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ON ESCAPE

A review of Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape (De l'évasion)* [1935/36].

ON ESCAPE (*De l'évasion*) is one of Levinas' earliest works, and this is a welcome translation. Published originally in 1935/36, *On Escape* straddles his doctoral thesis, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, and *Existence and Existents*. The slim volume includes an extensive introductory essay by Jacques Rolland on "Getting out of Being by a new Path," the final sentence of *On Escape*. It also includes helpful notes at the end. One might describe it as a rude and rudimentary work. In his introductory essay, Rolland describes this text as a "youthful work" and an "introduction" into a space of questioning, which is "the ancient problem of being *qua* being" and the possibility of an escape from being into an otherwise than being. Nonetheless, it is seminal, and worthy of a careful reading as it gives an insight into the particular phenomenological approach and analyses which Levinas will develop in his later works. Levinas' concern in *On Escape* is "getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident" (73).

It is worth drawing attention to later criticisms of Levinas' work, particularly that of Dominique Janicaud. Janicaud singles Levinas out for particular criticism on account of the lack of that phenomenological rigor which was the hallmark of Husserl's phenomenology. Levinas displays "philosophical aplomb" when he "loftily and categorically affirms" "the primacy of the idea of infinity, immediately dispossessing the *sameness* [*mêmeté*] of the I, or of being [*être*]" (Janicaud, *The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology*). Levinas "takes liberties" with Husserl with his emphasis on "overflowing the intentional horizon." Levinas wants to overcome "the purely intentional sense of the notion of horizon." Yet it is perhaps precisely the phenomenological analyses which Levinas begins to undertake in *On Escape* that give an indication of the concern and development of his later thought, a thought which is not as undemanding and lacking in rigor as Janicaud might suggest. What is interesting is that

Janicaud regards the errance from the scientific discipline and rigor of Husserl as beginning with Sartre's *Transcendence of the Ego*. "Sartre abandoned [the workplace of French phenomenological investigations] to turn resolutely towards politics and an ethics of engagement." For Sartre, phenomenology was altogether too abstract, "too detached from concrete situations and sociopolitical struggles." *Transcendence of the Ego* appeared in 1937, the same period when Levinas was writing *On Escape*. As with Sartre, so with Levinas: it is the existential analyses of the human condition, pursued in a phenomenological manner, which are distinctive. The analyses of need, shame and nausea, undertaken against the backdrop of the question of being, give an insight to Levinas' later works, for one must "get out of being" by another way, the final articulation of which will be *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

To turn to *On Escape*: for Levinas, the question is the question of being and the naive presumption that things are what "they are". "Being is: there is nothing to add to this assertion as long as we envision in a being only its existence" (51). Such a question has often been associated with the question of transcendence, which can be seen as attempt to "get out of being." However, with the "existential turn" which Heidegger inaugurated in phenomenology, the question of Being (*Sein*) is bound up with the one for whom his or her own being is a question. One feels oneself bound to being. The fact would seem to be that one cannot get out of it. One is "chained to it."

Here one sees Levinas' insistence, which is developed in *Existents and Existence*, that human existence exhibits "a type of duality" (55). Although being is thought to be ultimately at one with itself and intends an identity, human existence has a self-referentiality which is experienced less as being at one with oneself than as tension, effort, and burden. This experience needs to be phenomenologically exposed. Duality is the mark (*stigmata*) of existence. The question of escape becomes "the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I (*moi*) is oneself (*moi-même*) ... to break the chains of the I to the self (*du moi à soi*)" (55). Rolland notes that key to unlocking the problem of being which Levinas addresses is the Heideggerian "ontological difference" between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*das Seiendes*), which Levinas translate into the contract between existence and existent, a contract which is sustained through work and effort. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas will describe this in terms of the reflexivity of the verb "to be." *Être* is always *S'Être*. Thus the conjugation of *être* as *je me suis* and *on s'est*. To sustain one's contract with existence—to maintain one's possession of being—by which anonymous being is humanized in the "here" of consciousness is effort and struggle, which one both wants to evade and escape. Rolland notes that this points to "a deflect or taint inscribed in [the] very fact of existence" (10). The emergence of

the solitary "I" which is the result of a contract between existence and existent is a work to be achieved, and not without effort.

What Levinas undertakes in *On Escape*, then, is a phenomenological analysis of those existential experiences which can be interpreted as attempt to escape the burden of existence, experiences in which being, in its anonymity and indeterminacy, is recognized and determined. Even from the outset, the phenomenological paradox which Janicaud criticizes in Levinas is evident: how can the indeterminate, which is strictly speaking non-phenomenological, be phenomenologically exposed? Thus, Levinas begins, like Heidegger, with an existential analytic of "the structure of this pure being" (56). But, unlike Heidegger, he asks how an *excendence* from it might be accomplished. In charting the escape from being to otherwise than being, Rolland draws attention to being as "there is" (*il y a*) in order to lay being bare. The *il y a* is bare being, but being which continues to bear upon an existent in its attempt to establish and position itself. Confronted with the *there is*, there is, as Rolland says, "the impossibility of being what one is" (34). "This," Levinas will say, "is the very experience of pure being, which we have promised from the beginning of this work" (67).

A Phenomenology of the *Il y a*?

Levinas begins with an analysis of *the structure of need*. Need seems only to intend its own satisfaction and the pleasure and the restoration of a "natural plenitude" (58). Yet, paradoxically, need does not respond to a deficiency in being, as if some lack had to be made up; rather, by attempting to fix itself on the particular, need attempts to escape from the pervasive plenitude of being; it seeks "release and escape" (69) from the *there is*. Although seemingly intending the particular, need is in reality a disoriented intentionality. It does not know what it intends and, rather than achieving satisfaction, it ends in dissatisfaction. But this dissatisfaction is a dissatisfaction with being itself, which no particular object can assuage. "What gives the human condition all its importance is precisely this inadequacy of satisfaction to need" (60). (At this stage, Levinas has not yet distinguished need from desire, as he does in *Totality and Infinity*.)

Allied to need is *pleasure*, which may be thought to be the satisfaction of need's emptiness. Certainly, pleasure does involve "a loss of oneself, a getting out of oneself" (60); ecstasy is precisely an *ek-stasis*, an escape from existence. "Yet it is a deceptive escape. For it is an escape that fails" (62). Pleasure comes to an end and one is returned to oneself, and the fact that one must exist. Now, it is this very failure of pleasure, which is a "return to the self" and the impossibility of escape, that guides the further phenomenological analyses of *shame and nausea*. "Shame's whole intensity, everything it contains that stings us, consists precisely

in our inability not to identify with this being who is already foreign to us and whose motives for acting we can no longer comprehend" (63). Shame "is primarily connected to our body" (64) which is a nakedness of being. Shame confronts us with something about us which seems alien, something with which we cannot identify. Similarly with *nausea*. It clings and "sticks to us" like treacle (66). We are immersed, as it were, in a morass of molasses. To be nauseous is to want to be elsewhere, but to have no place to go. "There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out" (66), and "this fact of being riveted, constitutes all the anxiety of nausea" (66). Rolland describes this in terms of the disorientation which accompanies "seasickness", a disorientation in which "the recoil of beings in all their aspects" is experienced, and there is the experience of nothing but the *there is*. Nausea "manifests nothing" (19). In Heideggerian terms, nausea causes "being as distinct from beings" to appear (21). The nauseous subject can identify no thing, yet remains exposed to the threat and the horror of the nothing which is there. Such a nothing, in which there is no thing, is the experience of the *il y a*. Rolland comments, "Nausea manifests ...being as the *there is (il y a)* of *there is* being (*il y a de l'être*)" (24), "the *there is (il y a)* that murmurs at the depth of nothingness itself" (24). "This is the very experience of pure being, which we have promised from the beginning of this work" (67).

What is the significance of this rudimentary work? It attempts a phenomenology of the human existential. It introduces the notion of the *il y a*, and the struggle with being otherwise than the generosity of *es gibt*. The move towards the *otherwise than being* is a move from the *il y a* towards *illeity*. This is a phenomenological challenge, but a challenge which needs to be addressed. If phenomenology cannot attempt an account of the existential, phenomenology is not phenomenology.

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