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Book review: Levinas's ethical politics, by Michael L. Morgan

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Simon Glendinning

Emmanuel Levinas is best known for thinking a certain primacy of the ethical in human life, where the ethical is not a matter of a specific morality but of an originary relation to an other person as wholly other, an other with respect to whom one finds oneself bearing infinite responsibility. This is what is revealed in what Levinas calls the revelation of the “face” (not just the countenance) of the other. Unsurprisingly, the possibility of a distinctively Levinasian politics has often been discussed, although Levinas himself did not spell out in a general way how his ethical starting point might have political consequences or implications. The question of whether we can elaborate a consistently Levinasian “ethical politics” from the various texts in which he does discuss political issues is the primary theme of Michael L. Morgan’s fascinating study.

At the end of his long, rich and detailed investigation of the political aspects of Levinas’s ethical thought Morgan turns to explore a sequence of criticisms of Levinas as a political thinker by Simon Critchley, Howard Caygill, Judith Butler, and Gillian Rose. At this point the tone of the book alters dramatically. From a modest and generous reading of Levinas, Morgan becomes sharply critical – if still generous. Critchley’s reading is, Morgan argues, “seriously mistaken”, systematically confusing culturally and historically conditioned relations to others (call this the relation to “political others”) with the ethically unconditional relation to the other revealed as a “face” facing me. According to Morgan, the latter relation (call this the relation to “ethical others”) subtends the former as a quasi-transcendental condition, an original revelation of the alterity of the other which “occurs to us all” as a structural feature of our everyday social lives, including our political lives (315). In the case of relations to “political others” our responsibilities are marked by all sorts of trade-offs, calculations of fairness, judgements of priority, and the weighing of degrees of responsibility in particular situations where individuals, groups and communities vie for consideration with multiple others. In the case of relations to ethical others we find ourselves in an encounter with the “face” of a singular other which exposes us to an irrecusably infinite responsibility, where we will have never done enough.

It is this distinction between types of relation to others, ethical and political, that, according to Morgan, Critchley systematically fails to respect. Moreover, Critchley’s specific objections to Levinas do not pertain to problems internal to Levinas’s thought, but derive from substantive political differences that arise from “Critchley’s own interpretation” of nation-state politics, and “his own moral and political position” on various topics, views which he imports from outside his reading (or misreading) of Levinas (311). Caygill is shown to be confused on the same basic conceptual point, being unwilling to “follow up on the clarity of the distinction” that Levinas insists on between political others and ethical others (318), and again Caygill’s specific objections are shown to flow from Caygill’s own “very partisan” judgements about politics (316). Similarly, where Butler finds tensions and paradoxes in Levinas’s political ethics, “she can only do so by ignoring the distinction between the everyday experience of the other person and the face-to-face as a transcendental-like structural relation”, and again her criticisms, which “confuse or ignore” that distinction (334), derive not from tensions or paradoxes internal to Levinas account but her own “independent” political judgements (327). The lesson is clear: to understand Levinas “one must not confuse the ‘ethical other’ with the ‘political other’” (339) – and all of these readers do, with their own political preferences leading the way. Rose is found even more wanting: it is not a question of confusing

ethical and political relations to others but denying altogether that Levinasian ethics even has a political dimension, a view with which Morgan disagrees “completely” (350).

All this comes at the end of the book, and is rapidly dealt with. Morgan runs through but does not attempt to correct the various confusions and misreadings of Levinas he identifies in these authors, since presenting Levinas’s views is what the whole book has attempted to do: “we have said enough about these matters” (313). Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel a bit of a whimper in the finale’s bang, since it does not end with a corrected understanding but with the defects of those caught up so consistently in confusions of their own making. Morgan must have thought hard about how to order his exposition: after an overview he begins with abstract ethical theory, and then passes to politics. And there is a sense that the book’s closing coup de grâce against Levinas’s critics draws this all together. But it does leave one wondering what it would look like to think clearly and without confusion about the relation between ethics and politics. At least a summary answer to this question would have rounded off the book in a more satisfying way for the reader.

Perhaps, however, the question simply defies a summary answer. Perhaps. But Morgan does offer at least the beginning of such a response when he states in his reading of Critchley’s confusions that “Critchley takes the relation between ethics and politics to be critical rather than constructive” (306). The point here is that insofar as Critchley manages not to confuse ethical others and political others, the former is, for him, the theme of thinking that intervenes in politics in order to prevent politics “becoming tyrannical”, something always needed when, as Critchley puts it, “politics is left to itself” (312). Ethical critique is thus understood as a “metapolitical disturbance” of politics, it comes from the interstices of society and politics: it aims to disrupt politics, which would otherwise “close over in itself” (312). For Morgan, and I think he is right about this, politics never has this kind of autonomy for Levinas, even when one thinks it most deserves the kind of “robust, vigilant and radical critique” that Critchley advocates (311). Moreover, thinking that it deserves such a critique is not a merely ethical intervention either: thinking that a political set-up deserves robust critique is itself a situated political judgement, and subject to the ordinary kinds of political objections to such judgements. Political judgements are not independent of how one conceives the relation of politics to ethics, and one’s ethics will be drawn on in one’s political judgements too.

So what is the relation between ethics and politics for Levinas? Morgan hints that when ethics and politics are construed along faithfully Levinasian lines, where the distinction between ethical others and political others is rigorously respected, it should be conceived as “constructive”: ethics does not come in from the outside to politics, on the contrary politics is “itself” (and always is) *what we are doing* when we attempt to organise a response to the ethical other. The central lesson of the Levinasian view is, that is to say, a conception of politics as having an ethical foundations, and hence a sense that what grounds and motivates political institutions and particular policies concerned with equality, reciprocity, and the making of political priorities – the infinite responsibility we each have for every other – will, in practice, always be *limited* in the effort to organise a response to the ethical demand that simultaneously recognises that such responsibility is due to all. On this view, the rule of law, the rights of man, and a democracy where each one counts as “the same”, all have their “source” not in the need to overcome or limit political tyranny or the war of all against all, but as a “constructive” enterprise in which a society attempts to do justice (politically) to what calls for infinite responsibility (ethically).

Politics is the effort to attain a just way to calculate with the incalculable. That is what a state is, for example. A state is more or less just depending on how well or badly its treatment of political others approximates to what can never be attained: infinite responsibility for the other. Attempting to make a just society is, as Morgan puts, “always a second best” in relation to our infinite responsibilities one to another, but since it is also “the best we can do”, nothing could be better (80).

Conceiving and constructing institutions and policies that respond best to the infinite demand of the ethical other belongs to a critical politics inspired by Levinasian ethics. Morgan does an excellent job trying to show that institutions which are liberal and democratic are, for us here and now, most fit for purpose in this respect, because they are institutions where the attempt to acknowledge that each one is wholly other is most closely approximated: we acknowledge that each one is incomparable by affirming that each one counts the same as every other, and each one counts as one.

Calculating with the incalculable is, for Morgan, the concrete task of politics, and as he works his way through Levinas’s most political texts, he makes every effort to read them as judgements made “in behalf” of Levinasian ethics. The most fascinating and controversial parts of the book concern Levinas’s remarks on the distinctive state that is the state of Israel. He finds that Levinas consistently “supports the Zionist idea and is disturbed by the current realities in Israel” (322). It is perhaps no surprise that the theme that dominates the readings of Levinas’s politics which are most critical – the very readings of Critchley *et. al.* that Morgan takes issue with at the end of his book – is Israel. The politically “weight-bearing” dimensions of the criticisms of Levinas that Morgan identifies in their readings are, as he stresses, all brought in from outside the Levinasian text and its logic. They are also, one and all, caught up in radical opposition to the current realities, indeed the very existence, of Israel too; and Levinas is found to be too apologetic, too uncritical of Israeli state violence against the Palestinians. But now, in engaging in this way with Levinas’s thought what his critics are really doing is trading political judgements with and against Levinas (and of course one can do that); they are not interested in how Levinas might have come to his judgements on the ground of his ethics of infinite responsibility, and when they do discuss his ethics (usually to turn it against him) they do so only by seriously misreading him as speaking about political responsibility. Morgan, by contrast, although also undeniably disturbed by current Israeli politics, goes as far as he can to work out what the state of Israel means for a Levinasian ethical politics, and to think the tasks, risks and tragedies of the contemporary Jewish state both in and after Levinas. This is not uncritical – but it certainly is constructive.