illéité,’ which has a different meaning from ‘the ordinary third party’. Secondly, we identify the framework in both philosophical and religious works, which differentiates ‘la sacré’ from ‘le saint’ and regards the latter as the basis of the ‘ethical’ relationship with ‘the absolute Other’. Thirdly, we position his ‘Ethics’ as a form embodying the plural or multi-dimensional relationships with ‘the Other.’ And lastly, we interpret his conception of ‘la vocation à la sainteté’ as signifying the need to define humanity by the absolute ideal of ‘Ethics,’ which is ‘la sainteté.’