Review essay

Outside the Subject

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The common element of a post-modernist view of selfhood is that the self, like the rest of the world, has no reference point, and must be regarded as having melted away. As C.S. Lewis (1952:10) quipped, "the Subject is as empty as the Object." When the subject is "de-centered", no longer an origin or a source, it becomes only the contingent result or product of multiple social and psychological forces. In this view, the unity of the self was at best a deceptive construction, and its very authenticity has been fundamentally challenged. From this post-structuralist perspective, the self should more appropriately be viewed as a contingency or an interpretive scheme, for any structure that would organize the self crumbles when we recognize that no part can assume participation outside its relation to other parts. In other words, there is no center, no organizing principle privileged over structure, and thus able to dominate its structural domain. In this scenario, the phenomenological insistence on the self's dependence on the other has been radically challenged: Not only has the self's autonomy been rendered meaningless, any construction of the self is regarded as arbitrary.

Emmanuel Levinas challenges this view. Although often regarded as a post-modernist, he holds steadfast to an orienting perspective by which the self may be actualized and defined. His perspective commands increasing attention in France, and, as evidenced by growing critical writings by American and English commentators, Levinas may well become the dominant voice of post-post-structuralism. This collection of fourteen essays (originally published in 1987), includes pieces written as early as 1949, but despite this forty year span, the anthology is thematically consistent and contains useful comment to situate Levinas with contemporary philosophers (e.g., Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Jean Wahl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty among others) who share an approach to an "intelligibility outside the objectifying sub-
ject” (Levinas, 1993:2). Levinas has been regarded as a direct heir of religious existentialists, so this volume is a valuable assembly for English readers of Levinas’s own perspective on how he regards his intellectual indebtedness to these philosophers.

But there is a caveat: This anthology is likely to be unintelligible to the reader not acquainted with the broad outlines of Levinas’s thought. It is a mark of his general standing that such a collection would be published, for there are only a few items that may be viewed as fully developed essays. Nevertheless, the themes explored here concerning Jewish philosophy (especially those of Rosenzweig and Buber), and the phenomenological orientation assumed by Levinas in relation to his philosophical peers are illuminating. But in a final assessment, this anthology is not a suitable introduction to Levinas’s work, and therefore the book will appeal primarily to those already interested by prior exposure to his writings. (Several anthologies of his work are available in English, as well as his major treatises, Totality and Infinity [1961] and Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence [1974].)

Assuming the reader does not have that experience, I will first offer a general introduction to his work, before making some specific remarks regarding some of the essays collected here.

Levinas is fundamentally an existential phenomenologist, and it is in the framework of an ontological inquiry that his argument is structured. His thought is heavily indebted to Husserl’s phenomenological analyses, where the attempt to examine how phenomena appear in our consciousness, to grasp our lived experience, regulates Levinas’s own approach. The self must detach itself from being and thereby discover its alterity, its otherness, and thus itself. A primitive consciousness does not “think,” but “lives” non-reflectively. Thought begins with a reflection on this primordial consciousness, and in thought the outside world then exists as non-self. Thought represents to itself what is extrinsic to it and thus perception and appropriation is defined by this self-consciousness. Alterity is established only in the nonreciprocity of relation. In the radical separation and relationship with the other (produced simultaneously), the subject becomes a “host”, a true self. The title of this book derives from this reiterated theme found throughout Levinas’s opus, namely from an order higher than knowing - outside the subject - the human is touched, and elected by an indiscernable logic, to be responsible for another. It is this ethical dimension that separates Levinas from Husserl, and it is the issue that most clearly articulates the differences from other twentieth century philosophies. I will return to this point.

The genealogy of Levinas’s position is built from nineteenth century formulations of a dialectical self. Beginning with Hegel, but most clearly articulated with Nietzsche, the sovereign subject relates only to that which it constructs or confronts. The realization of the self is determined in a com-