

Introduction

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Levinas and Lacan: two proper names that signify two sets of texts, two logics of alterity, two theories of language and subjectivity, two fundamentally different bodies of thought. Ethics and psychoanalysis: two terms that name what historically have been taken as clashing, even mutually exclusive, standpoints. Is a rapprochement between ethics and psychoanalysis possible? If so, on what grounds?

Of course, Levinas's and Lacan's conceptualizations of ethics and psychoanalysis, respectively, differ considerably from traditional ethics and traditional psychoanalysis. Levinas's ethics is an ethics of an inescapable responsibility for the Other that places the human being in a face-to-face position with the Other because of his or her humanity but, also, because of his or her relation to God. Lacan's reworking of Freudian psychoanalysis attempts to establish the epistemological conditions of the science of psychoanalysis. He conceptualizes the structure of desire and reformulates the problem of law and ethics in psychoanalytic theory. Both Lacan and Levinas address the heteronomy of the law and the ethical implications of what has come to be known as the decentered subject. Do these conditions not hint perhaps at possible connections between Lacan and Levinas?

The primary intent of this collection is to begin the task of thinking through what have been up until the writing of these essays anticipated connections and encounters between Levinas and Lacan. I offer next a brief synopsis of the papers contained in the collection to guide the reader through his or her reading.

In seeking to locate a point of orientation for a consideration of Levinas and Lacan, one inevitably encounters the legacy of Hegel. How the influence

of Hegel is played out in Levinas's rethinking of the ethical relation and in Lacan's reworking of Freud's thought is the question Tina Chanter addresses in the opening essay of this collection, "Reading Hegel as a Mediating Master: Lacan and Levinas." As Chanter suggests, Hegel's philosophy plays a singularly particular role both for Levinas and Lacan. He is arguably the most profound source for both of them; yet, at the same time, he bears their most potent polemics. Although the central concern of Chanter's paper is to gauge Hegel's role in Levinas's concepts of desire, infinity, and subjectivity and in Lacan's concepts of a decentered subject of the unconscious and in his conceptualization of the imaginary and symbolic orders, Chanter begins by turning back to an examination of the role Descartes plays for both. We discover that Levinas's unpredictable Descartes bears a close resemblance to Lacan's. In fact, both Levinas and Lacan, at least in their early works, favor Descartes's embodied subject, who owes his or her existence to an interruption of being, to Hegel's idealistic subject. With these connections set in place, Chanter turns in the final section of her paper to the work of Luce Irigaray's as representing a point of meeting between ethics and psychoanalysis and between Levinas and Lacan.

In "Cogito and *Séparation*: Levinas and Lacan," Hans-Dieter Gondek attempts a confrontation between Levinas and Lacan, with the goal of clarifying some of their primary concepts more closely and in relation to one another. He systematically discusses Levinas's and Lacan's conceptualizations of the Other, their understanding of the relation to the Cartesian *cogito* as well as of the process of separation in transcendence. He argues that while Levinas shows the relationship to the Other to be a preontological ethical relationship, the "great Other" [*grand Autre*] of Lacan is more representative of the nonpersonal moments of otherness that are revealed by language. Yet, for Lacan also, an ethical relationship is central—the relationship to the unconscious, which *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* he comprehends as being "ethically constituted." Indeed, as Gondek's analysis shows, Lacan is closer to the thought of Levinas in this seminar than anywhere else, without there being any indication that he in fact ever read Levinas.

The problematic of the "real" is the topic of the third paper. In "Levinas and Lacan: Facing the Real," Donna Brody charts the modalizations and determinations of an area of "passive sensibility" in Levinas's work, which he calls the *there is*: a horrific "underside" of formless reality, or of "being-in-general," which inhabits, eludes, and haunts the individual existent. This concept, she suggests, can be considered an instance of Lacan's conception of the real [*réel*]. She proceeds to discover those ways in which the real, or the *there is*, traverses and fractures Levinas's own discourse. Although this paper is centrally given over to explicating the infractions of the real within Levinas's

discourse, and although certain homologies and differences between the two thinkers are explored, the paper ends by returning the real to Lacan. Brody contends, on the basis of her analysis of the *there is*, that the irrepressible real exceeds and renders ambiguous the very categories and distinctions of Lacan's own encounter with it. She maintains that the immediate accessibility of the real is all-pervasive and cannot be confined to the unmediated access that psychoanalysis reserves for the navel of the dream and for psychosomatic symptoms.

Having come this far in our attempt to establish a link between Levinas and Lacan, the next paper in the collection is one reconstructed from a course Paul-Laurent Assoun gave at *Le Collège international de philosophie* during 1985–87. Assoun's essay is one of the first, if not the first essay, to articulate and assess the differences and proximity between Lacan's and Levinas's theories of subjectivity and alterity. The essay opens with a historic description of the dynamic of Lacan's and Levinas's works. For Assoun, the quarrel over humanism and the debate with post-structuralism provides the topos for constructing a confrontation between these two thinkers. Careful to respect the orientation of each thinker's work, and not to force unfounded parallels between their respective projects, Assoun brings to the fore the central presuppositions that a more detailed analysis would need to systematically work through: suppositions concerning temporality, subjectivity, language, the mirror stage and the *there is*, desire, eros, paternity, the feminine, the law of the Other and, of course, ethics. Assoun warns us that if, in the end, we were to decide that Lacan and Levinas necessarily pass along the same paths, we also would have to acknowledge that they never passed by at the same time, and that this missed encounter, perhaps, is not by chance. If both thinkers can be said to have initiated, in the name of the Other, reformulations in understanding, the stakes, contexts, and contents of their respective claims establish a separation and maintain a distance.

Although in psychoanalytic literature the concept of sublimation is frequently called upon—traditionally the cure is thought in terms of a greater capacity for sublimation and the realm of art and culture is thematized in terms of the sublimation of sexual desire—the lack of a coherent theory of sublimation has remained one of the lacunae in psychoanalytic theory. It should be of no surprise then to discover that Lacan, who attempted to reconceptualise the foundations of psychoanalysis, takes up the task of formulating a theory of sublimation. In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan defines sublimation as raising an object to the dignity of the thing [*das Ding*].

In his paper "Death and Sublimation in Lacan's Reading of *Antigone*," Philippe Van Haute offers an interpretation of Lacan's theory of sublimation. Van Haute argues that Lacan's theory of sublimation is indissolubly a theory

of the status and meaning of the beautiful and of ethics. He begins his essay with an elucidation of two examples of the beautiful that Lacan employs in Seminar VII, with an explanation of the relation between desire and language and by situating Lacan's insights on sublimation within the context of the decline of an ethics of the sovereign Good. Lacan's tragic ethics should be understood, Van Haute proposes, as Lacan's response to a situation that no longer has anything human about it, and, thus, answers to a world of drives and desires that does not prescribe from out of itself an aim that could be said to give meaning and direction to our lives. With this framework in place, Van Haute then turns to an elucidation of Lacan's reading of *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The final three papers in the collection, "Ethics with Psychoanalysis," "Rethinking the Beyond of the Real," and "Dis-possessed: How to Remain Silent 'after' Levinas," explicitly address the central issue of ethics and psychoanalysis. Alain Juranville begins his paper "Ethics with Psychoanalysis" with the question of whether we must, with psychoanalysis, go beyond guilt, or whether there is not something irreducibly objective in transgression [*faute*] that would suppose an ascribable Absolute Good? If so, would the affirmation of objective transgression and of the Good not bring us back to the idealism of metaphysical thought? In response to this question, Juranville undertakes a detailed examination of just what can be made of ethics with psychoanalysis in general.

Juranville proposes that ethics requires an objective Good that can be stated in discourse and in relation to which transgression can be determined. The finitude of freedom and the violence of being must be assumed by an absolute freedom that experiences guilt. He proposes that this necessity is precisely what Levinas insisted upon in his ethical critique of Heidegger. For Levinas, the absolute Other, before every possible choice and engagement, makes us responsible for the Other and commands us to substitute ourselves for the victim and renounce being. But, on the other hand, opposing Levinas, Juranville argues, it is necessary that this absolute freedom, which assumes the violence of being and finitude, be able to act according to the Good and choose in full autonomy and without submitting to the Law of the Other. Does psychoanalysis make possible the formulation of this conception of ethics? Situating his analysis within the framework of Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis, Juranville answers in the affirmative. He demonstrates that 1) the Good is conceivable and storable in discourse and, consequently, transgression can be objectively determined, and 2) the Good is realizable, despite irreducible finitude and transgression.

The relation between ethics and psychoanalysis is also the central concern of Drucilla Cornell's paper "Rethinking the Beyond of the Real." Cornell undertakes the difficult task of rethinking the relation between radical alterity

(what Lacan calls “the real,” or the limit of the symbolic) and what Cornell calls an “ethical relationship.” According to Cornell, both Lacan and Levinas, even if for quite different and irreconcilable reasons, argue that the ontological elaboration of the Sovereign Good, attempted by classical ethics, is philosophically unjustifiable, even unethical. This rejection turns Lacan to his Freudian rereading of the inevitability of the imposition of the moral law, whether the moral law is understood as the Ten Commandments or in terms of the Kantian categorical imperatives, two examples Lacan employs in the seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. For Levinas, however, the Good, which provides sanctity for the Other, can never be reduced to a set of commandments. The call of the Other is always unique, and how to heed this call cannot be known in advance nor simply through identification with another moral subject. To reduce the Other to a set of definable categories, Cornell argues, would violate her or his alterity. Precisely, because the Good is the good of the Other, it can not be fully actualized.

What is at stake in Cornell’s essay is an attempt to reformulate the ethical implications of the beyond of the real through challenging Lacan’s formulation of this concept *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. She begins with a summary of Lacan’s understanding of the relation between the pleasure principle and the beyond of the real. Here, Cornell establishes succinctly how Lacan’s elaboration of this relationship only makes sense from within a conceptual foreclosure of the “positive” symbolization of the feminine within sexual difference, a foreclosure not without ethical implications. Drawing on the works of Levinas and Derrida, Cornell then turns toward a reformulation of the concept of the real as the limit of the symbolic. This reformulated concept of the real can be thought without the moral implications of foreclosure.

The collection concludes with Rudi Visker’s consideration of Levinas’s “uncompromising position” within the contemporary crisis of post-Kantian ethics. His paper is a clarification both of Levinas’s concepts of subjectivity and ethical law and of the difference between Levinas’s formulations of these concepts and Lyotard’s and Lacan’s “pagan” formulations, as well as a critique of Levinas. While in the first half of his essay Visker champions Levinas against Lyotard and Lacan in a philosophical debate concerning ethics, in the second half he takes his distance also from Levinas by problematizing the latter’s conceptualization of the Good.

Confronted with the face of the Other, the subject, according to Levinas, loses all of its titles. But by the same token, it also reaches its truest and most proper core. As Visker’s argument shows, what properly constitutes a subject cannot be understood outside the horizon of this (“initial”) dispossession. The horizon, which for Levinas ultimately refers to the Good, has chosen us before we could choose it. In fact, Visker claims, it is because of this prior un-free-

dom that we can be free at all. But what, he asks, if there were to be more than one “Good” and, hence, more than one “dispossession”? Through an analysis of the concepts of the “face” and of “form,” Visker shows not only why Levinas cannot raise this question but also in what sense there is a price to be paid for this omission.