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Becoming For-the-Other: Through Suffering

“In the most profound sense possible, this people has a land of its own only in that it has a land that it yearns for—a holy land. And so even when it has a home, this people, in recurrent contrast to all other peoples on earth, is not allowed full possession of that home. It is only “a stranger and sojourner.”

Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* 1921

The problem upon which I focus has to do with the ongoing human cultural conditions of the movement of ethnically and religiously diverse peoples in and out of nation-states, the establishment of homes and communities as a result of such movements, and the often adverse reactions of the local population. In our modern era, those movements and reactions to those movements have become increasingly more volatile as individuals and masses of people have been forcibly moved or have chosen to move, for political, economic, or religious reasons and have been dealt with brutally. Such movements, moreover, occur for the fundamental desires of humans to lead fruitful and enjoyable lives but also to minimize the possibilities of their own suffering and tragedy and the sufferings of others.

For this presentation I refer to two philosophers from the early twentieth century in order to make a point about the relative status of strangers and sojourners, such as the Jewish People Rosenzweig has in mind in my initial quote. The problem becomes, in the case of Rosenzweig, how to evaluate the intellectual and social commitment he made to continue leading and living his life as a Jew in defiant *difference* to the dominant pan-Germanic and Christian milieu in the increasingly anti-semitic culture of Germany in the 1920s. The two philosophers whose ideas I explore, are Emmanuel Levinas, a French-Jewish philosopher, and Martin Heidegger, a German-formerly-Christian philosopher. The texts upon which I primarily draw for this reflection are Levinas' essay, “Useless Suffering” and Heidegger's early groundbreaking work, *Being and Time*.

This problematic has the subtext of a thematic on evil since additional questions arise from the original issues of exile, emigration, and assimilation. For example: How much does the kind of self-differentiation that Rosenzweig speaks of provide seeds for the sort of vilification that results in responses such as the near-total destruction of European Jews at the beginning and in the middle of the twentieth century? If thoughts like Rosenzweig's result in destruction, are they themselves evil or should we judge only the

reactive consequences of acting upon such inclinations as evil? However, and alternatively, how has his kind of self-differentiating, non-assimilationist thinking led to an ethical resistance to just those other kinds of actions which commit atrocious acts of suffering, of persecuting innocent ones? Because I am not nor could I ever become a carbon-copy of my neighbor, does my public avowal of that difference validate or justify the evil of the 'convert or perish' modes of acculturation and assimilation? How *do* we treat the "stranger and sojourner" and what do we mean by home?

Actively contributing towards or simply allowing the suffering of innocents, to whom my attention is drawn in publicly speaking of one or many of them, reveals the evil that, for Levinas, is the source of all immorality. In his essay, "Useless Suffering," Levinas argues that the "justification of the neighbor's pain is the source of all immorality" in so far as suffering is both a brute datum and a passivity. Such justification comes about through various forms, but the most insidious is the choice to act with indifference to the suffering of the other. For Levinas, such an indifference denies the vulnerability of the suffering one, a vulnerability that Levinas calls evil precisely because it's an undergoing, a radical undergoing that is an overwhelming and a rending that is violent and cruel and not merely a negation of non-freedom. In fact, all evil relates back to suffering as the *absurd* impasse of life and being and is absurdity per se.

For Levinas, suffering reveals to us the phenomenon of meaninglessness since the suffering of the innocent and vulnerable one surpasses our intellectual means of grasping and holding; it is as much beyond an Hegelian dialectic of *Begrifflichkeit* (conceptuality) as it is beyond assigning it an equipmental status in the toolbox of Heidegger's ontological workshop. However, suffering is also not susceptible to synthetic ordering of data into various schemata, i.e., it is even beyond the architectonic systematization of Kant's ethically oriented philosophy. Instead, Levinas tells us that suffering is a modality of revulsion as a denial of meaning: it is the way of not bearing and takes place as a peculiar sort of sensation, as passivity. It is important to note that such sensation, however, is precisely a sensibility that is conditioned by direct and sensual engagement in the face of the other. By *not* forcing the other into the preconceived categories of my own project I enable the possible working out of the desires and needs of that other. For Levinas, my desire is *for* the other in so far as I become responsible for the suffering of that other in this passive undergoing.

As passivity, suffering is "useless" and is heard as the moan, ache, woe of pain that *escapes* from the mentally deficient, enclosed and enveloped in their pain—a moan, ache, or woe that projects and exposes *me* to a medical, ethical *duty* that is "my duty" to respond to the sufferer's original call for aid via merciful *care* that imposes itself as the most basic and primordial task. This task is the task to *not* act in indifference or rationalization or abandonment, but to act beyond my given categories in providing an interhuman response to *in any way* alleviate the suffering of the immediate other. For Levinas, what arises as a consequence of experiencing the face of useless suffering imposes itself on *me* a *just* suffering, viz., *my* suffering for the suffering of the other. In other words, such a just suffering, as opposed to useless suffering that I encounter in the face of the other, points out the radical difference between the suffering of the other and

suffering in me—and is the only way that suffering can be meaningful. Suffering or enduring pain *for the other* is then raised to a compelling ethical principle that takes the form of shaping hopes and commanding the discipline of peoples, such as sharing wealth and coming to aid. Such suffering *for the other* is an inescapable obligation, and is so inescapable that waiting for a god in order that I might then imitate such divinely powerful action is degrading. We lower and degrade ourselves with such waiting, with waiting for a redeemer or any other to take over the responsibility which can only ever be mine in the empirical face of the immediate suffering of the other with whom I am sensually and directly engaged.

On the other hand, Heidegger's early philosophy presents us with what I call 'The Non-Suffering Mode' of being-in-the-world and, as such, promotes the inclination to respond to the kind of *difference* of a Rosenzweig that forcibly dominates the other who *stands in difference* and, thus, is an inclination that initiates evil. While the themes of home and exile are not an explicit in Heidegger's early work, we can say that the question about the meaning of Being that Heidegger raises in *Being and Time*, arises precisely out of interpreting those kinds of experiences that unsettle us out of our average everydayness, out of the routines of our accustomed ways of being-in and using the world into which we have been thrown and in which we discover ourselves. In an important way, such a disturbing out of the average everydayness and inauthenticity of our lives can be understood as promoting a kind of exile, and that, via *Angst*, we are disturbed out of the 'home' of our unexamined and relatively meaningless averageness of our everyday lives:

... uncanniness means at the same time not-being-at-home. In our first phenomenal indication of the fundamental constitution of Da-sein ... being-in was defined as dwelling with ... being familiar with This characteristic of being-in was then made more concretely visible through the everyday publicness of the they which brings tranquilized self-assurance, "being-at-home" with all its obviousness, into the average everydayness of Da-sein. *Angst*, on the other hand, fetches Da-sein back out of its entangled absorption in the "world." Everyday familiarity collapses. Da-sein is individuated, but *as* being-in-the-world. Being-in enters the existential mode: of *not-being-at-home*.¹

In fact, in evaluating the two conditions of being-at-home and of not-being-at-home, Heidegger pronounces even more assertively, "*Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon.*"² While any interpretation of Heidegger's work can never be quite definitive, what can be said in brief but convincingly clear terms about "being-at-home" is that for Heidegger, primarily out of the resources of his early work, there is no possibility of home or exile, since there is no possibility of enjoyment and pain. Without enjoyment, or having experienced the lack of enjoyment, what do I have to offer a stranger or sojourner? Referring to Heidegger in a much-quoted passage out of his own early work, *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas notes with some irony, that "Dasein is never hungry."³

Dasein is never hungry because hunger is a form of suffering. For Levinas, suffering is never merely a conceptual construct but has to do with a transitivity of living by which we are nourished or not. In fact, in so far as suffering and enjoying nourish that living, they can not be reduced to functional categories of the instrumentality of a pen or a hammer, as Levinas indicates Heidegger does. Rather, according to Levinas, those things

that exist and their very existentiality are included more fundamentally in the living that is enjoyment. So, in important ways I enjoy my daily bread and wine, but I also enjoy the work that was accomplished in order to attain that bread and wine, despite any accompanying troubles, pains, or minor sufferings. Levinas includes in such enjoyment acts of contemplation as well and any other kinds of theoretical representations in what he terms non-reflective, non-representational enjoyment. But even more than enjoying the labor by which I might not have the time to sit or stand around and enjoy things, Levinas maintains that these enjoyments oft times *mean* even more to me than my survival without them, such that occupying myself with being fed, with my nourishment, takes priority and precedence over occupying myself with the possibility of my being dead or occupying myself with death. In fact, we can say that Levinas defiantly refuses the reverence accorded to Plato's famous description of philosophers from *The Phaedo*, namely, "that those who rightly engage in philosophy practice nothing but dying and death."

Levinas questions the directionality of Heidegger's own questions, especially the resolute certainty of Heidegger's claim, that one's ownmost being-toward-death is the fundamental dispositional ground of being towards any possibility. But even more problematic for Levinas is Heidegger's insistence that his ontological project is *enough* to account for *caring* in any kind of an ethical sense that would mean more than an eternal recurrence of the will to be (including the letting-be of entities). He also questions the viciousness of Heidegger's circular logic, that the descriptive language of authenticity and inauthenticity necessarily leads to an ek-static moment of a human, as *Da-sein*, retrieving its own existence out of the self-forgetfulness of its being thrown into the everydayness of the they-self. In opposition, Levinas argues that Heidegger reduces existence to a kind of bare and lifeless state, whereas, Levinas contends that life is not naked existence and can never be—since the existence that Heidegger says is at the core of the *care* structure (*Sorge*) is necessarily an empty kind of substance. For Levinas, existence does not precede essence, *what* I do has equivalence with *that* I am. Thinking, sleeping, eating, dreaming, loving, reading and other ways that I care for existing take precedence for Levinas over care for my ownmost being, a kind of care that Levinas argues has to do with the essence of an otherwise naked *Da-sein*. Levinas connects human being's concern, my concern, for a love of life that is beyond the care of being that relies on an understanding of being or ontology. Happiness and love of life are in some important ways beyond the anonymous "there is" (*es gibt*) of Heidegger's ontology.

However, Levinas moves us beyond the simplistic happiness of enjoyment of the fulfillment of the potential of a substance, which Heidegger seems to have adopted in some way from Aristotle. For Levinas, enjoyment is not fulfillment or attainment of the goal of a substance, but rather is the enjoyment of the quality of life. What is enjoyed is not the substantial thing, but a quality, an adjective, a quality of life. In a way that can only be indicated here, Levinas' point is that in enjoyment, human being surpasses the Heideggerian categories of understanding of being by undermining the very way of being that Heidegger develops to distinguish the way of being of *Da-sein* from the way of being of the un-*Da-sein* things in the world that Heidegger (in his Hegelian overture) develops in Part I, section IV in *Being and Time*. For Levinas, I concretize my being in the world

through enjoying the eating of bread and drinking of wine, for instance, not as modes or dispositions that reveal my projective, intentional relationships based on my ownmost possibilities. Rather, I draw in a dependent way from the region that is my habitat in developing my own independent subsistence—I am always, and in all ways, constantly in tension with what I take from or give to my environment and my awareness or consciousness of the that relationship constitutes the development of my ego, not as a metaphysical substance (Aristotle), transcendent ego (Kant) or as an ontological-existential constant such as *Da-sein* (Heidegger). Rather, the kind of excellence of happiness Levinas has in mind is based on my desire that is fulfilled in happiness and that thus breaks the bond of being-in-the-world; in enjoyment, I turn my back on caring for the world.⁴

For example, Levinas contends that human beings build homes and in that way create an abode with which the cares of the world are distanced and held off through creating the conditions of separation from the material otherness of the world upon which s/he depends. By building a home, my dependence on the other in a master/slave kind of relationship is postponed since I am at once vulnerable to physical dangers and scarcity but I am also in control or master of some of those very things—I am capable of sheltering myself from threats and of achieving independence and self-possession. So, I store things up, I collect, I enjoy my possessions in my autonomy. In defending that autonomy each of us has our own mode or kind of self-defense when we self-centeredly protect ourselves from the pain of being hurt. We apologize and defend, we round up the wagons, justify the overstocking of our pantries with food and our rooms with furniture, we board up the windows and double-lock the doors. Moreover, we are not disembodied autonomous reasoning beings, definable within the Kantian limits of reason alone.⁵ Levinas also rejects Heidegger's version of decisive resolve as leading to a kind of close-mindedness. What Levinas has in mind in talking of being by oneself at home that provides a discrete or secretive existence is a kind of establishing an interiority separated and secreted from an exteriority. With such an interiority, I don't artificially draw spatial lines around ourselves, since I depend upon the hammer, boards, and nails with which we cooperate, and with which we also hold the world and others at a distance through our own ability to speak. We have a certain kind of elevation over them in our very own human constitution. I have a face-to-face relationship with other beings in the world that originates from one empirical condition and is not reducible to a metaphor, illusion or conceptual place-holder.

To concretize his position even more, Levinas uses gendered terms, such as feminine and masculine for, respectively, the word of passive welcome and the word of active command. The word of welcome is uttered from the interior of the home, symbolized by the feminine and is correspondingly the word and work of sharing—of giving the bread from one's lips to the other; while the word of command is uttered from the height of the exterior and is correspondingly the word and work of teaching and mastery. Pointing out such gendered ordering is important in order to understand the connections of what enjoyment and the home have to do with "useless suffering," the other key element, besides enjoyment, that has to do with what Levinas says about our face-to-face encounters that we have with the other. For Levinas, the face is not simply our biological face with eyes, ears, nose, and wrinkles but, rather, is the place of the history of smiles,

groans, glances, weathering, wounding—but especially of the vulnerability that leads to wounding.

The philosopher mathematician Pascal (*Pensees*, 295, 451) once wrote that the phrase “This is my place in the sun” constitutes “the beginning of the usurpation of the whole earth.” For Levinas, every appropriation of bread for my own mouth, tree that I cut down to build my own house, or any possession that I consume for the nurturance of my ownmost existence is in tension with the needs and desires of every other being. In fact, I have been thrown into this place in the sun, into this time and space, but that very thrownness includes, as well, the ongoing issue of justifying my place as more important and needful than my neighbors or, especially, more important than the stranger or orphan that stands outside the comfort of my home. For Levinas, justification comes in many forms: enlightened self-interest, the bargaining of the marketplace, pluralized greed, and any other form of rationalization of relative debts, i.e., those forms of mutual back-scratching that constitute the daily manipulations of our marketplaces. The other calls to me in need, but does so asymmetrically, that is, the other commands my attention to give without any thought of return, without any calculus of cause and effect, of putting into some kind of balance an exchange based on ‘what’s in it for me?’ The call of the other is the expression of their face lined in the event or history of suffering, most poignantly, the suffering of innocence—a kind of useless suffering that is beyond any scheme or framework of understanding and rationalization.

In fact, for Levinas (out of *Totality and Infinity*), our reasoned discussions are based on the vulnerable nudity of the face of the other, who has priority in my relating to her. In a face-to-face relation, then, in such a discourse, I am forever dependent on the other for my own significance. The transcendence of the other's face does not initiate a reciprocal balancing of obligations (an instrumental calculation), because that would justify the continuation of war and violence, and, as it did, the abyss of the annihilation of the Holocaust—the abyss of meaninglessness and evil. Rather, the transcendence of the other's face, as absolute priority, initiates shame--not a letting-be, but an irritation and restless sensibility for an unfulfilled responsibility. That means, to justify my neighbor's pain is to justify their suffering in a reasonable scheme of morality, or a justified scheme of reciprocal violence. In "Otherwise Than Being", Levinas argues even further, namely, that "I am not only responsible for the other but for the other's responsibility."⁶ Precisely Auschwitz commands us to act ethically, despite the overwhelming of human responsibility that occurred there. The asymmetrical command originating in the vulnerability of the face of the other reveals a responsibility that is without precedence (non-reciprocal; without a founding principle). Such a command calls one not only to responsibility, but to a kind of wakefulness that challenges reason at every turn, and resists any argument or morality that leads to or from Auschwitz.

In considering the conditions of emigration and exile communities, Rosenzweig stands at a particularly excruciating crossroad for us, since his choice to remain in and make his temporary ‘home’ in Germany, and to eloquently and philosophically argue for the preferability of that choice as a way to realize the potential of one variation of the community life of the Jewish People, could also be understood as a concrete variation of

diaspora existence that led to many millions of Jews remaining in harm's way, vulnerable to the onslaught of the totalitarian violence of the pan-Germanic Aryan policies of the National Socialists. In opposition to that conclusion, I contend that Rosenzweig chose encounter and engagement and the assertion of *difference* as a healthy way to promote the greater goal of the integration of communities of *difference*. It seems that the greater evil—in fact, the only real evil—is in the objectification of those communities of *difference*, of any community of *difference*, to the projects of violence and forceful utilizations of the dominant community which results in *in-difference* to suffering.

¹ *Being and Time*, 176.

² *Ibid*, 177.

³ See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 134.

⁴ For Levinas, the term for enjoyment, *bonheur*, literally translates as 'good-hour,' which takes into account both ethical and temporal dimensions of human life. With such a reference, Levinas could also be alluding to Rosenzweig's development of "The Hour" in Part III, Book 1 of *The Star of Redemption* as the period of constructed time which enables the Jewish People to eternalize their existence. For Rosenzweig, "The Hour" is also the time of terrestrial repetition marked by ritual festivals "In the service of the earth" and especially epitomized by the Sabbath. See, *The Star of Redemption*, 289-293.

⁵ Although Levinas does have Kant in mind with Kant's assertion that a pluralist community is only possible by taking into account sensibility and the affections (as with the Aesthetics).

⁶ See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117.