
I am willing to grant Derrida’s claim that it would be essentially impossible for a woman to have written Totality and Infinity; and I would like to think that Claire Katz has achieved something in her book that approaches to the impossibility of a man as author, something about maternity and about how a woman reads Levinas. The orientation we take in our very particularity, in our bodies, opens directly into our thinking. Philosophy dare not be merely a rash of indexicals jabbing away at this, here, me – but as it opens to a more general realm, and to one of reasoning, it must still negotiate with the specificity of the one thinking, writing, or speaking. Feminist philosophy, at least as much as Levinas, attends to the voice and to the gender of the thinker.

Derrida also interrogates the other mark of particularity that sets Levinas aside: that he is Jewish. The ultimate comment in “Violence and Metaphysics” is that citation from James Joyce that contests the separation of Greek and Hebrew that articulates Levinas’ publications. “Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.” If only a man could write Totality and Infinity, is it only a Jew who could write it, too? Or is Derrida asking whether there is at all ‘only a Jew’, or must every Jew now be a greekjew – and of course the inverse: is every greek a jewgreek?

Let us shift the focus from the question of who is Jewish to the intellectual traditions that flow into Levinas’ thought. Only someone who is willing to explore the Biblical and Rabbinic traditions is able to write what he has written, and in this respect, only someone who learns as Katz has, from this tradition could write as she writes. The specificity here, for the sake of some simplicity, is not existential, not about one’s practice, or one’s beliefs, but about one’s study and willingness to learn from a specific tradition of literary sources (and practices), marked with a positivity that makes many philosophers uncomfortable. Here philosophy turns on one’s intellectual traditions, what some misleadingly would call background, and the question is whether philosophy as a discourse escapes from the heritage of its traditions and resources – in their specificity. We can easily imagine a philosophical project that frames its concepts and even its logic on a specifically Christian tradition. Similarly on an Islamic one. Or a Confucian one. And we can also imagine someone drawing upon a tradition of Marxist-Leninist thought and practice. Perhaps even on the phenomenological tradition. As a rule, these traditions internally pursue reasoning and claim often enough a kind of universality,
but intellectual traditions more or less also insist on historical positivity and linguistic and cultural specificity.

For some philosophers, the threat of dissolving reason into virtually unlimited sets of discourses, ways of reasoning, idiosyncratic authorities and so on is the hallmark of postmodernism. For some, there is only one kind of reason, one kind of truth, and any vestige of the specificity of an intellectual tradition (other than something that can be safely called capital-P Philosophy) is a lack of philosophical reason or integrity. Levinas disrupts their fears and certainty, for he does not delight in particularity, does not abandon truth, reason, even totality. Levinas remains a philosopher, but he asks us to think harder about our own specificity, and indeed, about his, to recognize that philosophy could be altered enough to think with particularity and not assimilate what is other into a rational totality.

The genius of Katz’ book is that she leads us, as philosophers, to investigate and to learn from the dimensions of specificity in Levinas’ work. Not only is this key to her strong and important re-reading of Levinas, but it also has much to teach us about gender and responsibility: and, moreover, it also leads us to the much harder to grasp practice of thinking with the specificity of Jewish figures from the Bible, especially women figures. No one else has tried to read these Biblical figures of women philosophically. Philosophy has had its own share of difficulty thinking of women; and philosophy has had its own kind of problems thinking of Biblical men; but while literary theorists, feminists and theologians have written elegantly about the Biblical figures of women, the philosophers have not even tried. Katz’ result is elegant and important, and the concerns with particularities have motivated its unique form of argument.

Katz’ book is organized around a series of chapters that focus on specific Biblical figures. There are chapters on Abraham, and on Sarah, on Eve, and on Ruth, on Cain, and on Rebecca, as well as a key chapter on the work of Creation. Those chapters are not theological or literary in the first instance, not devoted to the history of Jewish interpretation or to current accounts by feminists and others – although the chapters do include such elements and displays a remarkable ability to learn from a wide range of intellectual disciplines. First and foremost these chapters address philosophical themes. The themes are key to interpreting ethics, especially Levinas’, but also to exposing the gender involvements in his ethics. Thus the relation of virility and the role of maternity emerge in relation to specific characters, but also for the sake of a philosophical discussion about self-reliance and about suffering for the sake of another person. The Biblical figures then appear as something more than examples, but something less than moral ideals. For the morality they indicate appears in Levinas and in Katz as philosophical, and so produces a discourse that is truly general and universally accessible.