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Desire as Disruption

Kris Sealey

Fairfield University, ksealey@fairfield.edu

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KRIS SEALEY
Fairfield University

DESIRE AS DISRUPTION

Drew Dalton's analysis in *Longing for the Other* does the much needed work of situating Levinas alongside other figures in the canon of Western philosophy.¹ In so doing, he raises the kinds of questions through which we get a clear picture of the uniqueness of Levinas' philosophical position. By juxtaposing his account of metaphysical desire alongside thinkers like Plato, Heidegger and Fichte (to name a few), Dalton establishes the sense in which Levinas is both *of* the tradition and in dialogue *with* the tradition, but *from* precisely the "outside."

Given the way Levinas conceptualizes the difference between desire and need, one wonders if desire (on Levinas' terms) can ever be anything other than metaphysical. Said otherwise, his position seems to be that desire categorically stands on (or, at the very least, prepares the way for) a radical breaking up of interiority onto that which is beyond. Dalton illustrates this quite successfully in his analysis. He traces the opposition between desire and what might be more accurately described as a relation across need, establishing that the latter presupposes a kind of inner life that, though not complete, projects toward a fulfillment of itself, or seeks a larger and more enriched version of itself. There is no object of my desire upon which my identity could "feed" in this kind of way. As he brings Levinas into dialogue with Plato's account of *eros*, Dalton illustrates the sense in which desire "desires" that which is not only "outside" the subject, but more importantly, *beyond* the subject as well.

This "beyond" takes on an overtly ethical import, but for the moment, the nuance of this distinction (between what might be outside without necessarily being beyond) captures what, I believe, is particular to the Levinasian framework. It helps us to understand why, for instance,

¹ Drew M. Dalton, *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009).

a Sartrean formulation of consciousness, as an intentional projection of “self,” does not come to Levinas as a genuine transcendence, insofar as it does not open up onto the metaphysical.² The Sartrean subject, as a negation of being, is always empty of “self.” The subject is “for itself,” and as such, never coincident with her “self.” Instead, out of an ontological necessity, consciousness moves toward a self that is always on the outside. If, by transcendence, Sartre means a journey toward that which is outside, then the dynamic between consciousness and its self would suffice. But if, along with Levinas, we recognize transcendence as a move toward the metaphysical, then my projection toward a self with which I can never coincide would be a failed transcendence. The Sartrean “self” might be on the outside, but it is not, by any means, *beyond*. Dalton’s analysis plays with these levels in order to illustrate Levinas’ unique way of accounting for metaphysical desire. Exteriority, he says, can either be “other and on the same level,” or it can be “other and above.” Metaphysical desire would indicate the kind of exteriority, and thus derive its signification from, that which is both outside and above. Hence, in the end, Sartre’s non-coincidence might be read as a “lost immanence,” which Dalton rightly aligns with the order of need and not desire. To be sure, this lost immanence references a sort of interruption (at worst, or maybe a minor inconvenience, at best). But it is not yet what Levinas captures in his tropes of metaphysical desire, or what Dalton wants to establish as the core of human longing.

In his re-reading of Plato’s *eros*, Dalton determines that, though the catalyst of the erotic movement is regarded as “good,” it is precisely not good *for* the subject who moves toward the object of her love. Again, we have another distinction, between that which is good (proper) and that which might be “good for me,” that highlights the structures that are unique to Levinas’ conception of desire, identity, and ultimately, alterity. In *eros*, I am transported into a version of myself that is truer, and in a sense, more complete. Nevertheless, Dalton wants to differentiate the object of this Platonic love from the destination of a need-inspired journey. He quotes another Drew (Hyland), who describes *eros* “as a movement toward a wholeness which it has never before been.”³ So even though love takes me into a “new perfection,” it is very much the case that I encounter, in that new perfection, a radical unfamiliarity. So, in the sense that love brings us into relation with something with which we have never been acquainted, there is compelling evidence for resonance between Plato’s rendition of *eros* and a Levinasian account of metaphysical desire. This is insofar as Levinas determines the “metaphysical” in desire to rest on a homelessness, and Dalton determines that *eros* is impossible as a “homecoming.” “[It] would seem that according to Plato no soul can erotically transcend by way of the homely... no soul can erotically transcend without becoming alienated from the homely, without diverging from the paths familiar to it.”⁴ Hence, the transport must be toward an “elsewhere,” or toward a self that is higher and completely otherwise than we know ourselves to be.

² For Sartre’s complete analysis on this issue, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991).

³ Dalton, 36

⁴ Dalton, 35

However, insofar as Levinas reads Plato's conception of *eros* as something that "eventually ends, like consumption, in the satisfaction of the subject," he disqualifies love as a movement of transcendence. So it is clear that at least part of what is essential to his account of metaphysical desire is that the subject remains dis-satisfied, or un-satiated. Dalton argues that in *eros*, we actually find that (1) the subject's desire actually deepens, and doesn't become shallower, the more she pursues the end of *eros*, and that (2) as a result, the "end" of *eros* doesn't promise the possibility of satisfaction. In that regard, the "new perfection" that *eros* promises, or the more complete version of myself that I encounter upon being transported, should not reinforce or support my *integrity* as a subject. In other words, I should not expect, from love, that better, or less-than-finite being against which Levinas warns in his own account of genuine transcendence. Metaphysical desire, in its opposition to need, leaves the subject exposed to that which is both outside and beyond. What becomes apparent in Levinas' collapsing of the metaphysical and the ethical is that this exposure is, in every sense, a *wounding* in the name of what is outside and beyond. So any resonance between *eros* and metaphysical desire also means that wholeness, completion and perfection are never good *for me*, even if, as Dalton points out, it is good. He reminds us that "[not] everything which is outside the subject carries the weight of the metaphysical," which is to say that not everything "outside" is necessarily "beyond."⁵ Perhaps we should also note that metaphysical desire indicates a "beyond" that must remain "on the outside." The end of metaphysical desire is entirely otherwise and elsewhere. So when Drew Hyland describes *eros* as "a movement toward a wholeness which [the subject] has never been," we must bear in mind that this subject never *is* the wholeness which *eros* promises. The consequence of this more perfect version of herself is that she is entirely otherwise (than being), or denied the kind of integral identity that might reincorporate the "beyond" into the inside.

To this end, Levinas identifies the ethical as metaphysical desire's necessary deflection. It is the social, or an encounter with the Other that secures the necessary break-up of the desiring *subject* of the metaphysical desire. In other words, though we speak in terms of the object of *eros* (to return to Dalton's Plato/Levinas analysis), the break-up of the subject, through this (affective) transcendence means that metaphysical desire is no longer in terms of an *object* in the true sense of the term. So in detouring toward the Other as an obsessive responsibility *for* the Other, metaphysical desire operates outside the field of intentionality, where "subject" and "object" poles, at least remotely, apply. As the desiring self is propelled toward the Other, the world no longer appears through mechanisms of objectification and thematization. Instead of there being "a manifestation for me," the Other is "a kind of super bright phenomenon which outshines all the intelligible powers of the subject."⁶ I find this way of phrasing the Other's absence to be quite informative, since it captures the sense in which the trace of alterity is "felt," despite its never being a manifestation. To a degree, the Other presents himself as the absence of light *for me*. But his entrance into my site (or sight) precisely *overwhelms* the parameters of that site. In other words, even though my eyes are blind to alterity's mode of signification, I am *affected* by

⁵ Dalton, 20

⁶ Dalton, 39

that which my eyes are unable to see. Dalton makes this clear when he explains that “it is not...that the Other stands entirely outside of my field. If he did then the subject could not even feel the pull that the Good exercises as the Other.”⁷

Instead of saying that the Other is an absence of meaning, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the Other is the presence of meaninglessness. She is “the light in which things appear,” if by “light” we understand the groundlessness (or “trans-phenomenological,” to borrow from Sartre) upon which we engineer our networks of signification.⁸ This brings to mind a novel by José Saramago, which describes a certain “plague” sweeping across an entire community that results in a sudden and unexplainable loss of sight.⁹ But unlike most cases of blindness, in which the individual is engulfed in a sea of *darkness*, this community succumbs to an uninterrupted wave of *white light* when they become blind. Perhaps we could employ this as Levinasians, and read Saramago’s account as a metaphor of the “plague” of ethical obsession. To be sure, this sudden and unexplainable blindness results in a kind of debilitation that compromises the very possibility of existence, very similar to how Levinas describes the subject’s inversion (or impossibility of identity) as she is propelled by the Good, and toward the Other, in metaphysical desire. To a large extent, Saramago’s blindness gives way to a restructured “social relation,” insofar as individuals must approach each other, and interact with each other, without seeing. To be sure, apprehending one’s world across intentionality does not, in the least, rely on the sense of sight. But perhaps the narrative in Saramago’s novel serves as a metaphor for an intentional projection significantly compromised upon encountering the Face. Caught up in too much light, I am compelled to “see” the Other without seeing, or in way that is radically otherwise (than intentionality). In a similar sense, Dalton’s descriptions capture the ethical moment, whereby the subject is overcome by the Other-as-light, and has to cope with the Face, who *expresses* without manifesting.

In that regard, metaphysical desire maintains the Other as he who is made present without being given. So when this movement becomes the lived moment of shame, it is at least partly because the Other halts my power to thematize, manifest and make meaningful. However, we must be careful not to read this ethical diversion of metaphysical desire solely in terms of a cognitive failure on the part of subjectivity. Upon encountering the Face, I am called to be *for* the Other (in substitution) in a way that transcends my choices and decisions. But this election is not quite *against* my will, but rather, prior to the instantiation of my will. So it is important to recognize that Levinas’ analysis of shame does not restrict itself to a “transcend or be transcended” overture, whereby one subject becomes an object for another subject. To be sure, Dalton captures the significance of shame for Levinas’ analysis of metaphysical desire, when he writes, “Indeed, it is this very power of the experience of shame to cast consciousness back upon itself as an object for another – this power to objectify the subject – which makes it of such

⁷ Dalton, 38

⁸ Dalton, 39

⁹ José Saramago, *Blindness* (Harvest Books, 1999).

vital importance for [Levinas]."¹⁰ But at the same time, Levinas' claim is not that the anguish of shame lies in my imprisonment in an (objectified) "being for the Other" that I can never be "for myself." Said otherwise, my shame does not result from my inability to apprehend myself the way I am apprehended by the Face. So even though I might describe myself as "objectified" in a moment of shame, it is on a uniquely qualified sense of the term.

According to Levinas, I am "cast back upon myself," in this position of vulnerability, in a way that is already beyond "subject and object" dichotomies. The identity from which I cannot escape (the one with which shame acquaints me most intimately) is neither (or no longer) a spontaneous subjectivity, *nor* reified objectivity. My passivity, Levinas says, is "more passive than the passivity of a stone," and in that regard, I don't think shame's sting is quite a consequence of the Other's power to "objectify" me. Indeed, shame is, upon Levinas' analysis, "shame of myself." But "[shame's] whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us..."¹¹ It is that nascent reminder that we are strangers to ourselves, in a way that will always deny us the kind of autonomy and sovereignty needed for that "subject/object" distinction to bear relevance to our human condition. If it was the case that, in shame, I find myself reduced to an object, wouldn't it also be the case that the Other is the *subject* for whom I am reduced? And if so, wouldn't this be tantamount to situating my being, and the being of the Other "along the same plane," instead of what Levinas intends, which is that the Other comes to me (or, sure enough, "accuses me") from a Height? Dalton's descriptions of shame as "not only a kind of passive experience of the subject ... [but] also an illumination of the way in which the subject *is* fundamentally passive" seems to clarify this ambiguity.¹² In this regard, my being an object for the Other indicates an "affectivity of having been open and exposed, [and] reveals the way in which the subject is ... not hermetically closed in on itself."¹³ Hence, the sting of shame does not lie in my taking on a reified object-identity. Rather, shame allows for that most unmistakable realization that I am *without identity*, abandoned to the ontological but already opened up onto the metaphysical.

Drew describes this "turn" as one toward a "(truer) freedom," whereby I choose to be responsible for the Other instead of choosing the pleasure of enjoyment and self-preservation. This ethical dimension indicates, somewhat retroactively, that my ontological freedom is really "a prison." This explains why, in shame, I am appalled by the density, or fullness of my being. The bond to my being appears in the form of shackles, which hold me back from that "truer freedom" – the freedom to visit the possibility of sacrifice. To be sure, this would save Levinas' conception of shame from being read as an experience of alienation, whereby my being is stolen from me by the Other. If the subject "is invited to choose responsibility for the Other," then my

¹⁰ Dalton, 119

¹¹ Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 63.

¹² Dalton, 126-127

¹³ Dalton, 127

substitution is what I choose, and the subsequent loss of self is not a theft.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it seems hasty to describe the passivity of being substituted (or the passivity of being called to responsibility) in terms of “choice,” and possibility. Levinas’ own analysis distinguishes substitution from a form of alienation or enslavement to the Other, and I read this as the point of Dalton’s clarification when he reminds us that “[through] the Other one is *freed* from the demands of *need*...one is *free* to devote oneself to the Other.”¹⁵ But to describe this in terms of an “ethical potentiality” might run the risk of undermining the radical affectivity/passion upon which Levinas grounds this drama of substitution.¹⁶ In other words, to read, in substitution, the end of a movement that “arrives at a higher and entirely novel, but nevertheless more complete, expression of [the subject’s] *potential*” might be to retain what Levinas reads as a Heideggerian formulation of death as yet another possibility (of, now, impossibility).¹⁷

Hence, the question for us might be, “Can ethical potential be something other than a potential that is already mine?” In the typical sense of “potential,” perhaps not. But this typical understanding is precisely what Levinas attempts to transcend in his formulation of “the Infinite within the finite.” Like the Infinite, (our) ethical potential is something that is “within us which could not have been produced by us [and as such, is no longer a modulation of spontaneity].”¹⁸ In this regard, Dalton pertinently employs a term like ‘possession’, which establishes the trace of the Other as something by which we are not “enslaved,” but undeniably as something that “slips into us, unbeknownst to us.” In that regard, we should understand ethical potential as a “birth of a new self” that is “never up to me,” but not alienating either. Dalton makes this clear in his pronouncement that “[the] accusation of the Other does not overpower the ego and wrestle it into submission.”¹⁹ Nevertheless, shame makes clear that the subject is, in every sense, “traumatized” by the appearance of the Other. So even though responsibility, as Dalton puts it, “frees me from the tyranny of being,”²⁰ it remains important to remember that my newfound freedom—to be at the service of the Other—is, indeed, a *difficult* freedom. It is to be under an obsession, or to undergo a dying without quite being able to die. Relative to the “prison of identity,” in which I am enslaved to self-interest, my substitution for the Other is not a violating force, and is, to a degree, quite liberating. But it is still the case that shame rests on a “breach” of subjectivity. This is the breach through which metaphysical desire travels, very similar to the way love, on Dalton’s analysis, lays the subject open to that which is elsewhere. Levinas’ account of metaphysical desire very much requires his phenomenology of shame, to demonstrate that the subject is already without identity, or broken open by its primordial grounding in the “otherwise.”

¹⁴ Dalton, 133

¹⁵ Dalton, 41

¹⁶ Dalton, 42

¹⁷ Dalton, 43

¹⁸ Dalton, 45

¹⁹ Dalton, 133

²⁰ Dalton, 134

Hence, in understanding human longing as a travelling toward some final self, through which we become “truly human,” it is of imperative importance to retain the severity of this breach in subjectivity (a breach that is not, to be sure, a violation). To be truly human, or to take up my obligation to be at the service of the Other, is to let go of a subjectivity to which the categories of completion and actuality can never apply. It is to live my responsibility (for the Other) as an incomplete response, or one that is never enough, or one that fails to close in on itself (even in some bittersweet guilt for not being able to respond sufficiently to the Other’s demands). But this seems to be the wound upon which Levinas’ radical sense of the metaphysical rests, as well as the obsessive content of his account of desire. In bringing him into conversation with the Western canon, Dalton successfully establishes that, though Levinas comes close to others in their accounts of longing, it is a closeness that is “in proximity” only.

KRIS SEALEY (Ph.D., University of Memphis) is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Fairfield University. Specializing in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre, she has published essays in *Levinas Studies*, *Research in Phenomenology*, and *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*.

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