

## The Psychoanalyst and the Philosopher

### *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*

by David Ross Fryer

New York, Other Press, 2004. 254 pp.

ISBN-10: 1-59051-088-7. Paperback, \$25.00

*Review by Donald L. Turner*

Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Lacan, indisputable twentieth century giants in their respective disciplines of philosophy and psychoanalysis, never addressed each other's work. But they dealt with many of the same issues, including the structure of subjectivity, the function of alterity, and the nature of ethics. In *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*, David Ross Fryer explores connections and divergences between these two thinkers' projects, providing both informative exegesis and provocative proposals for a theory of ethical subjectivity that draws on both thinkers, while moving beyond the position sketched by either.

Fryer's introduction presents the book's fundamental theme of ethical subjectivity, indicating the ways that the nature of subjectivity and its ethical significance are essential concerns for both Levinas and Lacan, as both thinkers deal extensively with the origin, structure, and function of the human subject. After drawing these connections, Fryer presents some of the more striking contrasts between the two thinkers' methods, foci, and conclusions, sketching the ways their visions of subjectivity and of ethics diverge. The early part of the book thus provides the context of a broader distinction between Levinas's philosophical methodology and Lacan's psychoanalytic approach.

The first chapter elucidates how, for both Levinas and Lacan, the self is fundamentally created on the basis of "the intervention of the other" (31). Fryer illustrates this in Levinas by explaining how the self evolves from a state of incompleteness and isolation by being confronted with that which is radically other than itself—a radical alterity that is manifest in death and in the face of the other person (elucidated in Levinas's *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity*, respectively). Fryer then explains the role of the other in the constitution of subjectivity according to Lacan by elucidating Lacan's tripartite structure of orders: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic.

Here he gives special attention to Lacan's portrayal of the "mirror stage", a psychological process in which the subject forms an internalized picture of itself based on the fictive unity presented in the mirror image—the view from without. This is a vision of a self that is already an other, because this ideal of unity is a fiction that the subject never actually embodies, despite her ambitions to the contrary.

The second chapter deals with sexual difference and the subject's sexual identity. Again, Fryer treats Levinas first, describing Levinas's discussion of femininity in *Time and the Other* as exemplifying "the very model of alterity itself" (75). Fryer extends this conceptualization with reference to Levinas's discussion of Eros in *Totality and Infinity*, where the relationship between lovers exemplifies the fundamentally dyadic self-other relationship. Fryer then turns to Lacan, elucidating his post-Freudian descriptions of the Oedipus complex and the dynamic whereby the subject takes a position as "sexed" by assuming a relation to the "master signifier": the phallus, followed by additional elucidation of the three registers and of the relationship between "demand" and "desire."

The third chapter deals with linguistic issues and the role of language in constituting the subject. With regard to Levinas, Fryer rightly focuses on *Otherwise than Being*, the work that contains the fullest picture of Levinas's mature philosophy of language. Here he deftly explains the distinction Levinas draws between "the said" and "the saying"—between "a collection of nouns" that compose "a system for the re-presentation of objects of our thought" and the disruptive act that "is not an intentional grasping, but an openness to the other's demands" (126-9). The subject does not make claims about the other person, but acknowledges herself as claimed by the other person, recognizing her subjection to the other's ethical demand. The "said" involves ontological determinations, which are always secondary to the primordial ethical encounter with the singular other.

Fryer then illustrates the function of language in psychoanalysis as the psychoanalytic encounter involves linguistic exchange between analysand and analyst. In Lacan's view, subjectivity itself is linguistically determined by the Symbolic order—the system of conventions and determinations that predates the subject and provides the structure within which she must find a place. By explaining how Lacan shows the subject to be constructed and situated by a linguistic order that she neither creates nor controls, Fryer connects Lacan's vision with Levinas's, in that they both view the subject's identity as being founded in relation to that which is other. In psychoanalysis,

the subject comes not to escape this essential constructive mechanism, but to understand it, and to gain some freedom from the “mirages of unity and control” that confound the subject who strives in vain to realize these unattainable fictions (141). In the closing few pages, Fryer observes that both thinkers highlight the role of language in the subject’s constitution, then describes the fundamental contrast: while Levinas seeks to describe, via the “Saying”, an order of meaning that transcends linguistic determinations, Lacan describes the subject as always already bound by and transcribed within the Symbolic order.

Though previous chapters mention ethics, in Chapter Four ethical concerns take center stage, as Fryer describes the ethical aspect of subjectivity in Levinas by presenting a bundle of concepts related to Levinas’s thinking about divinity in his later works and discusses the ethical goals of psychoanalysis with special reference to Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. He begins with Levinas, explaining how Levinas uses terms such as “transcendence”, the “Infinite”, and “God” to designate that which exceeds consciousness and phenomenological representation. In addition to this negative description, Fryer shows how Levinas also describes a positive aspect of these “non-phenomena”, whereby they generate the subject as ethically determined, a divine inspiration that calls him to recognize his subjection to responsibility for the other.

Turning to Lacan, through a careful explication of his descriptions of the Unconscious, repetition, transference, and the drive, Fryer describes what he characterizes as “the ethical goal of psychoanalysis”: the patient’s realization that her subjectivity is defined in relation to the Other and that her attempts to realize subjective unity and control are impossible. These realizations are supposed to free the subject from the pathogenic pursuit of such goals, awakening her to the force these dreams have played in her life, alleviating psychological trauma, and promoting “better psychic health” (214).

Where the first 214 pages of the book only explain key concepts from Levinas and Lacan and point out some relevant similarities and differences, the closing section finally brings Levinas and Lacan together in a more constructive way. In the later pages, Fryer maintains that Levinas’s vision of the “structure of subjectivity as foundationally ethical” is fundamentally accurate, but that uncritically accepting this vision of the subject could lead to pathological psychic conflict. He suggests that this can be avoided by availing oneself of certain offerings from Lacanian psychoanalysis: namely, a fuller realization of the unconscious conflict that rules subjectivity, a

heavier emphasis on the fundamental importance of sexuality and erotic drives, and a realization that attempts to embody the ideal of “the good” can, unless informed by psychoanalytic truths, become “pathogenic” (233). Fusing Levinas and Lacan, he closes by suggesting that “a proper vision of ethical subjectivity must account for *both* ethical signification and an ‘ethics’ of desire, for *both* the an-archy of the immemorial past and the power of the Unconscious” and that, indeed, the only ethical subject is the “subject desiring-the-good-of-the-other” (238).

Fryer’s explanations of Levinasian philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory are, by and large, sophisticated and insightful. To his credit, his commentary on Levinas treats a wider range of this thinker’s works than do many writers. In addition to lengthy treatments of Levinas’s two most famous works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, Fryer also discusses texts that predate the former work (mainly one of Levinas’s earliest books, *Time and the Other*) and those that follow the latter work (particularly *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, though also briefly treating other essays). Similarly, Fryer’s examination of Lacan’s oeuvre covers the *Ecrits*, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, and the texts of various seminars.

With regard to Lacan, Fryer does a wonderful job of clarifying the verbiage of this notoriously obscure and enigmatic writer, but his discussions of Levinas’s philosophy, though generally informative and accurate, are sometimes problematic. The most minor of these involve typographical errors, e.g., quotations from translations of Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being* twice render “apophansis” as “aphonasis”. (Of course, this may be the fault of the publisher, not the author.) More troublesome, and closer to the heart of Fryer’s argument, is his characterization of Levinas’s vision of the subject. Fryer repeatedly claims that Levinas fails to recognize the radical nature of the subject as split, divided, and marked by conflict at its very core—indeed, this is the main reason that Fryer sees the “anti-humanist” Lacan as a needful remedy to Levinas’s overly “humanistic” vision of the subject. Especially in his later works, Levinas often acknowledges the types of subjective fissures that Fryer thinks he ignores.<sup>1</sup>

Given Fryer’s otherwise faithful portrayals of Levinasian themes, it seems reasonable to assume that this results not from a dearth of research, but from Fryer’s desire to contrast a “post-humanist” Levinas with an “anti-humanist” Lacan. As Fryer defines these terms, this characterization is accurate enough, but it leads him to downplay the radical nature of Levinas’s vision. Moreover, he arguably overplays the role of gender and sexuality in

Levinas's writings, presenting the reader with the idea that these subjects play a larger role in Levinas's philosophy than is the case. It is at least debatable whether, as Fryer claims, categories of sex and gender are fundamental even in Levinas's early work. Furthermore, Fryer intentionally avoids dealing with the concept of "justice" in Levinas's work, perhaps because he intends to focus on the strictly dyadic self-other relationship. However, this omission is puzzling, given the facts that (1) Levinas himself claims that the notions of "justice" and "the third party" (*la tiers*) are crucial for understanding his ethical vision, and (2) there are obvious links between these concepts and Lacan's description of the Law and the Symbolic Order.

The biggest drawback to this book is that Fryer's comparisons and contrasts between Levinas and Lacan, insightful though they are, are relatively few and scattered, and their potency is diminished as they float amidst a sea of exegesis. Though Fryer claims in his introduction that his book "is not an introduction to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas or Jacques Lacan," the volume of text that he expends in explaining these thinkers' key concepts belies this assertion. While readers who are unfamiliar with Levinas, Lacan, or both will certainly benefit from Fryer's lengthy explanations of key terms and ideas, those who are already familiar with these two thinkers will find the mountains of explanation tedious in a volume that claims to not be an introduction. The bulk of the book, despite Fryer's disavowal, is indeed quite valuable as an introduction to some of the basic Levinasian and Lacanian themes. For example, his discussions of "an-archy" in Levinas and of the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis in Lacan are excellent glosses on these complicated topics. Still, those who seek more substantive comparisons between these two thinkers will find relatively little to sink their teeth into in the first two hundred pages; most of the real meat here appears only in the last few pages of each chapter, when crucial comparisons and contrasts are finally brought to light, and in the final twenty-five page closing section, where Fryer offers his own constructive contribution. Because these sections total only about 50 pages of a nearly 250 page book, readers might be left wanting less explanation and more comparison.

These criticisms should not dissuade readers interested in Levinas and Lacan from exploring this book, and they need not prevent anyone from enjoying it. Readers unfamiliar with Levinas' and Lacan's works will find adequate explanatory material to facilitate their understanding of the more comparative and contrastive sections, and those who are familiar with these authors might skim through the exegetical sections while still finding the constructive portions insightful and provocative.

*Notes*

<sup>1</sup> For example, in *Otherwise than Being* he describes “the psyche” as “a peculiar dephasing, a loosening up or unclamping of identity: the same prevented from coinciding with itself, at odds, torn up from its rest” (68), and in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* he describes the “fission” or “scission” of the self—the “enucleation of the very atomicity of the one” in which “the stony core of [one’s] substance is hollowed out” (25-6, 71).