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THE SELF AND THE OTHER IN LEVINAS AND SPINOZA

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Abstract: Emmanuel Levinas in his ethics elucidates his key concept of the other-directed self by opposing it to the wholly self-interested self, as he interprets it, in the ethics of Baruch Spinoza. However, when we consider the Spinozan self within the context of his own ethical system, we find that it also ultimately is other-directed, but in a manner quite distinct from that of the Levinasian self. The contrasting ethical selves of Levinas and Spinoza provide alternative models of existing ethically in the world, both of which are in insistent opposition to the modern humanist valorization of the autonomous egoistic individual as a valid ontological concept and worthwhile ethical ideal.

Keywords: *Conatus Essendi*, Ego, Holiness, Individual, Other, Self, Substitution, Virtue.

Emmanuel Levinas in his philosophy is noted for his focus upon the relationship of the self to the other, a relationship that he contended is innate in and to the very identity of the individual self. At key points in his elucidation of the other-directed self that is the basis of his ethical system, he contrasted it with what he purported to be the wholly self-interested individualism underlying Baruch Spinoza's ethical system. Levinas's interpretation of the Spinozan individual self is a strategic misreading that allowed him to highlight the profound differences between his conception of the self and that of Spinoza. However, when we consider the Spinozan self within the context of his own ethical system, we find that it also ultimately is other-directed, but in a manner quite distinct from

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that of the Levinasian self. Considered together, the contrasting ethical selves of Levinas and Spinoza provide alternative models of existing ethically in the world, each of which appeals to a particular type of contemporary existential situation and need. Moreover, although the Levinasian concept of the self functions as a strategic critique of the Spinozan self, both are vitally opposed to the modern humanist conception of the intrinsically separate egoistic individual, with its proprietary rights and satisfactions, as a valid ontological model and worthwhile ethical ideal.

Levinas highlighted his fundamental disagreement with the Spinozan concept of the self, as he interpreted it, in his explication of his own ethical system in a late-life interview in which he referred to the key Spinozan concept of *conatus essendi* (the effort to persist in one's being) as being that against which he had developed his entire philosophy:

> In the *conatus essendi*, which is the effort to exist, existence is the supreme law…. A being is something that is attached to being, to its own being. That is Darwin's idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics…. However, with the appearance of the human - and this is my entire philosophy - there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other.[1]

Levinas contended that being human means that we can choose *not* to choose ourselves first, but to give the other priority over ourselves, which he characterized as "the valorization of holiness"[2] over self-interestedness:

> As opposed to the interestedness of being, to its primordial essence which is *conatus essendi*, a perseverance in the face of everything and everyone, a persistence of being there – the human (love of the other, responsibility for one's fellowman,

[1]Emmanuel Levinas, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," trans., Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed., David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, New York, NY: Routledge, 2014, 168-179, 175, 172.

[2]Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, trans., Michael B. Smith, New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2000, 229.

> an eventual dying-for-the-other, sacrifice even as far as the mad thought in which dying for the other can concern me well before, and more than, my own death) – the human signifies the beginning of a new rationality beyond being. A rationality of the Good higher than all essence.[3]

There are two key points to be noted in this passage in making the contrast between the Levinasian and Spinozan self. One is the concept of sacrificial dying-for-the-other, which Levinas elsewhere characterizes more generally as "substitution,"[4] and the other is the emphasis placed on the supreme rationality of the transcendent Good beyond being, a concept that Levinas borrowed from Plato. In emphasizing both, Levinas was making an implicit contrast with the Spinozan model of the ethical self, which Levinas took to be both wholly self-interested and implicitly opposed to any notion of transcendence.

In his illuminating introduction to his translation of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*, Alphonso Lingis elucidated the crucial role that the concept of substitution plays in Levinas's ethical system:

> For Levinas substitution is the ethical itself; responsibility is putting oneself in place of another. Through becoming interchangeable with anyone, I take on the weight and consistency of one that bears the burden of being, of alien being and of the world. I become substantial and a subject, subjected to the world and to the others. And because in this putting myself in the place of another I am imperiously summoned, singled out, through it I accede to singularity.[5]

For Levinas, the self in its singular subjectivity comes into being only by dint of its sacrificial relation to the other, a relation that Levinas considers is implicit in the very nature of language, which is fundamentally and primarily a beseeching and responsive communication with the other, and only secondarily and incidentally an expression of one's egoistic individuality.[6] A

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[3]Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 229.

[4]Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, Pa: Duquesne UP, 1998, 124.

[5]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, xxix.

[6]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 143.

wholly autonomous expressive self, according to Levinas, is a fictive fantasy of humanist egoists and idealists. As existential beings, we can choose to acknowledge or to deny the obligation to the other that is innate in the self's very identity as a self, and in this choice we are in effect choosing either to be human, by acceding to a higher rationality that attests through self-sacrifice to the Good beyond being, or to be subhuman and animalistic in our wholly self-interested drive toward individual thriving in our essential being.

In making his argument for the other-directed self, Levinas was attempting to address the nihilism he felt to be the greatest temptation and threat to being ethically human in the contemporary world. When we take as an existential goal and model the egoistic individual in its self-interested thriving, we come face to face with the absurdity of death, to which every individual – no matter how successful in its existence – ultimately is delivered. When we consider, however, that the self is by its very nature obliged to the other in an infinite responsibility that is the singling out that the Good has conferred upon each of us in our being brought into the mortal world, we are given an existential task and purpose – that of sacrificially *substituting* ourselves for the other in pursuit of an ultimate justice for one and all in testimony to the Good beyond being – that supersedes our thriving as essential individual egos:

> Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out…. No one is so hypocritical as to claim that he has taken from death its sting, not even the promises of religions. But we can have the responsibilities and attachments through which death takes on a meaning. That is because, from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves.[7]

For Levinas, the encounter with the "face" of the other, in its absolute alterity, is a kind of divine grace that we are granted

[7]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 124, 129.

which frees us from the entrapment of a wholly self-interested egoistic individualism and the absurdity of its death, an egoistic existence which he identifies with Spinoza's metaphysical system and its intrinsically unethical (for Levinas) acceptance and endorsement of the necessity and truth of being: "Being is play or détente, without responsibility, where everything possible is permitted."[8] Levinas's entire philosophy is marshalled against acceding to the necessity of such a system. As Richard Cohen recently commented in contrasting Spinoza's valorisation of the truth of being with Levinas's valorisation of the Good beyond being: "Spinoza exalts indeed idolizes the true, the true without the good, science as a substitute for ethics; Levinas exalts the good, the good above truth but requiring truth, truth serving justice; and I, I am with Levinas, for this is a debate without neutral spectators as it is a debate without exit or escape."[9] Put in these terms, Cohen's preference for Levinas seems inevitable and just.

But is the Spinozan self as depicted and critiqued by Levinas and denigrated by Cohen, a self wholly enmeshed and expressed in amoral being, the authentic self of Spinoza's ethical system? I would argue that it is not. To understand why it is not, let us return to the key concept of *conatus essendi* in Spinoza's original usage of it: "Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being.... The endeavor, wherewith everything endeavors to persist in its own being, is nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question."[10] In Levinas's reading of Spinoza, the self selfishly *chooses* to persist in its own being in lieu of substituting itself sacrificially for the other in testament to the Good beyond being. But Spinoza's system is predicated on the assumption that we have no choice when it comes to the endeavour to persist in our "actual essence," which is a particular and necessary expression of the ultimate reality that is

[8]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 6.

[9]Richard Cohen, *Out of Control: Confrontations between Spinoza and Levinas*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016, xviii.

[10]Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans., G. H. R. Parkinson, Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2000, 136.

God, who alone is "self-determining, active, and free."[11] We are not free to choose whether or not to persist in our own individual nature or essence, but only to choose whether or not to express positively and well that nature. As Stuart Hampshire commented in his clarifying study, for the Spinozan individual self, "In the last analysis, and speaking philosophically, there is no such choice of an ideal or end. Philosophically speaking, the choice is of the right means to an end that is already determined for him by his nature and appetites as an individual thinking and physical thing."[12] For Spinoza, to assume that we can choose whether or not to persist in our own individual nature, in our "natural essence," is as absurd as assuming that a lion could choose to be a lamb if it wanted to, and it is the persistent belief in and illusion of such a choice that contributes to making human beings miserable in the world. Rather, the wisdom of life in Spinoza's system is to focus all of our powers on understanding and actively fulfilling positively and well our necessary and given individual natures. If we choose to deny our essential nature, we do not alter it in the least, as it is necessary, but we sacrifice our power actively to express and understand that nature.

This task of endeavouring to understand and actively express our nature may seem to be a wholly self-interested and even solipsistic behaviour, but according to Spinoza, it is the very basis of ethical human sociality, as "the man who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of the basis of all virtues, and consequently is ignorant of all virtues."[13] Moreover, "The highest good of those who follow virtue is common to all, and all can enjoy it equally."[14] Virtue is a key term for Spinoza that refers to the power of successful expression of one's individual and essential nature. "Virtue is human power itself, which is defined by the essence of man alone… which is defined solely by the endeavor

[11]Stuart Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2005, 184.

[12]Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, 184.

[13]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 266.

[14]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 251.

by which a man endeavors to persevere in his being."[15] So, in Spinoza's system, virtue and the effort to persist in our individual nature, *conatus essendi*, are in effect one and the same. This layered and complex understanding of *conatus essendi* is in distinct contrast with Levinas's strategic interpretation of the concept as being a Darwinian struggle for the self at the expense of others. Indeed, Spinoza's emphasis on the positive nature of power as properly understood and expressed may well seem naïve in a world full of manipulative users and abusers, but it is his faith in the positive powers that are potential in human nature that is his particular gift to a sceptical and cynical contemporary world, as Gilles Deleuze commented, "In a world consumed by the negative, [Spinoza] has enough confidence in life, in the power of life, to challenge death, the murderous appetite of men, the rules of good and evil, of the just and the unjust. Enough confidence in life to denounce all the phantoms of the negative."[16]

Once we have achieved individual virtue by coming to understand the implicit reason of our own nature, which is always by necessity a relative achievement, as only God has full power of understanding and expression of his nature, we can use our hard-won understanding to enlighten others, "Since we know of no particular thing that is more excellent than a man who is led by reason, each person can give no greater display of the power of his skill and ingenuity than in educating men in such a way that they finally live in accordance with their own rule of reason."[17] In contrast with Levinas, for whom the essential existential task of the self is to substitute itself sacrificially for the other in the manner of a holy saint, Spinoza posits the enlightened self as a sagacious role model, teacher, and guide to the unenlightened. Indeed the self that has achieved a degree of freedom by dint of its self-understanding is obliged by the shared social instinct of human nature to help

[15]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 241.

[16]Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans., Robert Hurley, San Francisco, Ca: City Lights Books, 2001, 13.

[17]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 282.

others to the achievement of their own liberation, for "Freedom does not remove the necessity of action, but imposes it."[18] Thus Spinoza's model of the ethical self ultimately is other-directed, like that of Levinas, but in a strikingly different manner, in which we each are obliged according to the degree of our own self-liberation to assist our neighbours out of their own bondage to hatred of self and other. Steven Nadler recently noted the earnest effort at liberation that is the passionate argument implicit in Spinoza's thought system: "If there is one theme that runs throughout all of Spinoza's writings, it is the liberation from bondage, whether psychological, political, or religious."[19] Antonio Negri likewise commented upon the revolutionary social potential of the Spinozan system of individual liberation through self-acceptance and understanding that ultimately and inevitably produces an other-directed "love" that "rips us free of solitude and permits us to construct the world together."[20]

Although it seems to me necessary to press back against Levinas's strategic misreading of Spinoza in order to appreciate the nature of Spinoza's ethical self in its relation to the other on its own terms, unlike Cohen, I am not interested in choosing between the ethical systems of the two philosophers or in using one to denigrate the other, for both are of great value and use in the contemporary world. The model of Levinas's other-directed self with its existential task of sacrificial substitution speaks to those who are exhausted by and disgusted with an existence the only purpose of which is self-satisfaction and the ultimate end of which is the absurdity of one's wholly individual death, whereas Spinoza's model of the liberated self speaks to those who feel oppressed by a world that does not accept their nature and to those who have allowed the lesser gods of their nature to put their reason in bondage to their emotions. When I briefly

[18]Spinoza, *Complete Works*, trans., Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael Morgan, Indianapolis, In: Hackett, 2002, 686.

[19]Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2011, 32.

[20]Antonio Negri, *Spinoza for our Time: Politics and Postmodernity*," New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2013, 17.

summarized the two ethical systems for a friend recently, he responded, "I see, Levinas is good for the depressed and Spinoza for the oppressed," which is well put. Moreover, both systems offer crucially alternative models to the dominant humanist understanding and valorisation of the individual as a self-sustaining autonomous ego with proprietary rights and satisfactions. In their critique of the idolatry of the thriving, satisfied egoistic self as an ethical model and existential ideal, Levinas and Spinoza each offer a postmodern and posthumanist way forward into a future in which the self's egoistic individuality is diminished in favour of a meaningful purpose within and connectedness to a greater and ultimate reality that Levinas refers to as the Good beyond being and Spinoza famously described as, "*sub specie aeternitatis*,"[21] the perspective of the eternal.

In making their arguments against the modern idol of the freely independent individual actor, the valorisation of which Spinoza's early-modern philosophy prophetically anticipated,[22] both philosophers questioned the value of individual freedom, egoistically understood, as an end in itself. As Levinas noted in his comments on the story of the biblical character of Job:

> We have been accustomed to reason in the name of the freedom of the ego – as though I had witnessed the creation of the world, and as though I could only have been in charge of a world that would have issued out of my free will.... To be responsible over and beyond one's freedom is certainly not to remain a pure result of the world. To support the universe is a crushing charge, but a divine discomfort. It is better than the merits and faults and sanctions proportionate to the freedom of one's choices.[23]

Levinas continued by arguing that modern humanism, which considers the freedom and satisfaction of the individual to be an end in itself, without reference, connection, or obligation to the other, "has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently

[21]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 306.

[22]Negri, *Spinoza for our Time*, 18.

[23]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 122.

human."[24] Spinoza's determinist system likewise critiques the presumptions of a wholly free and independent individual actor, "There is in the mind no absolute, i.e., no free, will, but the mind is determined to will this or that by a cause, which is again determined by another, and that again by another, and so on to infinity."[25] The individual's freedom lies in his choice to assent to, endorse, and understand his nature or not, and to realize it as a small but unique part of a greater whole, which is to conceive things "under a species of eternity."[26] As Hampshire commented: "To Spinoza it seemed that men can attain happiness and dignity only by identifying themselves, through their knowledge and understanding, with the whole order of nature, and by submerging their individual interests in this understanding."[27] Although Spinoza's understanding assent, in its "Stoic… wisdom of resignation and sublimation,"[28] and Levinas's sacrificial substitution, in its saintly ideal of holiness, are ethical ideals that are temperamentally distinct and perhaps in natural and necessary systemic opposition, they are similar in their conception of life as an existential task in the service of a greater reality that gives dignity and purpose to each individual mortal being. Despite his career-long phenomenologist's opposition to Spinoza's Stoic, determinist metaphysics, Levinas recognized that both systems, in their supreme instances, are in service to the same ultimate, unencapsulable Good: "Philosophy has, at its highest, exceptional hours stated the beyond of being and the one distinct from being…. Here we have the boldness to think that even the Stoic nobility of resignation to the logos already owes its energy to the openness to the beyond essence."[29]

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[24]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 128.
[25]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 155.
[26]Spinoza, *Ethics*, 307.
[27]Hampshire, *Spinoza and Spinozism*, 123.
[28]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 176.
[29]Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 178.