

The Split Subject – the Infinitely Demanding Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas

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We never know self-realization.
We are two abysses – a well staring at the sky.
Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*

Before turning more closely to my interpretation of Levinas, let me quickly sketch the theoretical and socio-political framework that guides that interpretation and which is drawn from a recently published book.¹

On my view, philosophy begins in disappointment. That is, philosophy, modern post-Kantian philosophy, begins not in an experience of wonder (*thaumazein*) at what is, but from an experience of failure and lack. One senses that things are not simply wonderful. The two main forms of disappointment I analyse in my work are religious and political: religious disappointment provokes the question of meaning (what is the meaning of life in the absence of a transcendent deity who would act as a guarantor of meaning?) and opens the problem of nihilism; political disappointment provokes the question of justice (how is justice possible in a violently unjust world?) and provokes the need for an ethics.

It is in this connection and with the issues of religious and political disappointment in mind that I engage in a little *Zeitdiagnose* and try to paint a picture of the present age. I consider a couple of coherent, tempting, but in my view deeply misguided, diagnoses of our times, social pathologies if you prefer. I call them 'active nihilism', where I talk about those, like al-Qaida, who seek a violent destruction of the purportedly meaningless world of capitalism and liberal democracy; and 'passive nihilism', where I discuss forms of what Nietzsche calls 'European buddhism' or indeed 'American buddhism', that is, forms of contemplative withdrawal where one faces the meaningless and violent chaos of the world with eyes wide shut. I reject both forms of nihilism, but think that each of them expresses a deep truth: namely, their identification of what I see as a *motivational deficit* at the heart of liberal democracy, a sort of drift, disbelief and slackening that is both institutional and moral. In the drift of this deficit, we experience the moral claims of liberal democratic societies as externally compulsory, but not internally compelling. We approach ethical issues in a spirit of Diogenean cynicism rather than free commitment, where, as Yeats writes, the best lack all conviction, whilst the worst are full of passionate intensity. The question, then, is how might we fill the best with passionate intensity? My larger claim that I deal with at length in the above-mentioned book is that what is required to deal with this motivational deficit is a motivating, empowering ethics of commitment and political resistance.

What we need to start thinking about in order to begin to make up that deficit is a motivating theory of the ethical subject. On my view, an ethical subject is the name for the way in which a self binds itself to some conception of the good, whatever that good might be, whether it is Kantian, Sadeian or something in-between. At the core of ethical subjectivity is a theory of what I call ethical experience, which is based in two concepts: approval and demand. My basic claim is that ethical experience begins with the approval of a demand, a demand that demands approval. Ethical experience is virtuously circular. The nature of this

¹ See *Infinitely Demanding. Ethics of commitment, politics of resistance* (Verso, London and New York, 2007).

demand varies in different thinkers: in Plato, it is the demand of the good beyond being, for Paul and Augustine it is the demand of the resurrected Christ, for Kant it is the demand of the moral law which is felt as the fact of reason, for Fichte the fact of reason becomes an act of the subject, for Rousseau it is the demand of the suffering human other, for Schopenhauer, it is compassion for all creatures, and so on and so forth. In the longer version of this argument, I illustrate the motivational deficit in morality with an extended discussion of the relation of moral justification to motivation in Kant as his work constitutes a *locus classicus* for the problem I am trying to address: namely, how a self binds itself to whatever it determines as its good. Through an analysis of the concept of the fact of reason, I try to show the fragile necessity at the heart of Kant's claim for the primacy of practical reason and how this claim is taken up by contemporary Kantian philosophers, like Habermas and Rawls. I conclude with some remarks about what I call the 'autonomy orthodoxy' in post-Kantian philosophy and try to begin to question the sufficiency of autonomy in our ethical thinking.

The wider theoretical task, then, is the following: the construction of a model of the ethical subject. In order to do this, I take three concepts from three thinkers and then raise a question that I will address briefly at the end of this talk: the problem of *sublimation*. From Alain Badiou, I take the idea of the subject committing itself in fidelity to the universality of a demand that opens in a singular situation but which exceeds that situation, what I call a 'situated universality'. From Knud Ejler Løgstrup, I take the idea of what he calls 'the ethical demand' and his emphasis on the radical, unfulfillable and one-sided character of that demand and the asymmetry of the ethical relation that it establishes. From Emmanuel Levinas, I will try and show how this moment of asymmetry in my relation to the infinite demand of the other's face defines the ethical subject in terms of a split between itself and an exorbitant demand that it can never meet, the demand to be infinitely responsible. So, my normative claim, if you will, is that at the basis of any ethics should be a conception of ethical experience based on the exorbitant demand of infinite responsibility. Not only that, I will also recommend that this exorbitant demand of which I approve is that in relation to which the ethical subject should form itself. The subject shapes itself in relation to a demand that it can never meet, which divides and sunders the subject, the experience of what I call '*hetero-affectivity*', as opposed to the '*auto-affectation*' of the autonomy orthodoxy.

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Having sketched this larger framework, albeit too quickly and briefly, let me turn directly to Levinas. For Levinas, the core of ethical experience is, indeed, the demand of a *Faktum*, but it is not a Kantian fact of reason as much as what we might call 'a fact of the other'. In *Totality and Infinity*, the name for this fact is the face of the other (*le visage d'autrui*). The ethical relation begins when I experience being placed in question by the face of the other, an experience that happens both when I respond generously to what Levinas, recalling the Hebrew Bible, calls 'the widow, the orphan, the stranger', but also when I pass them by on the street, silently wishing they were somehow invisible and wincing internally at my callousness.

Levinas's difference with Kant is that ethical experience turns around the facticity of a demand that does not correspond to the subject's autonomy, but which rather places that autonomy in question. Ethical experience is heteronomous, my autonomy is called into question by the fact of the other's demand, by the appeal that comes from their face and lays me under an obligation that is not of my choosing. For Levinas, there are two main tendencies in Western philosophy:

autonomy and heteronomy. The former has usually been dominant, particularly in the modern period, and Levinas sees his task as the attempt to breathe some life back into the latter. For a philosophy that pursues the project of autonomy, the highest value is that of the subject's freedom and what must be eliminated, philosophically and socially, is that which stands in the way of freedom. The most extreme expression of this view would be a sort of comic-book or Fukuyama-esque version of Hegel which would see history as the progressive realisation of freedom. Levinas's claim is that responsibility precedes freedom, that is, prior to the free activity of the subject bringing all of reality within its comprehensive epistemic grasp, there is the experience of a heteronomous demand that calls me into question and calls me to respond. Autonomy comes back into the picture for Levinas at the level of another demand, namely the demand for justice, the just society and everything that he gathers under the heading of 'the third party'. What must be acknowledged is the heteronomous constitution of autonomy, that the ethical demand is refractory to our cognitive powers and the other person can always resist whatever concept under which we may try and subsume them.

In my view, the basic operation of Levinas's entire work is the experience of an exorbitant demand which heteronomously determines the ethical subject. This demand is the imperative '*tu ne tueras point*', 'you shall not kill' which is expressed in the resistance of the other's face. The demand provokes an act of approval on the part of the subject, the words '*me voici*', 'here I am', the Hebrew *hinneni* of Abraham's response to the demand of God in *Genesis* 22. Levinas insists that the subject discovers itself as an object, in the accusative case as he puts it, as interlocuted by the demand of the other. But the Levinasian subject is constituted through an act of approval to a demand to which it is fundamentally *inadequate*. I am not the equal of the demand that is made upon me. It is this fundamental inadequacy of approval to demand that explains why, for Levinas, the relation to the other is asymmetrical. That is, the subject relates itself to something that exceeds its relational capacity. This is what Levinas paradoxically calls '*le rapport sans rapport*', the relation without relation, which is arguably the central concept of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. Yet, how can there be a relation between beings that remain absolute within that relation? Logically speaking, this is a contradiction in terms, yet it is precisely such a relation that Levinas wants to describe as ethical.

This difficulty can be illuminated by considering the function of the concept of infinity in Levinas's work. From the late 1950s onwards, he describes the ethical relation to the other in terms of infinity. What does this mean? Levinas's claim is very simple, but even quite sophisticated readers still get it muddled. The idea is that the ethical relation to the other has a *formal* resemblance to the relation, in Descartes' Third Meditation, between the *res cogitans* and the infinity of God. What interests Levinas in this moment of Descartes' argument is that the human subject has an idea of infinity, and that this idea, by definition, is a thought that contains more than can be thought. As Levinas puts it, in what is almost a mantra in his published work, 'In thinking infinity the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*'.²

It is this formal structure of a thought that thinks more than it can think, that has a surplus within itself, that intrigues Levinas because it sketches the contours of a relation to something that is always in excess of whatever idea I may have of it, that always escapes me. The Cartesian picture of the relation of the *res cogitans* to God through the idea of the infinite provides Levinas with a picture or formal

² See 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1987), p.54.

model of a relation between two terms that is based on height, inequality, non-reciprocity and asymmetry. As he writes, in a characteristic series of antitheses, The idea of the infinite consists precisely and paradoxically in thinking more than what is thought while nevertheless conserving it in its excessive relation to thought. The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable.³

However, Levinas is making no substantive claim at this point, he is not saying that I actually *do* possess the idea of the infinite in the way Descartes describes, nor is he claiming that the other is God, as some readers mistakenly continue to believe. As Hilary Putnam rightly points out, 'It isn't that Levinas *accepts* Descartes' argument, so interpreted. The significance is rather that Levinas *transforms* the argument by substituting the Other for God'.⁴

As Levinas is a phenomenologist, it becomes a question for him of trying to locate some concrete content for this formal structure. Levinas's major substantive claim, that resounds in different ways throughout his mature work, is that the ethical relation of the self to the other corresponds to this picture, concretely fulfilling this model. One might say that the ethical relation to the face of the other person is the *social* expression of this formal structure. Levinas writes, 'the idea of infinity is the social relationship', and again, 'The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face'.⁵ Thus, the ethical relation to the other produces what Levinas calls in a favorite formulation - rightly emphasized by Maurice Blanchot in his writings on Levinas - 'a curvature of intersubjective space'.⁶ When I am actually within the ethical relation, I experience the other as the high point of this curvature. As such, the relation can only be totalized by imagining myself occupying some God-like, third-person perspective outside the relation. From a Levinasian point of view, this is the common shortcoming of various theories of intersubjectivity. For example, Hegel's thesis is that subjectivity is constituted through an intersubjective dialectic, namely the life and death struggle of master and slave. For Husserl, my full constitution as an ego is dependant on a relation to the alter-ego, whereas for Heidegger *Dasein* is *Mitsein*, what it means to be a person is indistinguishable from my being with others. For each of '*les trois H*', as they were called in France, the relation between self and other is a relation of equality, symmetry and reciprocity. Levinas's polemical point is that the relation between myself and the other only appears as a relation of equality, symmetry and reciprocity from a neutral, third -person perspective that stands outside that relation. When I am within the relation, then the other is not my equal and my responsibility towards them is infinite. It is such a non-dialectical model of intersubjectivity that Levinas has in mind, I think, with the notion of the 'relation without relation'.

The picture of ethical experience that I am trying to elicit can be explored by picking out one item in the philosophical vocabulary of Levinas's later work: *trauma*. What is trauma? Trauma has both a physiological and a psychological meaning, denoting a violence effected by an external agency, which can be a blow to the head as much as the shock of emotional bereavement. As such, a

³ 'Transcendence and Height', in *Emmanuel Levinas. Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Peperzak, Critchley and Bernasconi (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1996), p.19.

⁴ See 'Levinas and Judaism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), p.42.

⁵ *Collected Philosophical Papers*, op. cit. p.54, & *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1969), p.50.

⁶ *Totality and Infinity*, op. cit. p.291.

trauma is a heteronomous fact that comes from outside the self without warning, for example a terrorist explosion. Whence arises the riddle of traumatic neurosis. Traumatic neurosis is the disorder that arises after the experience of a trauma, where its effect lives on at the heart of the subject. Like other neuroses, it is compulsive and repetitive: the original scene of the trauma is obsessively and unconsciously repeated, perhaps in nightmares or insomnia. It is the phenomenon of traumatic neurosis, in the form of shellshock or war-neurosis, that causes Freud such theoretical difficulties in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This is for the simple reason that if there is a compulsion to repeat at work in traumatic neurosis that repeats the origin of trauma, then how can this be consistent with the thesis of Freud's early work that dreams and other psychic phenomena are wish-fulfillments governed by the pleasure principle. It cannot, and it is on the basis of the clinical evidence of traumatic neurosis that Freud is led to introduce the repetition compulsion and to engage in the speculation that he calls 'the death drive'.

What does that have to do with Levinas? In his later work, Levinas constructs what he calls an 'ethical language', composed of several strange, wonderful and hyperbolic terms: persecution, obsession, substitution, hostage and *trauma*. Levinas makes the extreme claim that my relation to the other is not some benign benevolence *à la* Hutcheson, compassionate care *à la* Rousseau or respect for the other's autonomy *à la* Kant, but is the obsessive experience of a responsibility that persecutes me with its sheer weight. I am the other's hostage, taken by them and prepared to substitute myself for any suffering and humiliation that they may undergo. I am responsible for the persecution I undergo and even for my persecutor; a claim that, given the experience of Levinas's family and people during the Second World War, is nothing less than extraordinary. Trauma was not a theoretical issue for Levinas, but a way of dealing with the memory of horror. In a number of texts from the late 1960s and 1970s, Levinas describes the relation of infinite responsibility to the other as a trauma. In 'God and Philosophy', he writes,

This trauma, which cannot be assumed, inflicted by the Infinite on presence, or this affecting of presence by the Infinite – this affectivity – takes shape as a subjection to the neighbour. It is thought thinking more than it thinks, desire, the reference to the neighbour, the responsibility for another.⁷

In short, the Levinasian ethical subject is a traumatic neurotic. The ethical demand is a traumatic demand, it is something that comes from outside the subject, from a heteronomous source, but which leaves its imprint within the subject. At its heart, the ethical subject is marked by an experience of *hetero-affectivity*. In other words, the inside of my inside is somehow outside, the core of my subjectivity is exposed to otherness.

I focus on the notion of trauma in order to bring out the links between Levinas and the psychoanalytic dimensions of ethical experience, particularly when we think of Lacan. Although Levinas was extremely hostile towards psychoanalysis and largely ignorant of it, I would like to redescribe Levinas in psychoanalytic terms for at least two critical reasons:

- (i) It is hoped that using Freudian categories to offer a reconstruction of Levinas's work as a theory of the subject minimizes some of the metaphysical residua and religious pietism present in Levinas's texts, but even more present in certain interpretations of those texts. For reasons that I would be happy to go into during discussion, I find the increasing hegemony of the religious reading of Levinas, whether Judaic, Christian or otherwise, the most disturbing feature of the

⁷ Levinas. *Basic Philosophical Writings*, op. cit. p.142.

events of his Centenary year. In my view, psychoanalysis provides a non-theological vocabulary for conceiving the affections of ethical subjectivity.

- (ii) Turning briefly to Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, it is important to recall that there are two main topics in Seminar VII: ethics and *sublimation*. Might one not wonder whether Levinas's ethics condemn us to a lifetime of trauma and lacerating guilt that cannot – and, moreover, should not – be worked through? Doesn't Levinas leave us in a situation of sheer ethical overload where I must be responsible even for my persecutor, and where the more that I am just the more I am guilty. If so, then such a position risks amounting to nothing less than a rather long philosophical suicide note or at the very least an invitation to some fairly brutal moral masochism.⁸ In my view, thinking of the work of Melanie Klein, the trauma of separation requires *reparation*, the ethical *tear* requires *repair* in a work of sublimation that would be a work of love.⁹ In other words, Levinas risks producing an ethics without sublimation, which risks being disastrously self-destructive to the subject. The question is, and here we pass from ethics to aesthetics and overflow the limits of this paper, what form of sublimation might be imagined here? In my view, and here I differ from Lacan for whom the model of sublimation is always conceived in relation to tragedy, it is a question of thinking Levinas's work in relation to a rather unusual conception of humour and the humorous self-division of the subject.

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To conclude, ethical experience in Levinas is rooted in the claim that responsibility begins with a subject approving of a demand that it can never meet, a one-sided, radical and unfulfillable demand in Løgstrup's sense. Levinas writes, 'To be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility'; or again, 'to be a "self" is to be responsible before having done anything'.¹⁰ I, as it were, decide to be a subject that I know I cannot be. I give myself up to a demand that makes an imprint upon *me* without my ever being able to understand *it*. 'I' am an existential exaggeration. In language closer to Levinas, this is another way of thinking about what he means by the claim that ethics is not ontology. Arguably, the main thesis of Levinas's work is that the ethical relation to the other is not one of comprehension and cannot therefore be subsumed within Heideggerian *Seinsverständnis*, understanding of being. We can now see how this thesis looks from the perspective of ethical subjectivity: the relation to the other lives on as an imprint in the subject to which it responds but which it cannot comprehend. That is, there is something at the heart of me, that arguably makes me the 'me' that I am, but which is quite opaque to me. This is moment of irreducible *facticity* at the heart of the subject, a facticity that cannot be mastered in the *kairos* of the moment of vision or the free movement of existential projection.

In my view, and this is a somewhat heterodox claim, the key concept in Levinas's work is ethical subjectivity. The precondition for the ethical relation to the other is found in Levinas's picture of the ethical subject. It is because of a disposition towards alterity at the heart of the subject that relatedness to the other is

⁸ Judith Butler has recently suggested this criticism in a fascinating reading of Levinas in *Precarious Life* (Verso, London and New York, 2004), p.140.

⁹ This criticism was suggested to me in discussion with Axel Honneth.

¹⁰ *Levinas . Basic Philosophical Writings*, op. cit. p.17 & p.94.

possible. This is why I tend to privilege Levinas's later work, *Otherwise than Being*, over his earlier work, *Totality and Infinity*, for it is here that ethics is worked out as a theory of the subject, what he calls 'the other within the same'. In terms of my overall normative argument, commitment or fidelity (Badiou) to the unfulfillable, one-sided and radical demand that pledges me to the other (Løgstrup) can now be seen to be the structure of ethical subjectivity itself (Levinas). The ethical subject is defined by the approval of a traumatic heteronomous demand at its heart. But, importantly, the subject is also *divided* by this demand, it is constitutively *split* between itself and a demand that it cannot meet, but which is that by virtue of which it becomes a subject. The ethical subject is a split subject and this is not tragic, it is comic.