Essential Vulnerabilities

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Conclusion

What does the presence of an other hold out for us? Whether it is Phaedrus, anxious about his lovers, or Sartre, ashamed before a keyhole, the stakes of this question are high. For Phaedrus, the question is whether to open himself to others or shut himself off in fear. For Sartre, the issue is whether the presence of an other is a risk to his very self, a self that is a self by making others objects. For us, the question poses a challenge to some of the dominant thought of the cultures that have shaped us. Levinas's answer to the question is that fraternity is ipseity, that I am a self by being in relation to other—but that, adding his own proviso, I relate to others while remaining my self. In fact, the self is a self by relating to others while absolving itself from the relation and remaining itself. Striking about Levinas's idea of the relation is, first, that it is a relation in which I bracket all my own interests, desires, and presuppositions in order to relate to the other as such—as the singular other before me, the person before me no matter what their properties may or may not be at any one time—and, second, that though I am constituted by the other, I retain myself in that constitution. Levinas is between Heidegger, for whom I am fundamentally in the world, and Descartes, for whom I am fundamentally turned in on my self. It is this that makes Levinas an important transitional figure between those who define us by inwardly turned subjectivity and those who make subjectivity fundamentally an artifact of something outside itself—or, to use a common set of terms, between moderns and postmoderns.

Levinas, however, as I have shown, is not alone in critiquing the self-sufficient self and creating a philosophy of the other. Plato, his frequent contrast figure in *Totality and Infinity* for his own approach to the self, is a philosopher of the other. He describes and delineates a similarly fundamental and disruptive directedness of self to other. The similarities include the figuratively violent nature of the relation of self to other, the freeing quality of being in a relation to an other, and the fundamental vulnerability we experience in being in such a relation. In addition, their philosophies of the other each include a movement from disruption to service, from simple to complex freedom, and from personal desire to the active promotion of the futures of others.
With these similarities noted, the differences in each philosopher’s view of the nature of relations to others stand out. In fact, one of the goals of this book has been to make them stand out and, in so doing, to alter how we see Levinas in the history of thought and how we understand what is most unique about him, and as well to open our minds to the idea that there is more than one fundamental way to be for or be affected by the other. Levinas is preceded by Plato, among others, in seeing self as fundamentally, metaphysically in relation to other. Levinas, then, is one of a number of twentieth-century philosophers to turn to premodern thought for a critique of the self-directed self found in Enlightenment thought, based in part on his acceptance of a fundamentally Enlightenment, as well as phenomenological, idea of the active aspects of knowing. But the premodern sources to which Levinas turns lead him to a strikingly different understanding of being for the other, as different from Plato’s as the new is from the eternal, as glory is from beauty, and as relating to someone as singular is from the responsive beholding of that other’s qualities. Two very different kinds of response. Two very different kinds of philosophy of the other. Each with its own importance, and each with its own very specific, and lasting, appeal.