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REVIEW

Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (eds.), *Nietzsche and Levinas: "After the Death of a Certain God"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0231144056

Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo's editorial endeavor to bring together a compilation of articles under the rubric of the famous Nietzschean verdict of the "death of God" is a valuable one in that it allows for a novel approach to this problem. What strikes the reader as particularly interesting, however, is the decision on the part of the editors to reframe this problem in the form of a dialogue between two radically different thinkers: Nietzsche, the iconoclast, the one who sets out to destroy the last vestiges of an already decadent Western morality for an affirmation of the self against all odds. And Levinas, the thinker *par excellence* of ethics, obsessed with the other and with the sacrifice of the self for the other. The editors' choice to bring together such radically different world-views will strike the Levinas lover or Nietzschean disciple as disconcerting. Indeed, the deep differences between the two philosophers seem to exclude any form of reconciliation or dialogue.

Yet, at the same time, one wonders if it is not precisely in the confrontation of the two that philosophical progress is rendered possible. Indeed, this encounter between Levinas and Nietzsche has the potential for incredible fruitfulness and this is precisely because of their deep and irreconcilable differences. For it is in the difficult dialogue between these differences that light can be shed on the limitations in each thinker and a way can be paved, albeit through repeated confrontation, to new horizons of thinking and new approaches to the issue at hand.

The first section of the book focuses on the re-evaluation of ethics after the "death of God" and opens with an essay by Alphonso Lingis, "The Malice of Good Deeds," in which the Levinassian philosophy of generosity confronts Nietzsche's acerbic critique of pity. The Nietzschean critique of pity is interesting in that it sheds a different light on the suffering of the other as constitutive of his or her "destiny" (26) and as such, requires on the part of the self, not an attitude of compassion as Levinas would promote, but on the contrary, of non-intervention. The "malice" of compassion is disclosed here and finds itself profoundly problematized by the Nietzschean critique.

Jill Stauffer's "The Imperfect," compares the Nietzschean concept of eternal return with the Levinassian concept of recurrence, showing two different ways of responding to the inherent passivity of the human subject. Stauffer judiciously compares Nietzsche's description of human subjectivity as evicted from its comfort zone to Levinas' description of a subjectivity "ill at ease" (41) with itself, thus shedding light on an intrinsic imperfection, fracture, and

incompletion of subjectivity. Both thinkers courageously define a limit to what subjectivity can do, all the while sketching out a possible response to this passivity: a tragic self-affirmation in the case of Nietzsche, and ethical awakening in Levinas.

Jean Michel Longneaux's "Nietzsche and Levinas: The Impossible Relation" constitutes a confrontation of Levinas' description of the ethical encounter with Nietzsche's critique of the morality of *ressentiment*. Although Levinas' departure of enjoyment for ethics seems to contain traces of the morality of *ressentiment*, Longneaux shows that the alternative Nietzschean description of the self as tragic and incapable of transcending its condition contains within itself an inherent pessimism. Longneaux concludes with a number of questions addressed to both philosophers, showing that a re-evaluation of ethics on both sides is necessary.

Judith Butler's essay "Ethical Ambivalence" confronts Nietzsche's critique of Judaism as a religion of the law (and, as such, as a religion of *ressentiment*), to Levinas' reweaving of this law in his ethical philosophy. In Levinas, the law is no more a text situated outside the self but the solicitation of the human other that befalls the self with the "crushing force of the unappeasable law." (72) But this "crushing force" of the Levinassian "superegoic law" (72) must, in turn, be criticized in the light of the Nietzschean critique and give way to the interrogation of whether the impossibility of a "critical evaluation of the demand" (72) would not lead to new forms of fascism.

Claire Elise Katz's essay "Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Thus Listened the Rabbis" contrasts Zarathustra's isolationist pedagogy to that of the Talmudic rabbis, which considers the disciple as an interlocutor and equal partner in the search for truth. Katz shows that Zarathustra's isolation and his failure to communicate his philosophy lies in a lack of appreciation for what they could have brought him. This is an interesting confrontation in that it presents the Nietzschean pedagogy with a new orientation out of its aporia—that of Talmudic sages. But the dialogue between Nietzsche and Levinas remains monologic as Levinas seems to have nothing, in turn, to learn from Nietzsche.

The second section of the book focuses on a re-evaluation of the human subject after the "death of God" and opens with an essay by Bettina Bergo, "The Flesh Made Word; Or the Two Origins." This essay compares Nietzsche's understanding of the body with Levinas' embodied understanding of ethics. This comparison is judicious in that it sheds light on the Nietzschean influence on Levinas' work on the body, all the while showing how Levinas opens up new dimensions of transcendence in the Nietzschean concept of recurrence as containing the possibility of a renewed sensitivity to otherness.

Rosalyn Diprose's essay "Nietzsche, Levinas and the Meaning of Responsibility" sees Nietzsche as a precursor for Levinas' struggle against the juridico-moral model of responsibility. Diprose shows that although Nietzsche and Levinas situate responsibility outside of a code of conduct and as prone to a return to embodied subjectivity, Nietzsche's sense of responsibility crystallizes into an "imperialistic self" (126) and remains locked within the confines of subjectivity. The aporia reached by Nietzsche is however overcome by a re-thinking by Levinas of the Nietzschean embodied self as inseparable from an awakening to otherness, and in so doing opens new horizons of responsibility unanticipated by Nietzsche.

John Drabinski's "Beginning's Abyss: On Solitude in Nietzsche and Levinas" shows that the two philosophies emerge out of the same catastrophic event of the destruction of the

Western categories of thought in which subjectivity had hereto found a home. This tragic event, or "abyss," (134) explains according to Drabinski, a certain "melancholy" (135) in the thought of both philosophers. Yet at the same time, this catastrophic event opens up a horizon of new philosophical possibilities that nevertheless remain in the light of that primordial trauma, laden with the "gravity of the task of beginning." (147)

David Boothroyd's essay "Beyond Suffering I have no Alibi", compares the Levinassian and Nietzschean understandings of suffering. Although both philosophers see suffering as containing the possibility of transcendence, Nietzsche sees suffering as a way for subjectivity to elevate itself to the state of nobility—"No cruelty, no feast" (159)—whereas Levinas understands suffering as that which elevates a hereto selfish self to the height of ethics—"No suffering, no ethics." (159) In both philosophies a possible signification is given to suffering: aesthetic for Nietzsche and ethical for Levinas. These two significations do not confront each other in this essay, and one is left to wonder whether a dialogue between the cruel joy of the barbarian and the pain-ridden conscience of the Jew is possible.

Richard A. Cohen's essay "Levinas, Spinozism, Nietzsche and the Body" is interesting in that it shows essential articulations between the three thinkers in their rethinking of human subjectivity. Although Nietzsche sees in Spinoza a precursor to his thoughts on the need to free subjectivity from traditional morality, he departs from Spinoza in his emphasis on the embodied character of this liberation. Levinas follows in Nietzsche's footsteps in this recovery of the embodied character of subjectivity, but unlike Nietzsche, and this time more in tune with Spinoza, he sees this embodied subjectivity as inseparable from the good, that is, from a concern with otherness. This three-part dialogue is judicious in that it shows not only the indebtedness of each philosophy to the other, but also the new ways that each philosophy branches out of the other.

The third section re-evaluates the concept of God and opens with an essay by John Llewelyn, "Suffering Redeemable and Irredeemable," comparing Levinas' thoughts on redemption with Nietzsche's. Llewelyn shows that although both thinkers are prone to a redemption apart from any reference to God, they differ in that the Levinassian redemption stems from an awakening to the other's suffering, while the Nietzschean redemption arises from an assumption that the suffering is noble. This juxtaposition leaves one wanting an evaluation of these two understandings of redemption in each other's light, as well as wondering whether a redemption which fails to do away with the problem of suffering can be defined as such.

Aicha Liviana Messina's essay "Levinas' Gaia Scienza" highlights an obvious contrast between Levinas' and Nietzsche's understanding of the "death of God." While Nietzsche sees this death as an opportunity for the self to affirm itself and like the "lion" (205) refute all servility towards an other, Levinas sees this death as that which precisely uncovers the self's responsibility for an other. Yet, Messina judiciously uncovers beneath this obvious contrast a profound similarity between the two thinkers. Indeed, Nietzsche does not stop at the metaphor of the lion but transforms this image into that of a "child" (205) who, in its innocence, lives in a loving acceptance of all the possibilities that the future might bring in an open stance to an ungraspable otherness reminiscent of the Levinassian understanding of responsibility.

Silvia Benso's essay "Levinas: Another Ascetic Priest?" offers an excellent response to

the Nietzschean critique of Levinas' thought as a morality of resentment. Benso shows that, although the terminology of Levinas' ethical language speaks to a contraction of the self in the face of the other, it cannot be understood as promoting an ascetic ideal. Indeed, according to Benso, the Levinassian contraction of the self does not signify a denial of the self, but on the contrary, testifies to a plenitude of the self which, at the contact of the other, is transformed into a generous gift. Interestingly, this idea of an excessive generosity stemming from a wealth of the self is already attested to in Nietzsche's own understanding of the noble self, thus pointing to a possible point of reconciliation between Nietzsche's and Levinas' philosophy of the self.

Brian Schroeder's "Apocalypse, Eschatology and the Death of God," draws an interesting parallel between Levinas and Nietzsche's responses to the death of God. The two responses originally seem to point in opposite directions: the Levinassian pointing to an eschatology which, in its ethical connotation, opens up a future of unknown possibilities; the Nietzschean pointing to an apocalyptic destruction of the idols of morality. Beneath this contrast, however, Schroeder shows that the apocalyptic is not so far removed from the eschatological in that it opens upon a new orientation of the self defined as a "yes-saying" before an endless multiplicity of horizons.

This compilation of essays has made room for a renewed inquiry into the aftermath of the "death of God." The often ingenious comparisons of Levinas' and Nietzsche's philosophies have offered thought-provoking, although often divergent, treatments of this problem. In the estimation of the reader, the only drawback is the feeling that a more genuine dialogue between the two thinkers should have taken place. Instead of a juxtaposition of the two philosophies that is limited to comparing Nietzsche and Levinas, the reader would have benefited from a more genuine confrontation between the two, which might lead to a more fruitful dialogue.

But perhaps this want on the part of the reader is good. Indeed, new questions have been raised, and room has been made for two radically different thinkers to take their seats at the table. The reader has, at best, been able to hear each philosopher's views on a given subject and the essayists have succeeded in giving each a space to express himself. The final judge must then be the reader; he or she must now deepen his or her own reflection and reading of Nietzsche and/or Levinas in light of what has been written, and pave a way beyond everything that has been said.

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