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Book Review

Drew Dalton, *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 313 pp.

Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire is Drew Dalton's first publication in book form. It successfully distinguishes itself from other secondary literature on Levinas at multiple levels. Dalton finds that other works on Levinas are often caught up in the question of whether Levinas' work is prescriptive or descriptive in the realm of ethics. Though this question is also part of Dalton's concern, it is not the forefront of his book. Dalton's goal is to understand metaphysical desire as a phenomenological experience. One of his main purposes is to reveal Levinas' metaphysical desire as the human experience of longing. He does this by also examining what several other philosophers have to say about the experience of longing. In truth, Dalton's work is a serious investigation of Levinas' explicit and implicit influences. He engages with not only most of Levinas' works, but the writings of Plato, Martin Heidegger, Johann Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, and Rudolf Otto. Dalton focuses on the points of contact between their works and Levinas' metaphysical desire. Few authors have so extensively researched how these philosophers have influenced Levinas. Hence more specifically, Dalton's book attempts to understand exactly how and to what extent Levinas's influences informed his notion of metaphysical desire. But Dalton's real accomplishment is distinguishing Levinas' understanding of metaphysical desire from concepts that can be found in these five philosophers. In that, Dalton reveals the real singularity of Levinas' work clearly and precisely, without 'linearizing' the importance of metaphysical desire and metaphysics with Platonic Eros, Heideggerian Being, Fichtean Longing, Schelling's creation as *Contractio Dei*, or Otto's Numinous. Thus, through Dalton's analysis we get a better light into what metaphysical desire could possibly be.

Among the things Dalton wants to understand about Levinas' work are:

1. What is the relationship between metaphysical desire and other desires or needs?
2. What is the relation between metaphysical desire and ethics (i.e. the relation between self and other)?

3. Closely related to the above, then, what can metaphysical desire tell us about human freedom?
4. What is the relation between metaphysical desire and the transcendental, i.e. the religious?
5. What is the purpose or relevance of metaphysical desire, i.e. human longing, at all?

The first chapter focuses on an investigation of the legacy that Platonic Eros has lent to metaphysical desire. Eros seems to share numerous similarities with metaphysical desire. Both aim at an experience of a higher order, that is, at the transcendent. Here, Dalton coins the term the *transcendent*, pointing out that both Eros and metaphysical desire attempt to reach *beyond being*. This *beyond being*, for both, is necessarily a height rather than an immanence. Yet this height is also experienced in earthly being. This means that not only do each say something about being, they also want to tackle why and how to strive for true being. Metaphysical desire and Platonic Eros are indications of something greater within us and some alterity outside of us. Both indicate a superabundance, the infinite, the truly Other, and something outside of the self to strive for. Importantly, this being outside of the self entails that it is a condition for the possibility of the self.

The question is, then, is this truly Other something which is aimed at in order to transform the self or in order to satisfy or stabilize the self? Here Dalton gives a strong and compelling account of Levinas' understanding of how metaphysical desire destabilizes the self and is the condition for the possibility of ethics. According to Dalton, for Levinas, metaphysical desire reveals the limits of our being through interruption and deflection. It seems metaphysical desire is felt only when the other is experienced in such a way as to allow the Good to destabilize the self (44). Dalton concentrates on the idea that the Good provides for a binding relationship to the other as a kind of emancipation from the self. In other words, by virtue of the relationship with the Other, new doors are opened up for the self, doors which represent "another way of living, a way out of the servitude to itself" which it is seemingly "forced into by its very being," (41). No longer is the self limited to a solipsistic relationship of self to world, one based merely on the subject's own interpretations and needs to self-fulfillment. Rather, the Other opens the self to its own vulnerability. In turn, this vulnerability orients the self to others and therefore is a condition for the possibility of striving for the true self. Without the other we are limited to a static self-existence. With the other, we can reach beyond ourselves toward true alterity, thereby coming to understand ourselves more truthfully. In Dalton's elegant words, "metaphysical desire can be read as awakening a subject from the slumber of ontological actuality into the true life of ethical potentiality," (42).

Unlike metaphysical desire, for Levinas, Eros simply desires to affirm the self and placate desire. Dalton questions Levinas' assertion and wonders

whether Eros may actually have degrees of de-stabilization and affirmation. True metaphysical desire absolutely resists determination and location. When true metaphysical desire is felt, it stirs restlessness or indetermination rather than stability. By virtue of this fact, metaphysical desire will never have an object. Its purpose is not to be fulfilled or satisfied. Hence its goal can never be things such as homecoming and nostalgia. According to Dalton, true Eros may also be just that. With this proposal, perhaps the affirmation that is found in earthly Eros can be understood as a lower order of Eros, an order that can be satisfied. The higher level of Eros would resemble metaphysical desire. In other words, desires that can be fulfilled may be supported and possible because of the existence of divine Eros. These desires, however, are more properly dubbed earthly Eros and issue from divine Eros. Only indeterminate, objectless desires actually reach the status of divine Eros itself. From this account, by the end of the chapter Dalton asserts that the difference between Platonic Eros and metaphysical desire must revolve around the fact that Platonic Eros seems to explicitly have this distinction between different levels of desire – the earthly and divine Eros distinction – while metaphysical desire only indicates a desire connected to transcendence of the finite.

The second chapter focuses on the Heideggerian interpretation of Platonic Eros through having and striving. More importantly, however, it also investigates the influences that Heideggerian Being may have had on Levinas. In dialogue with Heidegger, Dalton works around some well known tension between Levinas and Heidegger. One of Levinas' biggest critiques of Heidegger revolves around the lack of ethics within Heidegger's work. Indeed, Heidegger claims that ethics is an ontic phenomenon rather than an ontological one. Levinas, however, Dalton clearly reveals, locates metaphysics (and thus ethics) as more fundamental than ontology. In fact, whereas for Heidegger ontology is the fundamental science and Dasein is the being most appropriate to investigate the meaning and reality of ontology, Levinas finds metaphysics even more fundamental than ontology. According to Dalton, for Levinas, ontology is still connected to being and therefore to beings present in the world. What Levinas is looking for, what he thinks is primary, is that which is *completely* separate from Being and beings. But while separate, metaphysics is also the support and condition for the possibility of Being and beings. Longing, then, is how metaphysics is felt by beings.

Thus here, in chapter two, we find Dalton's analysis and development of Levinas' questioning of Heidegger's project of fundamental ontology. As a result of this analysis, Dalton also brings Heidegger and Levinas closer together, developing the points of contact between the two. In that, we also come to a more robust understanding of Levinas in contrast and continuity with Heidegger. Specifically, Dalton questions where the true tensions between Heideggerian Being and the Levinasian *il y a* lie. Heideggerian

Being is beyond beings, but also not separate from beings. Indeed, it is in deep continuity and responsible for the presencing of beings. The Levinasian *il y a*, however, “is the sign of a rupture within the continuity of being, the separation of a particular being from the totality of being in general,” (96). The *il y a* is more truthfully situated beyond being than Heidegger’s Being itself and therefore is the space of metaphysics. It is necessary that the metaphysical be beyond being so that it be absolutely *transcendent*, as Dalton mentions throughout his text. This is what ensures its place as an infinite longing rather than a determinable need. According to Dalton even Michael Zimmerman’s distinction between ontic craving and ontological desire is not enough for Levinas (87). For it is only by tending to a desire which is truly *beyond being*, absolutely outside of the realms of the self, that one can attend to one’s ownmost self (88).

The third chapter revolves around how we are to understand freedom in the light of metaphysical desire. It begins with an analysis of shame and ends with a fuller understanding of freedom as the result of our responsive relation with the other. The purpose is to further Levinas’ understanding of freedom from the all too powerful sovereignty seemingly found in idealism. However, Dalton uncovers many similarities between metaphysical desire and idealism. After a particularly thorough discussion of shame, which is integral to true freedom, self-consciousness and responsibility, Dalton discusses shame as the passive affectivity of the subject. It seems Fichte may have already made the observation that real, mature freedom arises only after the other’s freedom is felt pushing back on one’s own. In other words, according to Dalton, Fichte’s self-positing I is not as far off from Levinas’ decentered subject as one might assume. An invaluable acknowledgement about Fichte’s self-positing I is its ability for passive affectivity or receptivity. The non-I is necessary in order for the I to come to an understanding of itself. Therefore, according to Dalton, one can interpret Fichte as saying that “for subjectivity to emerge as a real strong force, the external world must first solicit it,” (148). This assertion is strikingly close to Levinas’ previous one, namely that the other opens up the way to a true understanding of the self.

Furthermore, Dalton acknowledges that Fichte had an understanding of an objectless, infinite longing in common human experience. True to the project, however, Dalton shows this longing to be distinct from Levinasian longing. According to Dalton, though the I shows passivity, though it longs and finds its true freedom in the checked freedom it experiences by encountering the non-I, fundamentally, Fichte’s conception of longing “appears in some sense as the desire to transgress the limitations placed upon the self” by the non-I (157). Fichte’s longing is still tied to the being of the self, it is an “expression of the interests of the self,” (157). Moreover, instead of the infinite as the alterity that breaches the subject, the infinite for Fichte is found in the self-positing nature of the I itself. This makes Levinas

and Fichte irreconcilable. Indeed, it shows that Fichte's idealism collapses into the egoism that Levinas condemns it for promoting.

The 4th chapter is one of the most impressive and profound. It, along with the fifth and final chapter, truly seems to further develop the heart of the book. Moreover, it holds much potential for further interpretive work and study. These chapters focus on the relationship between metaphysical longing, creation, singularity and universality, God, and the Other.

Schelling's understanding of creation as not chronological but logical is an extremely important step in understanding the nature of Levinas' metaphysical desire. Instead of the linear understanding of God's creation of the world and man, along with His periodic intervention in the world and human affairs, Schelling and Levinas have a somewhat more atheistic understanding of creation. Creation is *Contractio Dei*. God, in fact, is not present in the world. Dalton explains that what exists before humanity is a pure presence so extreme and superabundant that nothing can escape it, no singularity can arise. The only way to separate from this superabundant presence is through negation. Thus, God's act of creation, his act of love, is his own self-negation. That is, God contracts from pure presence in order to allow space for the birth of humanity. This, however, cannot be seen as an event in history *before* the existence of human beings, but rather a happening that can only be understood in *light of* the existence of human beings. It is not a chronological narrative, but a logical deduction that cannot be understood as linear historical progression. According to Dalton's analysis and synthesis, human beings are their own creators. Human beings are both dependent on and independent from God. Thus longing results from the very separation that God enacts, from the trace of the infinite that he leaves in his contraction. Metaphysical desire is the force that is felt in longing. As expression of God's contraction, it is part and parcel of the support for human existence. In other words, it expresses God's movement *beyond being* so that humanity can have being. This is the "subject's subtle dependence upon another history," upon a great otherness (181). Through this act and the subsequent arrival of humanity, individual consciousness arises, but already imbedded in this structure of existence. Dalton's subsequent analysis of Schelling's *Ungrund*, then, shows a deep affinity to Levinas' superabundant *il y a* which, through God's contraction, is felt as a trace of the infinite within finite beings. The difference Dalton locates between Schelling and Levinas, is merely the ethical value placed on the *Ungrund* in distinction with the *il y a*.

In his last chapter, Dalton investigates Rudolf Otto's understanding of the numinous as closely related to Levinas' understanding of the infinite. The problem is not so much the concept itself. It indicates the experience of superabundance and exteriority. For Otto, the numinous is so superabundant that it can inspire reverence or it can inspire a kind of horrific fascination. According to Dalton, the problem for Levinas is that

Otto conflates the holy and the sacred. The infinite should not inspire fascination but only the ethical relation to the other for Levinas. However, Dalton, unlike Levinas, is less inclined to condemn Otto for this. Whereas for Levinas, the sacred is a force of evil – it expresses that which is so present that it overcomes all particularity and singularity, all beings – the holy is identified by both Otto and Levinas as the numinous. The holy is the infinite that is felt in human experience as an ethical call. Dalton rightly questions the conflict between the two by expressing the concern that there seems to be an ambiguity in Levinas' own understanding of the infinite. It is not so clear that there is a difference in the infinite in the form of the holy and the infinite in the form of the sacred. Following Levinas' own understanding of his work, there may in fact be two types of the infinite, two ways of being *beyond being*. But, Dalton's solution to this ambiguity is intriguing. Perhaps Levinas was not defining the existence of two kinds of the infinite. Perhaps Levinas points toward two ways to orient oneself toward the infinite. One can either orient oneself toward the holy which is associated with the good and the ethical relation with the other, or orient oneself toward the sacred which is all consuming and reacts violently toward the self and the other. Each depends on one's response to alterity, to the wholly Other. In that way, perhaps human longing is really a protective experience. It protects us from the possibility of being consumed by the infinite and absolutely Other. By turning us toward the human other that we are to share the common phenomenological experience with, the Other directs us toward the *beyond being* in a way that supports human existence, rather than in a way that overwhelms us with superabundance.

In the end, it is clear that this book is truly about the ethical subject. Thus, one of the tasks underlying Dalton's whole project is the attempt to show how Levinas' metaphysical desire is in fact phenomenologically felt. Dalton speaks briefly about the consequences of misinterpreting or misusing metaphysical desire. According to Dalton, metaphysical desire connects us with the infinite in order to connect us to other human beings. Human longing is necessary to ethical life; it reveals our freedom as responsibility to and for the other. Most of all, this book is original in the fact that few scholars probe so deeply into Levinas' influences. Few scholars question how far the influences actually go. In fact, I found myself entrenched in the work done illuminating Plato, Heidegger, Fichte, Schelling, and Otto just as much as the work done on Levinas. He truly puts each of these philosophers in dialogue with one another. All in all, this book is a valuable scholarly time investment.

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