

Elise Claire Katz

Levinas, Judaism, and the feminine: The silent footsteps of Rebecca

BLOOMINGTON: INDIANNA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003

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ISBN: X

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Both Emmanuel Levinas and Simone de Beauvoir break with the traditional pretense of Western philosophy that gender is irrelevant to theory. For both thinkers, gender plays a central role in understanding how thought works, what ethics is, and how best to understand human life. In Beauvoir's case, this centrality of gender is not completely surprising—as a woman she found numerous ways in which gender forced her to think and analyze differently than did her male colleagues, and her analysis of this in the Introduction to the *Second Sex* remains one of the key texts in contemporary feminist theorizing about gender. Levinas, on the other hand, poses a less obvious case of a thinker we might expect to pay attention to gender. He is a he, not a she, and a he from a patriarchal religious tradition. He works within the framework of a tradition of philosophy that has tended to set aside questions of personal particularity. Hannah Arendt, for example, trained in much the same way, almost completely excludes consideration of gender from her philosophical structure in *The Human Condition*. The ability to see gender as philosophically relevant, then, marks Levinas as significantly different in an important way

But merely attending to gender is not enough to make a thinker helpful from a feminist perspective. Schopenhauer attended to gender, we might note, and produced vicious misogynist screeds. What we also need to know is how gender operates in a thinker's analysis, what picture of gender provides the structure for his thought, and in what ways that picture might hinder or help women's political aims, might support or detract from women's theorizing.

Answers to this question in the case of Levinas have been sketchy and somewhat varied, so this new book by Claire Elise Katz fulfills an important purpose in contemporary philosophical thought. Katz analyzes Levinas' discussions of gender with a deep and thorough knowledge of his philosophical development, the connections between his philosophical writings and his theological thought, and the ways in which his changing views on ethics are interrelated with changes in his account of gender.

Ethics, for Levinas, deals first and foremost with the other, with alterity, with non-identity. Insofar as Levinas also adopts a picture of femininity that makes it one paradigm for otherness, the feminine should, it seems, occupy a central place in his ethical thought, and Levinas does analyze the feminine in his discussion of ethics. Paradoxically, however, while Levinas' early thought provides a central place for the feminine, that place is outside of ethics, as the transcendental ground of the possibility of ethics. Katz notes that this is a place that may be less than satisfactory from the standpoint of a woman who would like to be considered a moral agent

rather than a passive, silent backdrop against which ethical actions occur. Of course, in saying this, I am conflating the feminine, as an idea or category, with women, a problematic move. It is a move that Levinas himself makes on occasion, as Katz demonstrates, as when his discussion in *Time and the Other* slips from the feminine to women in a way which does not seem conscious or intentional.

Katz's thesis, however, is that as Levinas' thought develops he moves toward a more concrete notion of the feminine and of women, both. This occurs in conjunction with the move in his philosophical thought toward a more explicitly theological focus. His later analysis of gender and of ethics, both, become informed in crucial ways by the lives and actions of concrete women. These women are specifically the women found in the Scriptural narratives, the narratives of the creation of Eve and Adam, of Ruth and Naomi, of Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Rebecca. In Levinas' philosophical development from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise Than Being*, Katz argues, he moves away from a carefully neutral philosophical style toward a philosophy that draws more heavily on Jewish theological sources, and as he does so his theorizing of the feminine becomes less abstract and more focused on the complexities and realities of real women's roles and actions.

Katz develops Levinas' thought carefully and in depth, noting the criticisms others have made of his work (Tina Chanter, Luce Irigaray) and the dangers inherent in some of his descriptive language and metaphorical association of ethics with the feminine. Katz examines Levinas' earlier thought quite carefully, particularly the discussions of the feminine in *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*. These two works, Katz argues, set the stage for the treatment of sexual difference in Levinas' thought, and can only be properly understood against the backdrop of the midrashic discussions of the Genesis story of creation. These Genesis commentaries provide the context for understanding sexual differentiation in ways that are not limited by Greek understandings of the feminine as lack or defect in comparison with the masculine. The feminine, instead, in the Jewish readings that Katz cites, is symbolic of alterity, certainly, but it is a positive alterity. Genesis offers a view of undifferentiated humanity that only becomes fully human after sexual differentiation. This implies that the masculine is not the perfection of human nature, confronted with a lesser, defective human in the feminine, but instead that there is no fullness of humanity at all without sexual differentiation.

This understanding of the feminine can be read in a very positive way, but it also has some negatives. While the feminine on this view is a positive quality rather than a negative quality, it is also a picture of the feminine that falls back into many of the hoary old tropes of woman as mystery, woman as hidden, woman as symbolic of withdrawal from sight. These aspects of the myth of the feminine appear in Levinas, in some cases re-interpreted in interesting ways, in other cases more problematically. Katz notes the ways that Levinas' thought is sometimes in conflict with itself here, as when he rejects the notion that the face (our perception of the fundamental humanity of the other) is not sexed while still assuming that subjectivity is a masculine trait, and that femininity exists to provide a hospitable ground for the development of that subjectivity.

As Levinas' thought develops, he moves away from the tropes of woman as mystery, as background, as hospitality, and begins instead to draw more heavily on the language of maternity as paradigmatic of ethics. This move brings with it both important resources and problematic

implications. The dangers are well known to feminist theorists: the valorizing of women's self-sacrifice, the silencing of women whose lives are not defined by motherhood, and so on. Katz is well aware of the dangers here. But she is also aware of the importance of two aspects of Levinas' feminized ethics. The first is that an ethic that holds up maternal ethics as a model for both men and women is an ethic that acknowledges the centrality of the feminine to human life. When we note the dangers of feminine stereotypes, Katz notes, "we should be careful not to fall into the trap of disparaging the feminine—thus, implying that not only is it bad for men to be like women, it is bad for women to be like women (152)."

A second important aspect of Levinas' treatment of the feminine nature of ethics, according to Katz, is the way that it celebrates life, nurturance, and creation in contrast with the virile ethics of death, aggression, and control. And again, though there is undoubtedly a risk in using terms such as feminine and virility as quasi-essentialist descriptors of ethical perspectives, that risk may be countered by the fact that the feminine ethics is held up as an ideal for all humans. Katz is careful to note both the dangers and the important resources of this move in Levinas' thought.

While reading this book for review I was struck, once again, by the ease with which women and issues of gender are erased from contemporary philosophical discourse. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Levinas' appropriation of the feminine as the lens through which he analyzes ethics, Katz's analysis provides a compelling argument that one cannot understand Levinas in any adequate sense without attending to his use of the notion of the feminine. Yet one would hardly guess that the feminine plays such a central role in Levinas' thought from reading many scholarly discussions of Levinas, nor from conference discussions of his view. It is as if discussing the feminine is somehow a bit suspect, not really appropriate, perhaps an aspect of Levinas' thought that is best kept off to the side and out of view. Which makes about as much sense as trying to understand John Rawls without ever examining the way he defines reason. In any case, Katz's book provides a definitive counter to this tendency, and a careful scholarly analysis of the place and development of the feminine in Levinas' thought.

As is often the case with Levinas studies, this book is not easy reading, though it is far less jargon ridden than some Levinas scholarship. It might be useful for an advanced undergraduate audience, but it is primarily appropriate for graduate-level readers and beyond.

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