

LEVINASISM AND THE MASCULINE ELEMENT: ETHICS, GENDER, AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. This is the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. That will be the sign of the covenant between you and me.¹

Babies are born with perfectly designed genitalia, and no one has the right to inflict this unnecessary procedure [circumcision] on them as they grow – for any reason.... Medical authorities throughout the world consider circumcision medically unnecessary and unethical.²

1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas's approach to gender, sexual difference, and the erotic relationship is inextricably connected to his fundamental ethical thesis that an exorbitant responsibility is the intersubjective genesis of subjectivity. But in the interweaving of these apparently disparate threads of thought, a certain complex of ambiguity arises among the following three pairs of terms: Same/Other; masculine/feminine; man/woman. The terms "feminine" and "woman" – sometimes capitalized – appear often in Levinas's work. The corresponding terms "masculine" and "man" rarely, if ever, make a direct appearance in his philosophical text, although they seem to have the presence of an absence in what may

¹ The New American Bible, Revised Edition. (2015). Washington, D.C.: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, p. 33.

² Doctors Opposing Circumcision. (2019). Retrieved August 1, 2019 from <https://www.doctorsopposingcircumcision.org/>

amount to a form of a metaphysical denial in Levinas's phenomenological approach to the ethical dialectic of the Same and the Other.

Could this circumspect scission of masculine consciousness signify a transcendental *praejudicatum* at the heart of Levinas's analysis of subjectivity? But would not the infliction of such a scission be merely cosmetic or substantially alter the whole radical configuration of subjectivity? Is subjectivity to be subject to the impossible arbitration of sex and gender? To borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, we could ask: Supposing subjectivity to be a woman...what then?

What I intend to do in this present essay is to trace the genealogy of this suspected bias in favor of the feminine and to sketch out the direction for an alternative approach to the politics of sexual difference from a 'masculinist' perspective in order to allow all voices – vices notwithstanding – to be heard.

2. The Ambiguous Dialectic of the Same and the Other

The terms "the Same" and "the Other" are used by Levinas primarily to indicate broad categories of being and quasi-being in a sense not unrelated to the context in which they are found in Plato's *Sophist*, although Levinas adopts these terms with a metaphysical purpose in mind that is perhaps less 'Greek' than that of Plato.

According to Levinas's construal, the concept of the Same refers generally to that which is identical with itself, such as the "I" or agent of self-conscious subjectivity. As such, it is absolutely separate and distinct from the "wholly Other." Levinas will allow that the identity of the "I" with itself does involve a limited kind of otherness, following the course of an Hegelian dialectic where consciousness goes out of itself and differentiates itself from

itself, but only to return to itself in a totalizing identity of the same-in-difference. This otherness within the Same involves a repetitive movement of temporal desire understood as a *need* which can achieve only temporary satisfaction. Subjectively, it is impossible to ever catch up with ourselves; yet, ambiguously, we are always who we are, me-myself, identified with ourselves in a form of satisfaction and closure.

But Levinas articulates another order of desire: metaphysical desire. Building on the Cartesian notion of the temporal priority of the infinite over the finite, of a thought which thinks more than it thinks, metaphysical desire does not aim at what is other within the economy of the Same, but at what is absolutely Other. That which is absolutely or wholly Other refers precisely to what, intrinsically, cannot be reduced to the identity of the Same. Thus, metaphysical desire reveals or produces an infinite surplus of desiring over the desirable, forever exceeding the possibility of satisfaction, that is, returning to itself as the same. Repetition here becomes “infinite;” pure identity succumbs to difference.

Thus, there are two faces to this ethical asymmetry. On the one hand, the Other “approaches” the Same from the superior, metaphysical height of an irreducible exteriority, and thereby poses a perpetual ethical challenge to the identity, or the totalizing, objectifying proclivity of the Same. On the other hand, this *ethical* ‘power’ of the Other over the Same is not yet, by definition, social or political power. In fact, the ethical power of the wholly Other is generated precisely by the absence of political power. This is why Levinas frequently used the Biblical formula of “the widow, the orphan, and the stranger” to depict the wholly Other. The ethical relation between the Same and the Other operates within a framework of an invisible “sociality” that is prior to consciousness and not yet within the

visible world of political society. And how the move is made from the metaphysical to the political realm is unclear in Levinas's work, as I have argued elsewhere.³ Nevertheless, it is simply assumed that the boundary between these two orders is a permeable membrane, like a skin, and thus they are not kept *entirely* separate by Levinas. Herein lies the source of an important ambiguity in Levinas's ethical phenomenology. The discourse of the Same and the Other operates ambiguously in a phenomenological gap between the infinity of the transcendental order and the transcendent immediacy of the empirical given in the form of lived or living *praxis* depending upon the position from which it is viewed.

3. Masculinity, Femininity and the Transcendence of Fecundity

This metaphysical/empirical ambiguity in the ethical dialectic of the Same and the Other is further compounded by the fact that from the very beginning Levinas includes in his analysis the nomenclature of gender. For better or worse, it is the feminine that characterizes the wholly Other for Levinas—for the most part. Specifically, the feminine is variously associated in Levinas's work with an affective, pre-conscious invisibility, a pure future and an immemorial past, modesty, interiority, sheltering, the socializing and welcoming aspect of the home, fecundity, maternity, intimacy, generosity, sweetness, kindness, goodness, tenderness, mercy, love, mystery, and soul. This gendered litany of associations heightens the ambiguity between the metaphysical and the empirical. And

³ "Action, Passion, and Responsibility: Levinas's Circumcision of Consciousness," in *Selected Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Volume 20: "Reinterpreting the Political: Continental Philosophy and Political Theory."* Edited by Stephen H. Watson and Lenore Langdorf. (New York: SUNY Press, 1998): pp. 93-1

there will be a further ambivalence within this already metaphysically ambiguous ascription of gender itself.

The feminine, as the wholly Other, is not *all* goodness and light. Having the peculiar presence of an absence, the feminine is also equivocation par excellence, according to Levinas. Perpetually slipping away from the light, essentially hidden behind the veil of a passivity more passive than any patience, the feminine also inhabits the shadow world of non-identity, operating at a distance, “refractory to society,” especially at the level of erotic otherness (TI 265). In “Judaism and the Feminine Element,” Levinas goes so far as to say that “the feminine also reveals itself as the source of all decline.” A “charming weakness...at the verge of letting go....” “Woman,” Levinas says, “is complete immodesty, down to the nakedness of her little finger. She displays herself, the essentially turbulent, the essentially impure. Satan...was created with her. Her vocation of contemplativeness...is allied to all indiscretion” (JFE 37). The feminine brings the necessity of death into paradise. Thus, the otherness of the feminine involves an ambiguity of religious origin operating within the philosophical ambiguity.

But the complex of ambiguity that arises from this interweaving of metaphysical, ethical, empirical, political and religious voices is easily missed, oversimplified, or otherwise distorted by critical commentaries focusing on the association of the feminine with the wholly Other, such as the early critique by Simone de Beauvoir, or those of Catherine Chalier and Tina Chanter. What is entirely overlooked or taken for granted by *all* of these commentaries; what, among the proliferation of sensitive and careful philosophical language devoted to an oblique and modest glimpsing of the multi-faceted equivocation of

the salvific feminine, has even, perhaps, already become invisible to Levinas him/herself, is the presumptive association of the masculine and the man with the identity of the Same.

For reasons which would follow from the metaphysical agenda of Levinas's *philosophical* text—reasons involving convoluted traces of authorial sexual identity, non-identity, and parenthood at work behind the scenes, which Derrida has traced to the very gravesite of the faulty text—the masculine, as such, never makes a direct appearance in Levinas's philosophical writing, as if it had already be placed under erasure of the ethical as the very condition for the possibility of this strange conversation about the otherness of the feminine Other. But, outside of the philosophical corpus, a more direct confrontation with the masculine finds is to be found.

Again, in "Judaism and the Feminine Element," we are told that prior to the masculine conversion from action to responsibility by the approach of the feminine Other, the fact that "Grain and flax are wrenched from nature by the work of man," shows that the masculine in its virility marks the break with the spontaneous and instinctive life "buried in the immediacy of nature, the given" (JFE, p. 33). This break by the masculine with the natural feminine marks the opening of the "hard and cruel" world of reason and spirit, an "inhuman" world guided by impersonal calculation, "the anonymous realm of the economy that proceeds according to knowledgeable plans which cannot prevent though they can prepare disasters." Levinas's description of masculinity in this text sounds close to his notion of *Il y a*, the anonymous and perpetually threatening pit of the sheer *there is*.

There it is—spirit in its masculine existence. It lives outdoors, exposed to the fiery sun which blinds and to the winds of the open sea which beat it and

blow it down—on an earth without inner recesses, removed from its homeland, solitary and wandering, and even as such alienated by the products that it has created which rise up untamed and hostile. (JFE, p. 33)

The taming of this hostile “masculinity of the universal and conquering *logos*” with its warehouses full of impersonal merchandise, will be accomplished by the feminine, the “one who does not conquer,” through the conjugal bond which is also the social bond. The naturally irresponsible wealth of the Same/masculine/man must be socialized or *ethicalized* by the Other/feminine/woman; impersonal grain must be turned into personal bread; impersonal flax into personal clothing. The promiscuous errantry of the masculine/male consciousness must again be circumcised in order to enter a new covenant. Conquering consciousness must be enticed from the hardness of an inhuman world into the “the strange failure of sweetness” of the feminine home by which he will be made human. For “‘without woman man knows neither good, nor succor, nor joy, nor blessing, nor pardon.’ Nothing of what would be required for a soul!”

But, this metaphysical socialization process of the masculine/man which will place a new limit on his virility and soften the edge of his hardness and coldness, leaving him domesticated, human, and ethical, will also leave him, according to Levinas’s once again ambiguous description, in the position of a certain spiritual preeminence over the woman within the feminine home. In one of his Talmudic commentaries, where he is discussing the proper political structure of family life from a Biblical perspective, Levinas argues that there had to be “a sexual difference and, hence, a certain preeminence of man, a woman coming later, and as a woman, an appendage of the human.... That family scenes there

would have been between the members of the first perfectly equal couple!" This preeminence of the masculine occurs, however, only after the conjugal domestication or circumcision of the conquering masculine *logos*.

So, whereas the feminine soul of the woman, which is continuous with the natural, is, in itself, the wholly Other, and, in this sense, the source of the ethical and the very possibility of goodness, it nevertheless has the dark side of bringing a certain malevolent equivocation into the world as well. Therefore, the feminine is in need of the conjugal bond and the submission to the masculine rule of domesticated divine reason. On the other hand, whereas the masculine spirit of the man is in itself the identity of the Same and thus the site of the spirited violence which breaks with the equivocating dissolution of the natural, it finds itself out in the cold until it is softened and warmed by submission to the sheltering tenderness of the feminine. It is only within the reciprocity of the conjugal bond that the feminine soul and the masculine spirit will find their mutual fulfillment, and the fulfillment of the larger requirement of the ethical responsibility which transcends the conjugal relationship. This does not seem like "two totalities" completing one another, as Levinas would have it. Rather, it seems more like to incompletenesses that will never be totally whole.

According to Levinas, the specific point at which the conjugal bond of the feminine soul and masculine spirit enters most fully into the larger economy of the ethical responsibility, is through the narrow door of the erotic relationship. This will add a new ambiguity to the picture. The erotic relationship is both presupposed by and transcends the ethical relationship. Understood as a "dual egoism" in which the profane and

voluptuous touching of sexual love takes its place among all the other pleasures of life, eros is seen by Levinas to presuppose the ethical relation, which thus subtends genuine erotic love. The voluptuous caressing of erotic love at the profane level involves a return to oneself, without accomplishing transcendence—as with all other appetitive pleasures. Thus, the sensual dimension of the erotic relationship within the conjugal bond, remains at the particular level of profane pleasure and would be unjustifiable for Levinas without the universalizing possibility inherent in fecundity and the birth of the child.

Fecundity is the condition for the possibility of transcendence *beyond* the face-to-face relation, according to Levinas. Insofar as voluptuousness involves any transcendental desire toward an infinite future, its only ultimate outcome can be the engendering of the child. The engendering of the child, Levinas says, “continues history without producing old age” (TI 268/Tel 246). My child is somehow me and while at the same time wholly her/his own person. Thus, the parent-child relation involves a horizontal transcendence or existential immortality beyond death and the possibility of the impossibility of the face-to-face relation. In the child, as in the textual flesh of genuine works given over to a future generation, there occurs a veritable transubstantiation of parental flesh involving a unique kind of exteriority. Paternity and maternity would be—although, perhaps, in different ways for Levinas—the most perfect concrete forms of fulfillment of the exorbitant demand of ethical responsibility, involving a perfect self-sacrifice to the point of death—and beyond.

4.

Although it is perhaps within the erotic relationship under the canopy of the conjugal bond, that the masculine/man and the feminine/woman come closest to the achievement of wholeness, nevertheless, even in this entanglement there remains an ecstatic gap of Derridean dif-ferance between them. Having thoroughly sundered the feminine element and the masculine element, it will be as impossible for these “elements” ever to achieve a paradisiacal whole as it would be for Plato to get motion and rest back together. Once cast out of the garden, there can be no return.

Levinas, like Husserl before him, misses the truly human world. His religious commitment, like his mentor’s commitment to “science,” will not allow him to see the flesh and blood woman as a truly independent being with her own peculiar desires structuring her own economy of self-fulfillment; although he at least sees her as essentially human. But he does not see the flesh and blood man, in himself and with his own peculiar desires structuring his economy of self-fulfillment, as a human being, at all—at least not without subjection to the economy of exteriority. And thus, upon the shoulders of these less-than-humans, the burden of exorbitant responsibility is thoughtlessly allowed to fall more heavily.

From the very beginning, the masculine/male is prepared for this self-sacrifice under the yoke of an absolute and unremitting demand to be the responsible one. Within the messianic eschatology of Judaism, this exorbitant responsibility would be the very essence of masculinity. The barbaric ritualized mutilation of the penis in ‘covenant’ circumcision symbolizes the initial preparation of the sacrificial male ‘beast’, in the same way gelding makes steer fit to be slaughtered for the nourishment of those who control the

herd. This command to self-sacrifice is perhaps reflected in the sad statistic that at adolescence, when boys and girls first begin to act on the sex-role stereotypes transmitted to them by the cultural myths of masculinity and femininity, as represented by Levinas's analysis, "boys' suicide rate goes from slightly less than girls' to four times as great as girls'" (Farrell, p. 165). And this pressure will only be exacerbated later by the misandry of a thoroughly sexist and politically unjust military conscription policy relative to other social institutions.

That the basic demand of Levinas's philosophy of exorbitant responsibility is aimed primarily at the masculine element which has been absolutely separated from its feminine counterpart and, thus, now is absolutely in need of it in order to become human, is also reflected in the very choice of the otherworldly Platonic forms with which the philosophical argument is carried out. There can be no mixing or intermingling of these fundamental, elemental ontological categories without a resulting confusion of understanding, and, hence, a confusion of practice—the origin of which would be located in the dark side of the wholly (holy) Other. The very essence of the Same bespeaks this absolute separation. But it is a separation which leaves the Same/masculine/man out in the cold inhuman domain of a lofty and spiritualized reason, exiled and willing to strike any bargain, and where it would perhaps be condemned to remain were it not for the troubling, and yet warm and sheltering face of the wholly (holy) Other/feminine/woman calling the Same/masculine/man to its self-sacrifice in the name of an exorbitant responsibility which leaves widows and orphans in the swirling smoke of its self-immolation. *All* may be victims

of this extremism, but at least the widows and orphans are left standing after the masculine element bites the dust.

When the absolute separation of these otherworldly Platonic forms is translated into the empirical order of flesh and blood men and women by way of the nomenclature of gender, there occurs a scission in the human species guided by the supposedly clear topography of a non-hermaphroditic sexual difference reinforced by the Biblical myths of Genesis. Separated by an absolute difference, neither man nor woman is seen to be whole in themselves, although the lack of wholeness of the man is greater than that of the woman. She at least has a soul in Levinas's construal, even if Satan is thought to lurk in its labyrinthian corridors and recesses. But, the man without the woman is seen as a consciousness that is less than human, and in need of the woman to make him whole. And because he is made human by the woman, and is thus utterly dependent in this way on her, the man easily will be made willing to provide for and protect her—especially against other men—since, if anything were to happen to her his very humanity would be lost.

The subtle expectations attached to these mytho-religious dynamics will cause trouble for all those mere mortals among us who cannot fulfill the demands of exorbitant responsibility. Although men are just beginning to speak up—which, given *their* role in the oppressive patriarchy, is a more difficult task—nevertheless, it should not come as a surprise that men are dying an average of ten years sooner than women, and that a husband whose wife dies first is about ten times more likely to commit suicide than a wife whose husband dies first (Farrell, p. 164). When the myths about men communicate that, in themselves, they are merely cold-hearted calculating machines best suited to field work

outside the nurturing home, they cannot help but understand themselves as disposable in comparison with the ethical necessity and goodness of the wholly (holy)

Other/feminine/woman. The demand of an exorbitant responsibility symbolized by the mutilation of the otherwise healthy and natural penis levied by a jealous God that justifies this self-sacrifice, is only a more subtle version of the ideological myths of all imperialistic cultures which promise eternal glory to the suicidal warrior.

The modern feminist critique of the supposed privilege of patriarchal male power and the infamous oppression of women that follows from it, is myopic and misguided when directed against men as a class in their metaphysical foundations, and only exacerbates a deeper wound. Most men, like most women, are far from the thrones of any real political power. The male slaves of Abraham's household who were forced to pay the price for the continuity of their master's bloodline and the blessing of Sarah's belated fecundity, without benefitting themselves—unless one subscribes to a trickle-down theory of messianic economics. It is precisely the *myth* of patriarchal male power, whose obverse is an exorbitant, suicidal responsibility laid most heavily on the shoulders of me, that keeps men from seeing that *they* are being victimized as much as, in not more so than the women who have decided not to take it anymore.

Perhaps a larger class of both men *and* women is being victimized by a matriarchal patriarchy composed of not just the powerful men who supposedly rule, but also the perhaps more powerful women who rule these men by being the very source of their humanity. This ruling class of women and men is the origin of those religious, philosophical, nationalistic and cultural myths or ideologies whose true aim is to keep the

LEVINASISM AND THE MASCULINE ELEMENT

powerless powerless, while believing otherwise. I think that Levinas has overlooked the unbracketed influence of these Biblical and secular presuppositions as they operate in and upon his work as a whole.