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THE REPRESENTATIVE OTHER: CONFRONTING OTHERNESS IN KIERKEGAARD, LEVINAS AND RICOEUR

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Abstract

In this paper I present the notion of a 'representative other', an equivocal concept of otherness, which I wish to free from any substantial theological grounding. I arrive at this notion, however, through a survey of the concept of otherness in the work of three religious writers: Søren Kierkegaard, Emmanuel Levinas, and Paul Ricoeur. I argue that all three of these thinkers provide resources to help me liberate the concept of otherness from the concept of God. My motive for doing so is fuelled by the recognition of the role that otherness plays in the constitution of selfhood and in ethical understanding. I wish to understand this role independent of theological considerations.

Hegel raises the issue of 'otherness' in the constitution of selfhood in his *Phenomenology of Spirit,* where he presents us with his influential master/slave story. What is at issue here is the desire on the part of the combating beings for 'recognition' as essential beings, that is, beings whose essence or freedom is recognized by an 'other' as something other than nature. The initial recognition gained by the victor in this struggle, we are told, is deficient due to the fact that it is a one-sided recognition, coerced by fear of death. Hegel goes on to show us that true recognition can only be achieved when it is the reciprocal recognition of equal and free beings.

At the end of his work on Hegel's phenomenology, Merold Westphal detects a crack, in danger of becoming a chasm, in Hegel's vision of this mutual recognition. Westphal suggests that Hegel has given us no reason to believe that the individuals who assert their desire for recognition in this initial conflict possess the resources necessary to escape what he suggests is their 'egocentric predicament'. Westphal tells us:

Against the background of this analysis in Chapter Four the announcement in Chapter Six that reciprocal recognition has been achieved is sudden indeed. No account of how the vicious circle created by the demand to be loved may be escaped is given. No source of overflowing fullness which breaks into the circle is designated. (Westphal 1990, p. 227)

Westphal goes on to suggest that perhaps Kierkegaard's God could provide the resources for pulling humankind out of the isolation of their own consciousness and desires. Indeed Kierkegaard presents us with a picture of selfhood that can only be completed by relating "itself to that which established the entire relation,"– God (Kierkegaard 1980, p. 13).

The question that I wish to examine in this essay is whether or not this 'other', which makes a claim on my freedom and which awakens the self from a situation of egoistic isolation, may perhaps be 'other' than the God that Kierkegaard supposes. Drawing on the works of Kierkegaard scholars, Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, I would like to suggest the possibility of a 'representative other' – a concept which serves as a kind of moral Archimedian point for establishing the self and for understanding the ethical relationship that I have with 'human' others. I should note that all three of the thinkers in question share a 'religious' or 'theological' interest. Despite this fact, I see in their conceptions of otherness the possibility of freeing this concept from any essential theological grounding.

Kierkegaard on Self and Otherness

There exists a debate among Kierkegaard scholars regarding the possibility of a non-theological appropriation of his view of self. What lies at the heart of this debate is precisely the status of this other, who plays such a crucial role in the constitution of selfhood. Arnold Come, in his book *Kierkegaard as Humanist: Discovering My Self,* explores the possibility of understanding Kierkegaard's view of selfhood through the resources of Religiousness A, the ethical-religious stage of existence that remains in the realm of immanence. Come thinks that a large measure of self-fulfillment or self-development is possible prior to a relationship with transcendence in Kierkegaard's view due to what he (S.K.) sees as a universal structure or dynamic of love, which is open to all human beings, even prior to Christian belief (Come 1995, p. 356). Jamie Ferreira discusses the possibility of

understanding Kierkegaard's 'other' in terms of "otherness as such" (Ferreira 1989). Such an understanding, as Edward Mooney shows us, allows us to see transcendence in somewhat more modest terms. The transcendent becomes that which "transcends our immediate context" (Mooney 1996, p. 38), whether this be other people, institutions, or perhaps even ethical ideals. This account of otherness offers hope of attaining a 'non-theological' sense by suggesting that the universal structure of human relations is not so strictly 'desire-driven'. Come thinks that Kierkegaard presents a picture of humankind in which transformative love is present 'prior' to the so-called "leap of faith". Now admittedly, Come's account of selfhood, derived from the resources of Religiousness A, still presupposes a structure of love which appears to be God-given and perhaps does not fully succeed in freeing this conception of selfhood from (strong) theological assumptions. Due to this fact, I would like to turn my attention to the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who makes the concept of otherness a central concern in his ontological prioritization of ethics. Levinas' stated desire to only approach the infinite or God by way of human relations, puts us a step closer to the concept of a non-theological, representative other that I am attempting to develop.

Levinas: Otherness as Infinite

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Levinas prioritizes the ethical over the ontological rather than use mixed categorization with which I ended the last section. Levinas' motive for such prioritization stems from his conviction that the totalizing discourse inherent in western philosophy has given us an inadequate picture of selfhood and the idea of otherness which is so vital to self-constitution. Otherness, the other self or person who stands outside my own consciousness, represents the infinite, that which exceeds comprehension and is irreducible to the intentionality of consciousness (in the Husseralian sense) (Levinas 1996, p. 16). Indeed, for Levinas, to try to bring this other into the field of the 'same' represented by the "knowing I" (Levinas 1996, p. 11), is to distort this other – it is an act of domination or, perhaps less dramatically, a reduction of the other to the same.

For Levinas, the self bears an ethical responsibility to the other that does not emerge from the subjective freedom of the self, but rather from the

outside, from the 'ungraspable' nature of the other. The relationship between the self of consciousness (understood in terms of the 'same') and the other (understood in terms of 'infinity') is not an epistemological or even ontological one, but is primarily that of an ethical relation. This is so because the other escapes the conceptualization and comprehension necessary for understanding the relation in terms of knowledge. Otherness represents a surplus which consciousness is unable to assimilate due to its finite capacity. Therefore, the proper relation between self and other must be an ethical one, a relation where comprehension's failure gives way to ethical responsibility, in a way that reminds us of Kierkegaard's appeal to faith once reason has exhausted itself in ethical passion.

In a discussion which followed Levinas' presentation of the essay "Transcendence and Height" to the *Société Francaise de Philosophie* in 1962, Levinas, in responding to Jean Wahl, situates the role of God in his concept of otherness. He tells us:

> I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse... The inadmissible abstraction is God; it is terms of the relation with the Other that I speak of God. (Levinas 1996, p. 29)

My attempt to enlist Levinas as an ally in my conception of a non-theological (or at least 'less' theological) other receives a boost from this admission I believe. If it is human relations through which Levinas wants to define God, then it would seem that his use of otherness in presenting us with the idea of the infinite may not be as reliant on a traditional conception of God as Kierkegaard's account suggests. We may even be able to invoke the influence of humanist thinkers such as Feurbach, for whom God represents the highest qualities or perfections of the human species (Feuerbach 1957). Feuerbach sees the creation of God as a concept which has an 'alienating' affect on our own self-understanding due to the fact that we are surrendering all that is best in our species to this foreign other. To re-appropriate the 'idea' of this other in terms of a humanistic program, while maintaining the infinite dimension of otherness, creates a certain tension, but it is a tension that I believe exists in the very idea of selfhood, that structure which emerges through a dialectic of the totalizing tendency of consciousness and the incompleteness which is recognized through the confrontation with otherness.

God, the Good, the other, represents that which stands outside of me, an I. The designation of this other as other, Good, or God, is not totally foreign, even if that to which it refers is. What I mean by this is that the designation of the unknown or that which is outside of us as Other, God, or the Good, is something which comes from 'within' human discourse, within the seemingly unavoidable attempt to totalize. The paradox of the linguistic situation is that we use concepts from the realm of sameness to designate the realm of 'not-same' or 'otherness'. I think that Feuerbach's anthropological view of Christianity captures this somewhat. We impose human categories or creations on that which lies 'without' us – the perfections of the species which exceed the abilities of any particular human subject. If I am correct here, then the otherness of the other that we experience, is never an unmediated otherness, but is rather mediated, in a quite Hegelian sense, through a 'relation'. That is, a relation between truly foreign otherness and our 'concept' of otherness.

Levinas suggests the paradoxical nature of this relation when he discusses the "idea of the infinite." He tells us:

> The idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable. If there were, in the idea of the infinite, an aim that was adequate to the ungraspable or unthinkable, it would no longer be the idea of the infinite. Yet, if the ungraspable, unthinkable surplus had nothing to do with thought aiming at a theme, there would no longer have been an idea of the infinite (Levinas 1996, p. 19).

I do not believe that this paradox of the infinite is resolved by way of the ontological argument of Descartes – the idea that we, as finite beings, have an idea of the infinite and therefore such an infinite being must exist. Again, I believe that the idea of the infinite in us is a mixed idea, one that recognizes our inability to comprehend all that lies 'outside' of our comprehension – what Kierkegaard simply calls the 'unknown' (Kierkegaard 1985, p. 39) – and yet one to which we give a name in order to have a theme, an idea, a concept. I don't claim to have solved the paradox which Kierkegaard and Levinas have so carefully identified, but I want rather to suggest that its paradoxical nature arises from two sources – that which is in me (thought, consciousness,) and that which is outside of me (the world) mediated by language which is both 'within' and 'without' me

(as the mediator of the outside world). So language, however imperfectly, gives me an other with whom I relate. Language gives me an other, an idea of the infinite, which, due to the fact that it is mediated by language, presents me with an 'idea', but it is still an idea that is not exhausted by comprehension. The idea of the other still influences me, still helps me to understand myself as limited, as finite, as fallible, etc., without me fully comprehending this other. At this point I would like to examine Paul Ricoeur's meditations on otherness which most strongly suggest the idea of the representative other that I am interested in, and which moves me further along the path to freeing otherness from an exclusive home in the realm of theology.

Paul Ricoeur: Oneself as Another

Ricouer shares with Levinas and Kierkegaard a theological interest. His work is informed by his belief in God and by certain Christian themes. In *Oneself as Another*, however, Ricoeur tells us explicitly, "the ten studies that make up this work assume the bracketing, conscious and resolute, of the convictions that bind me to biblical faith" (Ricouer 1992, p. 24). The reason for this, we are told, "has to do with my concern to pursue, to the very last line, an autonomous, philosophical discourse" (Ricoeur 1992, p. 24). It is this "bracketing" of theological concerns which brings Ricoeur's concept of otherness closer to my own interests than the views of Kierkegaard and Levinas.

The ten studies that make up *Oneself as Another* characterize the self as intimately tied to otherness both descriptively and ethically. Ricoeur brings together the descriptive and ethical dimensions of selfhood in his notion of narrative identity. This concept gives the essentially Hegelian dialogical notion of selfhood a narrative framework and suggests that we are co-authors (self and other) of our self, viewed in terms of a story. At the end of the final study, while discussing Levinas, Ricoeur suggests that the idea of otherness contains a certain 'equivocalness':

> Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does

my debt to them constitute my very self, or God – living God, absent God – or empty place. (Ricoeur 1992, p. 355)

It is precisely this passage from Ricoeur's work that initially suggested to me the idea of a 'representative other'. Otherness, as a concept, does suggest an ethical relation as well as (at the risk of defying Levinas' prohibition against assimilation) an epistemological one. Not only does the other overflow comprehension in order to maintain its status as truly other, necessitating an 'ethical' rather than a 'knowing' attitude, but at the same time the other provides me with a theme or an idea which allows me to gain understanding (or self-understanding). The dialogical structure of the relation between self and other gives me a basis for self-respect and self-esteem, as Ricoeur argued (Ricoeur 1992), as well as providing me with the possibility of understanding and actualizing my own freedom (Ricoeur 1978, pp. 178-179).

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur highlights a problem that he thinks haunts Levinas' characterization of otherness with regard to the ethical relation. He sees Levinas' injunction coming from the Other to the closed up ego as overemphasized to the point of creating an impossible situation for reception. He sees Levinas' emphasis on the separation between the 'same' and the 'other'in terms of the stubborn, closedness of the ego, as a characteristic which makes it impossible for the ego to respond to the call from the other (Ricoeur 1992, p. 337).[1] I am sympathetic to Ricoeur's concern here. I believe that we do understand something of the other due to the dialogical structure that exists in the constitution of selfhood 'through' others. This does not mean that we 'know' the other in any complete sense (nor do we know our self in any complete sense). Just as self-understanding is gained through dialogue, so is our understanding of 'otherness'. In "The

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[1] T. Peter Kemp thinks that Ricoeur's criticism of Levinas in this regard is incorrect. Kemp expresses this in his article: "Ricoeur Between Heidegger and Levinas: Original Affirmation Between Ontological Attestation and Ethical Injunction." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, no.5/6, 1995, p. 41-61. Richard Cohen also criticizes Ricoeur's interpretation and critique of Levinas in his essay "Moral Selfhood: A Levinasian Response to Ricoeur on Levinas". In *ricoeur as another: the ethics of subjectivity*. Edited by Richard A. Cohen and James I Marsh. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002, pp. 127-160. In this same volume, Patrick Bourgeois both defends and critiques Ricoeur's appropriation of Levinas in the section of *Oneself as Another* under consideration – "Ricoeur and Levinas: Solicitude in Reciprocity and Solitude in Existence" – pp. 109-126.

Problem of the Foundation of Moral Philosophy", an essay that contains many of the ethical ideas which later reappear in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur poses the problem of ethics as that of extending freedom in the first person to that of the second person (the face to face other whom we encounter) and then to the third person, the distributive other, the other as mediated through institutions which interpret our concepts of justice, equality, and law (Ricoeur 1978). In *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur shifts the focus from freedom to the idea of the good, or more specifically, the good life. He expresses the relation between self (1st person), other (2nd person) and others (3rd person) here in terms of his three-part "ethical intention" which he describes as "aiming at the 'good life' with and for others, in just institutions" (Ricoeur 1992, p. 172). Ricoeur's "ethical aim", whether it is concerned with understanding and actualizing freedom, as his earlier work suggests, or making possible the attainment (and cooperative understanding) of the good life, suggests that self and otherness are not so completely foreign to one another for both 'practical' (or ethical) and epistemological reasons.

Our ideas of freedom, ethics, self and other have a history. We come to understand these ideas without exhausting their content through our successive attempts at doing philosophy, articulating human experience, and attempting to situate our judgements of particular ideas in relation to the best historical 'wholes' or 'pictures' that we have.   This way of understanding, structured on the relation between whole and part reflects a hermeneutic approach to philosophy, often expressed in terms of the 'hermeneutic circle'. I think that the idea of otherness, and the notion of a representative other, can best be understood according to this hermeneutic structure. Levinas would likely reject this characterization of otherness as an attempt to bring it under a totalizing discourse – namely the totality of a (hermeneutic) circle. I would argue that our idea of otherness 'has' emerged in roughly the hermeneutic way. We have the idea of the other, not because it is instilled in us by God – the infinite, but because we have developed a concept, an idea of otherness from 'within' human discourse, even though it aims outward – beyond a content that is comprehensible.

The idea of the representative other that I have been suggesting, is the idea that we have created images, concepts and ideas of otherness through language, our articulation of human experience, and these images of otherness which include God, other people, and the institutions that further

represent other people, inform ethical life and self/other understanding. If we were locked up egos, we could not understand that we are 'other' to other selves, or that 'others' are selves (like our self) to themselves. If it were not for the confrontation between self and otherness through dialogue, through the images of otherness that language creates, then I believe that our relation to others would be less than ethical and would constitute less than understanding.

I agree with Ricoeur that the status of this 'representative' other must remain equivocal. Our understanding of otherness should retain the personal affection or sympathy that arises from the face to face encounter with another at the level of the second person, it should retain the sense of justice and equality that is distributed to all others whom we may never experience in this face to face manner at the level of the third person, and I believe that it should retain a sense of the infinite, the ideal that God and Good represents and which informs our moral striving. The idea that pulls us out of selfish desire without letting us forget about our self. But this idea of the infinite, of the other which I want to characterize as 'representative' of a theme, is not one, I argue, that comes to me wholly from the outside. It is an idea that emerges from a 'relation' between human understanding and articulation on one hand, and the otherness or infinity which lies outside of us and which we aim to thematize on the other.

I have attempted to show in this discussion of Kierkegaard, Levinas and Ricoeur on otherness, that the idea of the other, that plays such a crucial role in self-constitution and self-understanding (not to mention ethics), can be other than God. Kierkegaard seems to strongly suggest that this is not possible, but a number of Kierkegaardian scholars have argued that the resources for such a non-theological appropriation are present, to a certain degree, within Kierkegaard's own writing. Levinas, by defining God through human relations, moves closer to the idea of otherness that I am interested in. Finally, Ricoeur, by bracketing theological concerns in his work on self and otherness, helps to pave the way to the conception of a representative other, freed from a substantial notion of God that I have been trying to suggest. The concept of otherness which emerges from a relation between human creation (language) and the foreign otherness of the world, is not so other that we cannot relate to it, or allow it to inform our understanding of self and ethical relations.

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