

“On the Brink of Tears and Laughter”

Joy and Suffering in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas

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Abstract

The idea of enjoyment (*jouissance*), of “life as love of life,” is a crucial preconditional aspect in Levinas’s ethical thought. The self takes satisfaction in its own being by consuming the outside world through enjoyment, through making the Other into the Same. For Levinas, however, it is the face of the other person that interrupts my enjoyment and calls me to responsibility: “one has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it.” My enjoyment thereby becomes meaningful in the other.

Levinas also attempts to “envisage suffering . . . in the inter-human perspective - that is, as meaningful in me, useless in the Other.” In the context of his philosophical project, this move is necessary, lest my suffering become an alibi for the suspension of my responsibility, and lest one see the Other’s suffering as theodicy, as part of God’s plan. Unlike enjoyment, my suffering, “at the limit of its ‘usefulness,’” is precisely that which “does not fit in me.” This idea of an outside that cannot be assimilated and that instead assimilates or changes me is the essence of revelation. Nevertheless, Levinas does not address the fact that personal, even expiatory, suffering may often have more problematic interpersonal dimensions.

Introduction

[1] Ethics relies on pleasing the other. But while it is easy to talk about the pleasure, the feelings, of the other in a radical “ethics of sobriety” such as that of Emmanuel Levinas, it is more difficult to find a place for *my* feelings, the feelings of the ethical subject. After all, are not my feelings irrelevant? Are not affective states fundamentally self-absorbing or distracting in a way that neglects the other? And yet, if it is vital for my ethics to address the other’s feelings, does this not mean that feelings in general are an inescapable part of ethical subjectivity? If the other’s feelings are necessary, does that mean that mine might be as well? If so, which of my feelings are ethically necessary, and which are mere by-products of ethical activity? This essay will address such questions by tracing the progression through three basic affective states - enjoyment, suffering, and joy - in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, arguably the most important religious ethical philosopher of the last 15 years.

Enjoyment

[2] The idea of enjoyment (*jouissance*), or, as Levinas calls it, “life as love of life,” is a crucial preconditional element in his ethical thought. Enjoyment is the self’s primordial relation to the world. One can put it this way: before I digest a piece of fruit and convert it into fuel, I *enjoy* it. The self takes satisfaction in its own being by consuming the outside world through making the Other into the Same. The enjoyable is that which *fits in me* - both literally (food and drink) and figuratively (by way of sensory and cognitive nourishment, such as spectacles, puppy dogs,

good acquaintances, and so on). This notion of enjoyment-as-assimilation may not be terribly original; still, it is a rather graceful phenomenological simplification.

[3] For Levinas, however, this simplification lends flesh to his ethical argument, given that he holds that it is the face of the other person that *interrupts* my enjoyment and calls me to non-reciprocal responsibility. As Levinas says in *Otherwise than Being*, “one has to first enjoy one’s bread, not in order to have the merit of giving it, but in order to give it with one’s heart, to give oneself in giving it” (1981: 72). Here, generosity is no longer just a materially quantifiable activity. There is no generosity involved in gassing up a car, even if it is a 1967 Mustang. When feeding the hungry, one must give away one’s enjoyment of bread and not just the bread itself. My enjoyment thereby becomes meaningful in the other.

[4] If true generosity is a giving away of my own enjoyment to another, that means that suffering is always somewhere in the picture. As Levinas goes on to say:

Before any reflection, any return upon oneself, enjoyment is an enjoying of enjoyment, always wanting with regard to itself, filling itself with these lacks for which contentment is promised, satisfying itself already with this impatient process of satisfaction, enjoying its own appetite. . . . Without [this] egoism, complacent in itself, suffering would not have any sense. It would lose the passivity of patience, if it were not at every moment an over-flowing of sense by non-sense. . . . But giving has meaning only as a tearing away from oneself despite oneself. . . . And to be torn from oneself despite oneself has meaning only as a being-torn-from the complacency in oneself characteristic of enjoyment, snatching the bread from one’s mouth. Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify. Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood (1981: 73-74).

Levinas seems to place enjoyment on the level of obligation, if only indirectly. And I hope this move does not have much to do with what my elementary school teacher once did during a classroom birthday party, when she commanded us to “sit down, shut up, and have fun!” In any case, such sentiment finds precedence in Halakhah (Jewish law), specifically in the commandment that requires one to bring joy to the bride and groom, not to mention the requirement to enjoy the feast of Purim - when observant Jews feed the poor (as part of *sholoch malos*) and then, later that night, are obliged to drink so much that they “could not tell Mordechai from Haman.”

[5] David Goicoechea locates this almost genealogical relationship between enjoyment and suffering in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*. Goicoechea sums it up this way: “It is in enjoyment that one grows as a healthy and robust egoist. It is through the sorrow in the look of the other that one matures into the realm of conscience and moral responsibility to the other” (102). And it is the other’s sorrow that brings us to the second part of this essay.

Suffering

[6] Levinas goes so far as to include my suffering as an extension or genre of my passive subjectivity (indeed, “subjection”). In *Otherwise than Being*, the best example of my suffering as passive subjectivity is maternity:

Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted but a modification of maternity, the groaning of the wounded entrails by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is a responsibility for others, to the point of substitution for others and suffering both from the effect of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor (1981: 75).

Along the same lines, Goicoechea, though he does not discuss Levinas's idea of maternity, points out a correlation between *Totality and Infinity* and "The Intoxicated Song" at the end of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*:

"I want heirs," thus speaks everything that suffers, "I want children, I do not want myself."

Joy, however, does not want heirs or children, joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same (Nietzsche in Goicoechea: 110).

But where Nietzsche finds an expansively affirmative ethics in this kind of joyful wisdom, Levinas sees a contraction, an inward spiral, deaf to the world. For Levinas, morality begins when the other's sorrow displaces this joyous withdrawal.

[7] Levinas's views on suffering can be traced to the Hebrew prophetic tradition, in which the prophets rebuked the wealthy and powerful for their indifference to or mistreatment of the weak and poor. Goicoechea writes, "The Hebrew people were stiff necked in their quest for enjoyment, but the prophets had one purpose and that was to check them in their willfulness. . . . [And] just as the prophets revealed the face of suffering to check Hebrew willfulness, so the philosophers revealed the truth in order to check Greek folly" (111).

[8] But it is precisely with this philosophical recourse to the Universal that Levinas takes issue in an essay entitled "Useless Suffering." (And, in some ways, Nietzsche's joyful wisdom, in its desire to envelope and transform the other's suffering by connecting it with joy, is indeed an example of this Greek recourse.) Instead, Levinas's essay attempts, in his words, to "envisage suffering . . . in the inter-human perspective - that is, as meaningful in me, useless in the Other" (1988: 164). In the context of Levinas's ethical thought, this is a necessary move, lest my suffering become an alibi for the suspension of my responsibility, and lest one dare see the Other's suffering as theodicy, part of God's plan, or as one of the broken eggs that makes up the omelet of the social contract - which Levinas views as a secular Western extension of what he calls "the temptation of theodicy." Levinas, echoing Emil Fackenheim, notes that, if there is any lesson to be drawn from the Holocaust, it is about the absolute "disproportion between suffering and every theodicy" (1988: 164).

[9] In other words, by "the inter-human perspective" Levinas does not mean divine, natural, or historical providence, nor does he mean the social contract, and certainly not abstract Nietzschean joy. He thinks it is deeply unethical to behave in the manner of Job's friends, or like the Czar's mother who visits a field hospital and says to the dying soldier, "You must be very happy to give your life for our country." And even if "virtue is its own reward, I can only say so for myself; as soon as I make this a standard for the other I exploit him, for what I am then saying is: be virtuous towards me" (Levinas in Kearney: 67).

[10] For Levinas, “the inter-human perspective” means that I do not remain trapped in suffering as long as I have access to another person. We are asked to “consider the ‘pain-illnesses’ of beings who are psychologically deprived, retarded, impoverished in their social life and impaired in their relation to the other person - that relation in which suffering, without losing any of its malignancy, no longer eclipses the totality of the mental and moves into a new light, within new horizons” (1988: 158). That is, exteriority promises salvation. The model here is what Levinas calls “the anthropological category of the medical, a category that is primordial, irreducible and ethical. . . . For pure suffering, which is intrinsically senseless and condemned to itself with no way out, a beyond appears in the form of the interhuman” (1988: 158). To illustrate his point, Levinas footnotes the following Talmudic dialogue from Berakhot (5b):

Rav Hiyya bar Abba falls ill and Rav Yohanan comes to visit him. He asks him: “Are your sufferings fitting to you?” [Rav Hiyya replies,] “Neither they nor the compensations they promise.” “Give me your hand,” the visitor of the ailing man then says. And the visitor lifts the ailing man from his couch. But then Rav Yohanan himself falls ill and is visited by Rav Hanina. Same question: “Are your sufferings fitting to you?” Same response: “Neither they nor the compensations they promise.” “Give me your hand,” says Rav Hanina, and he lifts Rav Yohanan from his couch. Question: Could not Rav Yohanan lift himself by himself? Answer: The prisoner could not break free from his confinement by himself (quoted in 1988: 166 note).

It is interesting that Rav Yohanan is helped not by Rav Hiyya, whom he had recently cured, but by Rav Hanina, a third person: in other words, moral reciprocity is not what is being stressed. The obligation to free the patient from the prison of illness is not contractual, but situational. This is not “I scratch your back, you scratch mine.” It seems evident why this dialogue appealed to Levinas, who saw moral reciprocity as being strictly the other’s business.

[11] At this point, however, it is important to note that, according to Levinas, there is a “radical difference between the *suffering in the other*, (where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me), and suffering in *me*, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may) of someone else” (1988: 158). He elaborates on this theme in a footnote, in which he says that it is as “suffering *in me* and not as suffering in general, that *welcome* suffering . . . can signify a true idea: the expiatory suffering of the just who suffers for others, the suffering that illuminates, the suffering that is sought after by Dostoevsky’s characters . . . , of the ‘I am love-sick’ of the Song of Songs, of the sufferings about which certain talmudic texts speak and which they name ‘yissurim shel ahavah,’ sufferings through love, to which is joined the theme of expiation for others.” Furthermore, my suffering, “at the limit of ‘its usefulness,’” is that which “‘does not fit in me’” (1988: 166 note); and in a way, this idea is at the heart of revelation, that is, an exteriority that cannot be assimilated and instead assimilates me or, more precisely, changes me.

[12] However, there is at least one problem with this notion of seeking out “personal suffering that illuminates,” a problem Levinas does not discuss. Let us look briefly at one of the examples he uses: I would argue that, in general, the “suffering . . . sought after by Dostoevsky’s characters” is usually achieved by making others suffer first. Theirs is seldom the “expiatory suffering of the just suffering for others.” They torment themselves by hurting others in order to

feel violent shame. Raskolnikov's transgression and redemption make for an obvious case, but then so does Zosima's conversion from callow hussar to pious monk after he beats his defenseless manservant Afanasy. Even Prince Myshkin, in *The Idiot*, who does not actively seek suffering and humiliation but rather seems to fall into both, arrives at disaster in his quixotic and naïve quest to be impartially generous to all: Aglaya is crushed, Nastasya is murdered by Rogozhin, Myshkin himself relapses into autism. Indeed, my suffering, even if it is the result of well-intentioned moral risk-taking, is seldom just my own affair.

[13] The best illustration of this dynamic connection between my suffering and that of the other occurs in *The Brothers Karamazov*, when Alyosha seeks suffering after his mentor Zosima's death by going to Grushenka, thereby making ungenerous assumptions about her. Grushenka, in turn, had been planning to debase herself by corrupting Alyosha. But once she learns of the Elder's death, she is mortified and spares the young disciple. Her gesture restores Alyosha's soul: "I came here looking for a wicked soul - I was drawn to that because I was low and wicked myself, but I found a true sister, I found a treasure - a loving soul" (Dostoevsky: 351). In turn, Alyosha's confession arouses Grushenka's dormant sense of ethical agency. That is to say, moral illumination comes only when both of them discard their masochistic goals, retreating from their cruel projects of personal suffering. And although Dostoevsky maintained that his own wrongful imprisonment and exile, his own suffering, was necessary for his moral regeneration, in the novels it is never that simple: very few of his characters seek suffering and humiliation without making others suffer for it (for more on the Levinas/Dostoevsky connection, see Vinokurov, 2000, 2003).

[14] It seems odd, then, that Levinas should mention Dostoevsky's characters without qualification here. But is also likely that Levinas's fondness for Dostoevsky's novels was tinged with a certain chagrin. Jill Robbins writes that Levinas "registers his ambivalence toward Dostoevsky in *Difficult Freedom*, when he speaks (somewhat self-mockingly) of 'our taste for the pathetic, our sensibility nourished by Christianity and Dostoevsky'" (150). Indeed, Robbins correctly notes that "Levinas's intertextual relationship to Dostoevsky, and the particular intrication of Jewish and Christian traditions that nourish his work, complicates any simply Judeo-centered reading of Levinas's ethics." My sense is that Levinas found it difficult to draw a neat distinction between my "meaningful" suffering for the sake of the other (a result of my subjection to his demands) and our Western taste for pathos - for suffering-as-temptation. In other words, there is always the danger that my suffering for the other might become more meaningful to me than the other qua other. The drama of the conversion narrative is aesthetically attractive: it is not just spiritually or ethically compelling; it is, after all, sexy.

Joy

[15] Such ambivalence also suggests that Levinas's thought complicates any simply Christian reading of Dostoevsky's novels. Indeed, one scholar - while making a case for Levinas's thoroughly un-Christian view of joy and redemption - notes Levinas's reference to one specific Dostoevsky character. Léonard Rosmarin writes that for Levinas, desire:

can be defined as an insatiable hunger for the presence of the Other. A hunger which only increases as one attempts to assuage it. A hunger which cannot be reduced to an egotistical craving or be confused with sexual attraction inasmuch as it manifests itself as a willingness to assume more and more responsibility for one's fellow-man. Levinas refers to the unforgettable scene in Dostoevsky's

Crime and Punishment where Sonia Marmeladova looks at a desperate Raskolnikov and feels for him an “insatiable compassion.” According to Levinas, it is noteworthy that Dostoevsky does not say “inexhaustible compassion.” It is as though the compassion which flows from Sonia to Raskolnikov were a hunger which Raskolnikov’s presence kept on sustaining beyond any saturation point simply by increasing this hunger to infinity (57).

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes of a debt that “increases in the measure that it is paid,” adding that “this divergence perhaps deserves the name *glory*.” (1981: 12) And although Levinas is deeply uncomfortable with Messianic pre-occupations (be they Christian or Lubavitch), to the extent that he may be said to subscribe to any notion of salvation at all, this definition of *glory* would be its substance.

[16] In his discussion of Levinas and Christianity, Rosmarin concludes that for Levinas, the notion of a redeemer is not only useless but pernicious to the extent that it despoils man of the only privilege which fully belongs to him, that of embodying the Messiah. . . . In order to acquire the sole legitimacy as a subject which is unequivocally mine, I must, as a chosen one, offer myself up as a hostage to the widow, the orphan and the stranger. Therein lies my ultimate fulfillment and *joy*. How can I unburden my responsibilities on a saviour when I am summoned, personally, by the appeal of my fellow-man? Not to respond unconditionally to this summons would imply committing an act of betrayal against the Good to which I have been organically linked even before becoming a consciousness of self. At every instant of my life, I am the Messiah, and by embodying this myth, I accept a responsibility without limits towards my fellow-man (66-67).

In other words, I should always be prepared to recognize when I may be someone’s savior (because not even Rav Yohanan could “lift himself by himself”). In this light, traditional Messianism seems not only aesthetically indulgent but ethically lazy (if I am pining for the Messiah), or else quite possibly criminally insane (if I think I have abolished human constraints and compromises by revealing myself as the direct descendant of King David). But this more practical “Levinasian” Messianism, on the other hand, is indeed an expression of Sonya Marmeladova’s insatiable compassion. And in this expression one may attain a mundane and bittersweet joy (perhaps the only truly ethical joy there is), in which I rejoice in my hospitality to an other whom I cannot assimilate, co-opt, or objectify - an other who will never fit in me.

[17] This model of Sonya’s insatiable, joyful responsibility is different from the zero-sum model of Levinasian enjoyment described earlier. The latter conjures an image of two mouths and one piece of bread, rather than miraculous loaves and fishes; and the other’s face introduces the anti-Darwinian element of ethical infinity into this robust, almost pagan process. It is as though Levinas is reminding us that generosity ought to be experienced, at least on some basic level, as personal loss. But Levinas’s discussion of Sonia and of “glory” raises the possibility that for some, enjoyment is not sameness; that there are people for whom enjoyment is not a question of being nourished by what they can assimilate, but more a matter of engaging with the undigestible. Why these two almost incommensurate models? Perhaps Levinas allows for different models of reaching ethics because he acknowledges that while there are saints like Sonia, it would nevertheless be unethical to present her as the only story of ethics, just as it might be difficult to translate how she takes joy in responsibility. Instead, the model of ethics-as-sacrifice-of-

enjoyment acknowledges that ethics is generally not pleasant for us, while reminding us that we should not be ethical just to feel joy.

Conclusion

[18] In conclusion, I feel obliged to offer a caveat: Levinas's rationalist Lithuanian Jewish roots often make him uneasy with the fact that his philosophy refers to affective states, such as joy and suffering. Indeed, he refers to those human instincts and emotions that vividly illustrate his ethical arguments as mere "psychological accidents that reflect ontological realities." But I want to end with a passage from *Otherwise than Being*, which, I think, both capture the emotional intensity of Levinas's ethical project, and call to mind the interaction of both joy and suffering in that endeavor:

The human subject - me - called on the *brink of tears and laughter* to responsibility, is not an avatar of nature or a moment of the concept, or an articulation of "being's presence to us." . . . It is not a question of assuring the ontological dignity of man, as though essence sufficed for dignity, but of contesting the philosophical privilege of being, of inquiring what is beyond or on its hither side (1981: 18; emphasis added).

The call to responsibility can be frightening, absurd, and joyful all at once. Yet I must act upon this call not laughing and weeping, but on the *brink* of tears and laughter, under restraint, still retaining all of my faculties of thought and action. If I am actually indulging in an affective state, I cannot be fully responsible. And yet, if I am not on the brink of an emotional outburst, if I am passionless, then I understand nothing about ethics. I must give not just bread, but my enjoyment of it - because the human subject is always "me," and not "one," or "we," or "you." And I must restrain the pathos of my sacrifice, because my tears and laughter are beside the point.

[19] Can such a liminal state, such tension between affect and effect, be stabilized and substantiated? Maybe it can, but only inasmuch as any revealed moment can be stabilized and substantiated - by grappling with the demon of Eternal Return. In *The Gay Science* (Aphorism 341), Nietzsche imagines that it is possible to experience a "tremendous moment" (a revelation, perhaps) and to affirm this demon's threat as an ethical imperative - in other words, revelation makes it possible to aspire to live so as to not regret the eternal recurrence of one's actions. Such "tremendous moments," however, are not possible without the divine gift of forgetfulness, the sort of bad memory that permits us to relive the revelation of simple moral truths again and again and to be happy for others when they do.

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