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The Metaphysics of Levinas

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Levinas, like Ricoeur, directed phenomenology towards an overcoming of essentialist conceptions of being and towards the Other. Levinas calls this the overcoming of ontology towards metaphysics, his movement is a flight away from the totality of Being towards embracing the infinity of the Other, as the Other exerts a demand and responsibility upon being, indeed, the Other holds one hostage and exerts an ethical demand upon one to be responsible to the Other, thus limiting one's freedom. Like Ricoeur Levinas critiques an ontology of ipseity, the Same, and essence, directing phenomenology towards Otherness and a transcendence of Being towards embracing the Other as the exteriority which defines and limits Being. As I have mentioned in the previous section on Ricoeur, this flight towards Otherness is a repetition of metaphysics in a Jewish rather than Greek sense according to Derrida in "Violence and metaphysics"; Derrida seeks to trace the conditions of possibility of phenomenology as the trace or differance between Jew and Greek, presence and absence, everything and nothing. According to Derrida, God and history is written in this play between presence and absence, transcendental and empirical, it is differance which is the meta-condition determining presence rather than what Ricoeur and Levinas embrace as an anti-essentialist and Other-directed phenomenology. Levinas writes in a Jewish idiom with his ethics for the Other in mind, with phrases such as "neighbour" and the "infinity" of the Other, as well as "care" and "responsibility"; it is a Jewish ethics of care and compassion for the Other, in Judaeo-Christian religious ethics of loving the neighbour as oneself that is being elaborated by Levinas. Levinas is primarily concerned with moral agency as set out by a Judaeo-Christian framework in raising the Other to absolute as a site of transcendence and infinity. At the foundation of his concerns on "responsibility" and "justice" are a definition of an ethical relation to the Other which has the holocaust in mind, Levinas' ethics are defined in relation to the horrors of the holocaust and are an imperative for an ethics which takes Jewish alterity as the 'Other' in account.

Totality and Infinity

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the fundamental unit of phenomenology as the face of the Other. The face of the Other is naked and destitute, thus exerting a strong demand on one towards responsibility for the Other. Self is defined according to a countenance of the face of the Other, who exerts a burden of responsibility upon one and a demand for transcendence of Being and selfhood towards the infinity of the Other, as the self becomes circumscribed, defined and limited by this relation towards the Other. Levinas contrasts the totality of the self and Being with the infinity of the Other, the other is a site of transcendence as one goes beyond the bounds of ego to relate to the Other in a transcendent ethical relation with alterity and difference. The Other as exterior to Being exerts a demand and call upon one's existence towards responsibility for the Other.

Levinas argues that ontology reduces the Other to the same, and thus renounces metaphysical desire. This metaphysical desire is the desire for transcendence of the self towards the exteriority of the Other which exerts a limit on it and thus curtails one's freedom, because it exerts the burden of

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responsibility upon one. This relation, a calling by the Other to responsibility upon the self : Levinas calls an ethical relation. Levinas argues that this transcendence towards the infinity of the Other in an ethical relation is a more accurate portrayal of existential circumstances than the ipseity of ontology. Yet this reversal of the reduction of the Other to the Same is but a repetition of metaphysics rather than a deviation from it. Levinas' radical empiricism is no different from transcendental idealism because the transcendental and empirical are the same, nothing separates the transcendental and empirical, as argued in the Husserl chapters. The transcendental and empirical are related in paradoxical identity in non-identity, sameness in difference, as nothing separates the transcendental and empirical. The movement of the trace relates the transcendental and the empirical in a paradoxical institution of a difference which is a sameness. Transcendental and empirical are thus repetitions of the same through iterability. The transcendental does not exist outside the empirical, nothing separates the transcendental and empirical. As argued in the Husserl chapters, the transcendental-empirical distinction is an illusion. Further Levinas argues:

The “egoism” of ontology is maintained even when, denouncing Socratic philosophy as already forgetful of Being and already on the way to the notion of the “subject” and technological power, Heidegger finds in Presocratism thought as obedience to the truth of Being. This disobedience would be accomplished in existing as builder and cultivator, effecting the unity of the site which sustains space. In bringing together presence on the earth under the firmament of the heavens, the waiting for the gods and the company of mortals in the presence to the things- which is to build and to cultivate- Heidegger, with the whole of Western history, takes the relation with the Other as enacted in the destiny of sedentary peoples, the possessors and builders of the earth. Possession is pre-eminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine. In denouncing the sovereignty of the technological powers of man Heidegger exalts the pre-technological powers of possession. His analyses do not start with the thing-object, to be sure, but they bear the mark of the great landscapes to which the things refer. Ontology becomes ontology of nature, impersonal fecundity, faceless generous mother, matrix of particular beings, inexhaustible matter for things.¹

In the above passage, Levinas describes ontology as “egoism”, an emphasis on ipseity, and like Ricoeur, argues that ontology presupposes metaphysics. The self can only be defined in relation to the Other, selfhood does not exist without the Other as an interlocutor, Levinas describes the relationship with the Other as the ultimate relation in Being. Levinas argues that comprehension of Being cannot dominate the relationship with the Other, the Other is not subordinate to the ego but essential to defining selfhood, indeed selfhood is defined by an existential confrontation with the Other as interlocutor. Levinas is concerned to reverse Heideggerean ontology which is an ontology of power with its emphasis on Being. Levinas argues that ontology reduces the Other to the same, where this Other is an irreducible unit of phenomenology which must be taken into account. As argued above, a reversal of Heideggerean ontology presupposes the separation of the transcendental and empirical, which is not possible, because these are related in a dynamic relation of iterability and difference. The trace, which separates the transcendental and empirical, paradoxically institutes this difference as sameness. The transcendental and empirical are thus simultaneously identical and non-identical, distinguished by nothing and thus the distinction translates into sameness. A reversal of Heideggerean ontology thus repeats it rather than overcoming it in any sense.

Levinas describes Heideggerean ontology as an essence murderous of the Other, ontology has occluded the Other with a violence of suppression, while Levinas describes phenomenology as ethical and defined only in relation to this irreducible Other. As Levinas argues, ontology presupposes metaphysics. Otherness is the fundamental unit of ontology rather than the ego and the same, because a phenomenology of egoism reduces the Other where this Other is an irreducible unit of phenomenology because subjectivity is only defined in existential confrontation with the Other as interlocutor. Levinas

¹ Ibid., 46-48

further defines his ethical phenomenology in relation to Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology of subjectivity and egoism when he reinforces his idea of phenomenology as intersubjectivity and an engagement with the Other as that which defines subjectivity. The Other is the horizon upon which Being and the self is defined. It is the limit of the self and the fundamental phenomenological unit upon which the self is premised, as the Other exerts a call upon one to responsibility and is an interlocutor of one's existence. Levinas describes this as a veritable inversion objectifying cognition, the Other is irreducible to cognition, and is the fundamental unit of ontology rather than something reducible or subordinate to the ego as previously defined by Heidegger and Husserl. This move to privilege Otherness is a radical empiricism that repeats metaphysics rather than escaping it, as empirical is no different from the transcendental, existing in a relation of iterability, and repetition with a difference; rather than an ontological separation from each other. The empirical is not separable from the transcendental as the a priori difference which separates the transcendental and empirical translates into a difference which is nothing. Radical empiricism thus repeats metaphysics rather than escaping from it. As discovered in the Husserl chapters, transcendental empirical difference is an illusion; truth is neither transcendental nor empirical, but quasi-transcendental, the interval between the transcendental and empirical that conditions the thinking and production of both. It is the quasi-transcendental or the written mark, functioning as if it was transcendental, which enables metaphysics as it is the conditionality of transcendental-empirical differentiation as well as the condition of impossibility for designating an exclusive sphere of empirical signs. The quasi-transcendental relates the transcendental and empirical in simultaneous identity and difference, identity and non-identity. The necessity for the quasi-transcendental to distinguish the transcendental and empirical makes it impossible to separate transcendental and empirical as each separation depends on the other term for the distinction to be upheld. If there were no transcendental, then it would be impossible to distinguish, as Levinas does, a pure empirical idealism from it. The transcendental thus inhabits the empirical even as it is separated from it through the written mark or quasi-transcendental. Levinas requires the transcendental to exclude it from his radical empiricism. Empirical only exists in relation to transcendental through iterability and difference.

Otherwise than Being, or beyond essence

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas further defines his ethics of alterity and otherness:

The infinite orders to me the neighbour as a face, without being exposed to me, and does so the more imperiously that proximity narrows. The order has not been the cause of my response, nor even a question that would have preceded it in a dialogue. I find the order in my response itself, which, as a sign given to the neighbour, as a 'here I am', brings me out of invisibility, out of the shadow in which my responsibility could have been evaded. This saying belongs to the very glory of which it bears witness.²

Levinas describes the face of the other as the fundamental unit of phenomenology which commands one into existence. It exerts an ethical demand upon one and calls one to responsibility for the Other. Levinas describes it as a trace of a wandering cause, inscribed in the self. According to Levinas thus, the relation to the Other is not secondary but primary as it calls being into existence, it is a command to respond with responsibility and an ethical relation. Further Levinas argues:

Consciousness is born as the presence of a third party. It is in the measure that it proceeds from it that it is still disinterestedness. It is the entry of the third party, a permanent entry, into the intimacy of the face to face. The concern for justice, for the thematizing, the kerygmatic discourse bearing on the said, from the bottom of the saying without the said, the saying as contact, is the spirit in society. And it is because the third party does not come empirically to trouble proximity, but the face is both the neighbour and the face of faces, visage and the visible, that, between the order of being and of proximity the bond is unexceptional. Order, appearing, phenomenality, being are

² Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than being : or, Beyond essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Hague ; Boston : M. Nijhoff ; Hingham, MA. 150.

produced in signification, in proximity, starting with the third party. The apparition of a third party is the very origin of appearing, that is, the very origin of an origin.

The foundation of consciousness is justice. Not that justice makes a pre-existing meditation intervene. An event like meditation- synchronization, comparison, thematization- is the work of justice, an entry of the diachrony of proximity, of the signifyingness of saying into the synchrony of the said, a ‘fundamental historicity’ in the sense of Merleau-Ponty.³

As Levinas argues, the Other calls the self into existence, consciousness is only born as the presence of the third party. Phenomenology is an account of this third party and the Other as the fundamental unit which calls the self into existence through existential confrontation and a demand for responsibility. The Other is an infinity which commands one out of solipsism into existence, selfhood does not exist in a vacuum but in an ethical relation to the Other as a neighbour. Phenomenology is thus an account of this ethical relation to the Other as justice. Subjectivity comes with duties and responsibilities because of the ethical demand and burden that the Other exerts upon one, the self does not exist desituated in a concept of a non-reciprocal relationship with the Other but in a situated context of reciprocity and existential as well as ethical relationship with the Other. Levinas’ existential phenomenology is thus fundamentally concerned with ethics, justice and the burden of responsibility that the Other exerts upon the self. As argued above, this radical empiricism in the flight towards the Other repeats metaphysics as the empirical is no different from the transcendental. The trace, which separates the transcendental and empirical, translates into a difference which distinguishes nothing and separates nothing. Transcendental and empirical are thus paradoxically identical in their non-identity, and an empirical idealism thus is not a divergence from transcendental idealism but a repetition of it. As argued previously in the Husserl chapters, transcendental-empirical difference is really an illusion as they are repetitions of the same.

Violence and Metaphysics

Derrida defines Levinas’ metaphysics as a Jewish metaphysics rather than a Greek metaphysics which had privileged light and being, while Derrida argues that metaphysics is actually the difference or difference between Jew and Greek, presence and absence, everything and nothing. Phenomenology is enabled by the quasi-transcendental, or the interval between transcendental and empirical, presence and absence, as we have discussed in previous chapters, this difference is paradoxically a sameness because it distinguished nothing and separates nothing. Derrida thus demonstrates that Levinas’ phenomenology translates as a repetition of metaphysics rather than an escape from it, not unlike Heidegger’s repetition in his attempt to overcome metaphysics. Reading from Derrida:

This complicity between empiricism and metaphysics is in no way surprising. By criticizing them, or rather by limiting them with one and the same gesture, Kant and Husserl indeed had recognized their solidarity. It calls for closer meditation. Schelling went quite far in this direction.⁴

Derrida thus describes the relationship between empiricism and metaphysics as complicity rather than inversion or negation as Levinas would have it. Derrida describes the relation as an economy and solidarity rather than one of exclusion and negation, so Levinas does not, in his radical empiricism, manage to escape metaphysics. Further Derrida argues:

Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history. We live in and of difference, that is, in hypocrisy, about which Levinas so profoundly says that it is “not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets.”(TI,p. 24)⁵

³ Ibid., 160-161

⁴ Ibid., 190

⁵ Ibid., 190 -192

Derrida thus argues that there is no difference between Levinas' non-philosophy and philosophy as there exists a complicity between the Jew and the Greek, truth is to be situated between Jew and Greek, truth is neither Jew nor Greek metaphysics but quasi-transcendental. This is the difference and difference between Jew and Greek. Jew and Greek thought are not negations but repetitions of each other, they are the same and not negations or inversions of each other. Truth is quasi-transcendental and the difference or difference between Jew and Greek rather than either strictly Jew or Greek. Derrida would also demonstrate, as I have outlined above in the section on Ricoeur, that Levinas' turn to radical empiricism is a repetition of metaphysics as the transcendental and the empirical are the same, the movement of iterability relates the transcendental and empirical as repetitions of the same, rather than ontologically separable phenomena.

In "Phenomenology, Ontology, Metaphysics", Derrida argues that Levinas' notion of metaphysics has been informed by a need to overcome the "egology", 'sameness' and 'being' of ontology which has confined metaphysics to a totality and interiority. It is blind to the infinity and exteriority of the Other which exerts an ethical demand on one towards transcendence, thus transforming metaphysics and ontology into ethics through embracing the infinity of the Other. As Derrida argues, desire permits itself to be appealed to the absolute exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate.⁶ For Derrida, desire is excess and thus cannot be confined to the solipsistic ontology of being, desire is always a flight to transcend totality towards the infinity of the Other. This makes the metaphysics of desire a metaphysics of infinite separation. The flight towards the Other is a transcendence of the solipsism, ipseity and egology of the self, thus separating the self from itself to embrace the Other in the ethical demand that the Other exerts on One. As Derrida interprets this separation, this transcendence and infinite separation from the self is not unhappy consciousness but opening and freedom. As Derrida argues, the ego confines ontology to a metaphysics of the Same. On Levinas' interpretation, transcendence towards the Other, overcoming ontology of ipseity and sameness towards the infinity of the Other is what truly constitutes metaphysics by defining it as ethical. History has blinded the ego to the Other according to Levinas by confining it to Sameness, solipsism and ipseity. Derrida however makes the qualification that one accepts this expansion of ontology into metaphysics of exteriority and ethics if one accepts Levinas' equation of the ego and the Same. Were one to resist the idea that resistance to the same is not real but intelligible as intelligible resistance, one would not follow Levinas on his arguments about metaphysics being a prioritization of the Same and ipseity.

Derrida thus defines the confrontation with the absolutely Other as something which exceeds the confines of the concept relationship as it is not a representation, limitation nor a conceptual relation to the same. It is an encounter which resists conceptualization, resistant to all categories, something which exceeds the bounds of conceptualization or categorization or the notion of horizon, which limits one to the horizon of the same and unity over heterogeneity. In a move which anticipates Derrida's own, Levinas locates the encounter in a future and beyond that is present not in ontology, presence, ipseity or horizons but the trace, present at the heart of experience. It is thus a non-presence which determines presence, the trace of the Other in which one encounters its infinity and beyond exists at the heart of presence as a non-presence or dislocation of presence rather than something which can be determined within its horizon. The encounter of the Other is an ethical relation which is religious, encompassing the religiosity of the religious, not achieved by an intuition of a positive presence, but as a prayer addressed to freedom or a commandment. The face of the Other is accusative, it calls one out of indifference into an ethical relation of respect and responsibility, into a non-violent relation of seeing and recognition for the Other as other and not a subsumption under the conceptual category of the Same.

Levinas' restitution of metaphysics thus radicalizes and systematizes previous reductions of phenomenology and ontology by opening up metaphysics towards seeing the Other as Other and infinite in its beyond, grasping the Other not as a concept or totality which reduces it to the same but as a trace. This

⁶ Ibid., 115

confrontation is deeply religious and commands the self into a recognition for the Other as an infinite beyond, irreducible to the self or sameness. This confrontation with the Other frees metaphysics from the light of Being, or its Greek conceptualization of metaphysics towards a Judaic conceptualization of metaphysics which adopts the ethical relation towards the Other as the fundamental unit of metaphysics. Yet Derrida will demonstrate that this Jewish variant on metaphysics presupposes its Greek form because it assumes it as a point of departure, radicalization, inversion and negation and thus does not free itself completely from its metaphysical vocabulary. Derrida then goes on to interpret Heideggerean ontology as an “egology”, which neutralizes the Other of Being into the same, ontology is a philosophy of power which negates and refuses to accommodate the existence of the Other. Heideggerean possibilities thus remain powers, oppressive and possessive. Yet Levinas’ alternative in rejecting idealism and subjectivity is doomed to repeat it through his negation of Logos and thus paradoxically affirms the structurality of structure. He does this in affirming logocentrism through his denunciations of a center. The non-philosophy of Levinas remains logocentric as it affirms the non-centre as centre and thus reinscribes the structurality of structure by deviating, and hence simultaneously affirming the presence of a centre. Derrida eventually affirms that both philosophy and non-philosophy end up being logocentric in affirming or deviating from the presence or absence of a centre, and rather than choosing between philosophy and non-philosophy truth is rather quasi-transcendental and the difference between Jew and Greek, in which God and history are written and inscribed, unfolding between presence and absence as the play which constitutes the world. Derrida thus demonstrates the difference between Jew and Greek translates paradoxically as a sameness, Jew and Greek are repetitions rather than deviations and hence since this transcendental-empirical difference is an illusion, truth is the difference between these two extremes.

The fundamental unit of Levinas’ metaphysics, the face, is a unit which exceeds conceptualization and categorization as well. It is not a metaphor or a figure, but a fundamental expression which calls one into existence through exerting a command on one into responsibility and ethical obligation to the Other. This Other is irreducible, not conceptualizable, calling one into existence and ethical obligation through its expression as a command of one into existence in relation to the Other. Derrida then proceeds to argue that a world which recognizes the face, in which there is a true seeing and apprehension of the irreducibility of Other as Other, there would be no war. Yet the world as it exists is a world where there is no longer a face as war clearly exists. Yet the world without a face is also a world without a cause for war as it is a world without the Other which one has a confrontational relationship with. It follows that with, or without God, who guarantees the existence of a face, there is war and thus God becomes implicated in war. War supposes and excludes God because God should guarantee the face as acknowledgement of the Other so no war would ensue, and yet clearly in this world there is no acknowledgement of the face and thus an exclusion of God. Hence because war exists, war is the difference between the face and the finite world without a face. The reality is that God exists in the play between this presence and absence of a face, the world as it exists is a play between a world with a face and a world without a face and hence war and peace erupt and exist simultaneously. God exists as the play between the presence and absence of a face. God is thus the play, and difference between the world with a face and the finite world without a face. God exists in the play between presence and absence rather than as a strict presence to the world as God is difference, written in the play between everything and nothing, presence and absence, in which history unfolds. The face of God disappears forever in showing itself because it is not meant to be countenanced as a sacred and divine component of the transcendental beyond. The face is thus neither the face of God nor the figure of man but their resemblance. The Other resembles God but is not God, the Other is the resemblance between humanity and God.

Derrida argues that God is not infinitely Other as a positive infinity, but in a relational sense, through difference. As Derrida sees it, the Other cannot be infinitely Other except through finitude and mortality. Transcendental has to be mediated through empirical in a relationship of iterability and difference. God is not an either All or Nothing, Life and Death but named in the difference or difference between these terms, God is inscribed in this difference which we term history. Derrida then argues that

Levinas is not a thinker of difference or the quasi-transcendental but inversion of metaphysics or radical empiricism, which is a negative theology that repeats metaphysics rather than departing in any meaningful sense from it. Differing from Levinas, Derrida demonstrates that metaphysics is economy rather than alterity. Metaphysics is the difference between Jew and Greek, presence and absence, all or nothing, unfolding between these limits as history and inscribed as God rather than a choice of either totality or infinity as Levinas would have it. While Levinas would argue that presence is violence and the meaning of finitude, Derrida asks why we should choose finitude and history or radical empiricism over Greek metaphysics of light, power and oppression as Levinas has defined the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger. Derrida argues it is not a matter of choosing between Greek conceptualizations of metaphysics or Jewish conceptions of metaphysics but seeing truth as quasi-transcendental and the difference between these two extremes. There exists complicity rather than difference between philosophy and non-philosophy. Non-philosophy is really a repetition of philosophy and truth is rather not a choice between philosophy or non-philosophy but the difference and difference between the two.

In his later commentary on Husserl in *Rogues*, Derrida affirms two principles that his critique of Husserl's phenomenology from *Speech and Phenomena* and *Introduction to Origin of Geometry* had outlined. Firstly, Derrida had argued for the impossibility of pure Presence due to the necessity of temporalization. The two evils of rationalism named by Husserl in his *Crises of the European Sciences*, irrationalism and objectivist naivete, nonetheless are bound to the myth of reason as a certain presence. In *Rogues*, as Derrida has argued previously in *Speech and Phenomena*, the present is produced only by altering and dissimulating itself. Presence has to be temporalized and made simultaneous with non-presences in the forms of past and future in order to be communicated, the transcendental has to be repeated with a difference and relayed through difference in order to be communicated, and hence pure Presence as Husserl posits as the solution to grounding the sciences in an Absolute Present of transcendental idealism is a myth. Derrida argues that because Husserl has identified the two fallacies of reason, irrationalism and objectivist naivete, it is not a crises that cannot be overcome. Derrida would argue that Husserl has located the aporia of phenomenology, in reifying itself into two extremes of irrationalism and objectivism, truth is to be located as quasi-transcendental and the difference between these two extremes rather than a return to privilege presence and transcendental idealism as Husserl does. Derrida thus affirms at the end of his career that Husserl had discovered the fundamental aporia of phenomenology- that the two extremes of rationalistic fallacy- irrationalism and objectivist naivete were dead ends and the solution to overcoming fallacy was acknowledging impasse, paradox and the quasi-transcendental. Derrida argues that the crisis is resolvable by acknowledging it is not a matter of choosing one extreme over the other but acknowledging paradox and aporia as truth. To cite Derrida,

“If this crisis remains ambiguous, if this double critique calls into question a certain rationalism and a certain irrationalism, the only possible conclusion is that the crisis can be overcome. It is not an irreversible failure. The failure of which we are speaking, if it indeed fails or goes aground (the event of an accidental running aground or the event of an intentional grounding, linked, therefore, to some freedom or transcendental evil), fails only in appearance and indicates only an apparent failure of rationalism. An apparent failure of rationalism- that is precisely Husserl's conclusion. If it is going to inspire a call to save the honor of reason (Husserl wants no such rescue) but to endure a heroism of reason, which, I think you will grant me, is not too far away.”⁷

Reason can thus be saved by acknowledging the failure of reason is only apparent, it is resolvable by acknowledging aporia rather than committing to transcendental evil or freedom. Truth is quasi-transcendental, neither materialist or transcendental, but the space between that conditions the thinking of both.

⁷ Jacques Derrida. *Rogues: two essays on reason*. Translated by Pascale Ann Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford, California. Stanford University Press, 2005. 130.

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