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Levinas's Empiricism and James's Phenomenology

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Genealogies in philosophy can be tricky and even a little dangerous. Lines of influence and inheritance run much more linearly on paper than in reality. I am often reminded of Robert Frost's "Mending Walls" and the attention that must be paid to what is being walled in and what is being walled out. In other words, William James and Emmanuel Levinas are not natural conversation partners. I have always read James as a fellow traveler of Edmund Husserl, and placed both in a line of thought that might share Franz Brentano and Wilhelm Dilthey as forebears. In this genealogy, Levinas appears with an asterisk, or after one. Maurice Natanson described Husserlian phenomenology as an elderly grandparent who comes down to dinner just a little bit too early, making everyone uncomfortable. Seating Levinas next to James brings to mind some similar scene. What basic premises or positions do James and Levinas share? Is Levinas a Jamesian pragmatist? Is he a radical empiricist? Does James offer an ethics that parallels or even complements Levinas's rigorous ethical phenomenology?

Given the differences in their projects and the central assumptions and tools each uses, it is difficult to see any obvious similarities. Levinas introduces absolute alterity, diachrony, and asymmetry as part of an undoing of traditional philosophical approaches to ethics. He reanimates transcendence and recognizes exteriority as the modes or grounding of ethical philosophy. James, the psychologist-turned-philosopher, offers an ethics built on a metaphysics that posits both a version of intentional consciousness and a wider-self in which this subject might locate herself. Levinas seems to reject both the concept and centrality of intentional consciousness; in fact, one way of reading the preface to *Totality and Infinity* -specifically the description of "prophetic eschatology"-is as marking the limit of or rejecting outright the notions of inner-time consciousness and experience more broadly, both of which are essential elements of intentional consciousness (that ground James's work, for example, in *Principles of Psychology*). But Professor Craig's book, *Levinas and James* , carries the subtitle *Toward a Pragmatic Phenomenology* ; reconstructing a pragmatic phenomenology from Levinas, possibly Husserl's greatest critic, is a fantastically interesting task that challenges standard readings of James and Levinas.

I will pick two points of tension between Professor Craig's reading of James and my own to see how Levinas-for her-might either mediate or overcome the difference. First, I will focus on James's metaphysics of the "wider-self" and the ethics that follows this commitment to a wider or larger universe in which we might locate ourselves. I will draw out the comparison using James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Levinas's *Preface to Totality and Infinity* . I now suspect that James's presentation of religion is much closer to Levinas's than I suspected, believing that James and Levinas differ significantly in their respective metaphysical commitments, and in the relation between their ethics and metaphysics. Unfortunately, I may have forgotten the pragmatist criterion of a difference that makes a difference.

The second aspect of Professor Craig's reading I will challenge is her description of Levinas as a Jamesian radical empiricist. Professor Craig draws out Levinas in relation to Hume and others, and presents him as, like James, rejecting atomistic empiricisms. She specifically turns to the concept of the fringes or horizons of experience as her working example of their similar empiricisms. Her discussion of Levinas's empiricism is creative and unique-in fact it may be the only presentation of Levinas as an empiricist; but I will press the comparison as a way of highlighting the unexpected similarity Professor Craig has described. In the first few pages of the book, she offers that one of her goals is "to diffuse some of the anxiety surrounding Levinas's dethroning of the ego and destabilizing of the self" (Craig, 4). In order to build a case that Levinas shares aspects of James's radical empiricism, Professor Craig argues against the traditional reading of Levinas's phenomenological ethics that focuses on the ethical limitations of subjective experience of others. I will argue that both James's pragmatism and his radical empiricism entail a range of metaphysical commitments (e.g. varieties of Realism) that Levinas rejects as part of his critique of idealistic philosophical ethics. [1]

rejects as part of his critique of idealistic philosophical ethics. [1]

The book opens with a passage from Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* : "Time passes. Listen. Time Passes. Come closer now." *Under Milk Wood* is a text in which you get caught, get mired; Thomas's words are sticky. Every individual chapter begins with a similar snippet, from Emerson, Joan Didion, e. e. cummings, and others. The distances between these words and the chapters they introduce announce more than one thing. These distances push Professor Craig away from us, in a sense, just as we try to work through the preludes themselves and to see how our reading of them shapes how we approach the chapters they announce. And then there's Thomas beckoning us to the text itself as a whole: Time passes. Come closer now.

I have been caught by two of Thomas's poems:
(from "A Process in the Weather of the Heart")

> A process in the weather of the heart
> Turns damp to dry; the golden shot
> Storms in the freezing tomb.
> A weather in the quarter of the veins
> Turns night to day; blood in their suns
> Lights up the living worm. (Thomas, 6)

And:
(from "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower")

> The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
> Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
> Is my destroyer.
> And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
> My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (Thomas, 10)

I imagine that this mood is quite close to what James identifies in *Varieties* with the sick-soul, or the person for whom the world is a two-storied affair (the world is deeper, more spiritual, and hence, often more painful than it appears to be at first blush). Remember that in *Varieties* James differentiates between personality types including the healthy-minded temperament (also the name of a kind of self-help movement) and the sick-souled, "those persons who cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer from its presence" (James 1985, 114). These two types are described as once-born and twice-born, that correlate to a one or two-storied appreciation of reality. The comparison runs through a discussion of which type of person engages the problem of evil, a question of great importance for James personally and realistically. In other words, James recognizes evil to be a part of the universe, and pays attention to how various traditions engage the problem, and how religious experience might help someone to overcome it.

He turns his attention to the sick-soul in *Varieties* with these lines about the healthy-minded: "Let us then resolutely turn our backs on the once-born and their sky-blue optimistic gospel; let us not simply cry out, in spite of all appearances, 'Hurrah for the Universe!-God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world.' Let us see rather whether pity, pain, and fear, and the sentiment of human helplessness may not open a profounder view and put into our hands a more complicated key to the meaning of the situation" (James 1985, 115-116). [2] James's belief in the melioristic benefit of religious experience is intimately connected with the metaphysics it bears with it: a religion that does not realistically account for evil, one that dismisses it out of hand and mind, is one that is detached from reality as it is and as it is felt. For James, religions are either tough or tender minded. This is the difference James draws between a religion or religious belief for which we will be saved (*absolute*), and one for which we *may* be saved (*pluralistic*).

James's attention to the possibilities of the unification of the divided-self and the utter dependence of this on religious experience that accurately reflects the muddled and gothic reality in which we are immersed, does not at first blush share a great deal with Levinas's phenomenological ethics. Though it is certainly a point of contention for many, I suggest that it is possible that for James there is a wider universe in which we find ourselves, and that his ethics (as has been pointed out by Michael R. Slater and others) involves putting ourselves in a position to recognize this wider self in helpful ways. [3] We do not find this kind of metaphysics or metaphysical commitment in Levinas.

The process of the conversion of the divided-self, or, its "unification," the awakening from the

natural life to the spiritual life (James, Lecture VIII: The Divided Self, and the Process of Its Unification) finds a fascinating parallel in the scenes of insomnia we find in Levinas-I have in mind, in particular, his early book *Time and the Other* . Here he describes being thrown from the world with such force and effect that one cannot recognize the distances involved. On my reading, what is required in Levinas for any recovery is something or someone outside of oneself to and with which one might relate (though 'relate' might not be an expression that Levinas would use). Time, instead of being one's own experience of the world, is described as the relation with another person. Salvation, then, runs through the encounter with another—in the language of *Totality and Infinity* , the absolutely other. In other words, I am completely dependent on something completely outside of myself, of which my experience is not constitutive. This *other* must be non-conceptual and transcendent, and as such exterior to any given experience of it.

It is not mere chance that Chapter One of Professor Craig's book is titled "Insomnia" and the first section of the chapter, "The Split Subject." Describing Levinas, she writes, "ethics is not a set of rules or maxims one might internalize and subsequently enact. Instead, ethics is the interruption of freedom and its attendant powers by the visceral exposure to the vulnerability of another person, a vulnerability begetting vulnerability" (Craig, 2-3). Insomnia is used by Levinas "to describe a radical wakefulness and an alternative subjectivity to that based on presence, consciousness, or ego" (Craig, 4-5). The questions at this point include: do James and Levinas share a conception of the ego or self? Are the processes in James and Levinas through which a self emerges in and through a larger world parallel? Do they represent the groundings of ethics that are complementary, or similar enough in their grounding and function, to make any differences inconsequential?

My assumption was that James and Levinas do not share a conception of the ego. That is, James is very close to Husserl in many ways that Levinas might dislike. The relation between James and Husserl has been pointed out by, among others, Alfred Schütz, Aron Gurwitsch, Herbert Spiegelberg, and Husserl himself, as Professor Craig notes (Craig, 70). Levinas, for his part, finds intentional consciousness fundamentally incapable of grounding an ethics. It is guilty of a violence that reduces the other to *alter ego* , another version of 'here I am.' I take this to be a large part of the argument of the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* . There we find *prophetic eschatology* marking the boundary between the exertions of the self and the very possibility of a phenomenological ethics.

The "non-intentional persistence" and "ambiguous existence" that mark insomnia and *il y a* - the "feeling of life persisting anonymously" (Craig, 16, 17)-is a foil to the kind of experience that James examines throughout his work. Professor Craig reads James's "'stream of thought' as a metaphor for the ambiguous merging of psychic states, 'tinged with emotions'" (Craig, 20-21/PP 1:269), which she identifies with Levinas's conception of trauma. Insomnia, indolence, hunger, and fatigue are some of the examples or types of trauma Professor Craig finds in Levinas. The reference to *streams of experience* both connects Levinas with James's non-atomistic empiricism and is a central feature of what Craig identifies as Levinas's radical empiricism. She writes: "To make vulnerability vivid, Levinas foregoes the language of sense-impression associated with empiricists like Hume and invokes bodily states that radicalize the intermingling of the physical and the psychological. This is one of the reasons Levinas so often invokes trauma, a term that could mean (equally) a blunt blow to the body and a shock to the mind" (Craig, 14).

This is one of the many intriguing connections Professor Craig draws between the plasticity and pluralism of James's metaphysics and empiricism and Levinas's ethics. She writes: "Ethics, the break with essence, is inscribed in one's capacity to be turned or to pivot on a point always just outside the focus of one's last circle.... Echoing an Emersonian sense of openness, James insisted on the dynamic plurality of truths and later emphasized the 'layer after layer' of untapped *energy* , a 'third and fourth wind,' and deeper and deeper strata of combustible or explosible material definitive of human beings and critical to ethical aptitude" (Craig, 25). Experience for James is less an analytic tool dependent upon input and analysis, and more a holistic appreciation of the common-sensical interdependence of the self and the world. Experience does not introduce a third mediating force between self and world; it is our very immersion in the world, filled with other people, culture, meaning, and, of course, sickness and evil. But experience in James's psychology and pragmatism is always the starting point— here is where Professor Craig's warning about wanting "to defuse some of the anxiety about Levinas's dethroning of ego" must come into play (Craig, 4). James centers experience in the self; it is what defines the self and allows it to orient itself in the world (even in a world with due parts evil).

How much of Emerson's or James's pluralism do we find in Levinas's ethics? James presents

How much of Emerson's or James's pluralism do we find in Levinas's ethics? James presents us with a moral multiverse, and an endless set of lower-case-t truths that describe the relative success of ideas in this world, always subject to correction and adjustment. Does this correlate with the demanding ethics Levinas's grounds in the other's mastery over our own selves? The almost seamless situatedness in the world that is reflected in James's empiricism (even the states of melancholy and depression we find in *Varieties*) does not mesh easily with insomnia, a kind of thrownness from the world, which invites Levinas to introduce absolute alterity as the necessary condition for ethical response. More simply put: does James's pluralistic metaphysics fit with the always asymmetrical ethical relation in Levinas?

James is certainly anti-essentialist and anti-absolutist; his pragmatism and the only type of religiosity he abides are meant to stand in stark contrast to metaphysical systems that posit a realm of universal and unchanging Truths that serve in part to limit the meaning and significance of what James famously calls our "ethical republic here below." Is Levinas pluralistic in the same way or meaning as James? Does the ethical situation shift, vary, or change? Or does Levinas introduce a formal structure that inverts or undoes the traditional version of subjectivist ethical yearning? In Chapter Two, "Faces," Professor Craig presents Levinas as a pluralist of sorts, whose "metaphysics returns to the crowds, to the streets and noise," this in contrast to Heidegger's imagery of "plowed and sown fields and tree-lined clearings" (Craig, 37). Professor Craig returns to the imagery "of the streets here below and not the heavens above" (Craig, 63) at the conclusion of Chapter Two. Her examination of Levinas's "Jamesian empiricism" in Chapter Three is of particular significance.

Here Professor Craig turns to Richard Bernstein's description of a "pragmatic ethos" to link Levinas with James. This ethos includes, "anti-foundationalism, fallibilism, decentering the subject, contingency and chance, and plurality" (Craig, 66). The third suggestion-decentering the subject-is particularly striking. Bernstein argues, invoking mostly Peirce, Royce, Dewey and Mead, that "the theme of the social character of the self and of community is played out in many variations by the pragmatic thinkers. The very idea of an individual consciousness that is independent of shared social practices is criticized. In this respect, the pragmatists sought to dismantle and deconstruct the philosophy of consciousness and the philosophy of subjectivity" (Bernstein, 9). It strikes me that James might be the odd one out in this group, siding more with Emerson than with Dewey on the social character of the subject. James identifies the process of the emergence into subjectivity with a more metaphysical and less communal experience-again, something like the relationship with the Over-soul that grounds self-reliance in Emerson. Even if my reading of James is as wrong as it is quick, I wonder if Levinas would agree with *this* version of decentering the subject.

Professor Craig identifies Levinas as a pragmatist in large part because of what she takes to be his Jamesian radical empiricism. She identifies the impression of the face, for Levinas, as more than mere sense-perception, and thus more than Hume's empiricism might allow (Craig, 66). "Unlike the early empiricists who championed sensibility," Craig writes earlier in the book, "Levinas does not value sense-impressions as atomic building blocks of ideas but as wholly unique occasions of meaning irreducible to knowledge or understanding" (Craig, 13). Commenting on both Bergson and James, Professor Craig writes: "Subjectivity entails this temporal unraveling that refuses organization, a chaotic mixture of progress, regress, and lapse" (Craig, 22). These tendencies of life and experience in James serve his pluralistic metaphysics, especially his understanding of truth as revisable. As Professor Craig notes, "pragmatists focus on the practical consequences of ideas, describing meaning in terms of dynamic experiential effects. For James, this means that what is true today may or may not be true in the same way tomorrow" (Craig, 72). James's empiricism is radical, because it overcomes the atomism of earlier empiricism. Professor Craig looks to James's "A World of Pure Experiences," writing "experiences, never isolated as atomized facts or things, include the sense of connectedness, or the 'conjunctive relations' [ERE 44] between experiences. The emphasis," Craig continues, "falls on parts, but the parts themselves are indefinitely bounded, surrounded by halos lacking definite edges" (Craig, 73).

For James, the transitions surrounding the substantive parts of experience are essential to their meaning. He uses the term *fringe* to represent the halo that surrounds things and ideas: "The meaning is a function of the more 'transitive' parts of consciousness, the 'fringe' of relations that we feel surrounding the image, be the latter sharp or dim." [4] James introduces this expression in the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology* :

> *The sense of our meaning is an entirely peculiar element of the thought* . It is one of those evanescent and 'transitive' facts of mind which introspection cannot turn round upon, and isolate and hold up for examination, as an entomologist passes round an insect on a pin. In the (somewhat clumsy) terminology I have used, it pertains to the 'fringe' of

the subjective state, and is a 'feeling of tendency,' whose neutral counterpart is undoubtedly a lot of dawning and dying processes too faint and complex to be traced. (James, "Conception" in *The Principles* Vol. 1, 472)

The objects we perceive appear in spatial and temporal contexts that we appreciate in the act of perception. I have always taken this standard feature of Husserl's phenomenology and James's empiricism to stand in stark contrast to Levinas's presentation of the reception of the other as the event that challenges the power of subjectivity. [5] One of the advantages of Professor Craig's reading is the suggestion that Levinas allows for this very type of experience of the other. Professor Craig argues convincingly that the inability to perceive an object in-and-of-itself in James finds its parallel in the limitation Levinas places on our ability to comprehend the other person before us. She ties the horizons of experience in James to the "transcendent and infinite sense of a face that Levinas describes" (Craig, 74). I do not believe that any other reader of Levinas (or James, for that matter) has made this connection.

But there are a number of metaphysical commitments that follow James's radical empiricism, that do not find expression in Levinas. Michael R. Slater's recent book, *William James on Ethics and Faith* , takes great pains to differentiate between James's earlier pragmatism and his later radical empiricism. Slater argues that the conception of a wider self found in *Varieties* does not follow from James's radical empiricism. This argument has consequences for our understanding of how Levinas might be a radical empiricist. The explanation in Slater is worth citing at length:

> One of the reasons why James was concerned to distinguish his pragmatic theory of truth from his metaphysical doctrine of radical empiricism is that the latter makes a number of *additional* assumptions about the nature of reality and experience. Under the terms of radical empiricism, as James himself observes, "experience and reality come to mean the same thing" (MT, 64). In other words, there is no meaningful difference (or ontological difference for that matter) between reality and actual or possible experiences of reality under the terms of radical empiricism, which means that the doctrine entails a commitment to phenomenalism. Unlike traditional versions of empiricism, though, radical empiricism maintains that relations are directly experienceable and that anything that is directly experienceable is real (MT, 7; ERE, 22-23).... What James means by claiming that experience and reality come to the same thing, furthermore, is that reality (including both the subjects and the objects of knowledge, or both knowers and the known) is basically *composed* of experience, or what he calls 'pure experience," which he takes to be the primal "stuff" or "stuffs" of which the tissue of experience—and hence, the tissue of reality—is made (see ERE, 3-77, especially pp. 4-19, and also MT, 43). (Slater, 205 n.64)

What would Levinas say? The assumption that one's subjective experience is the *tissue of reality* strikes a discordant note with Levinas's approach to ethics; it is the very position that he dismisses in *Totality and Infinity* (and later, too, in *Otherwise than Being*). That is, Levinas would not agree that my subjective experiences constitute the essence of another's existence or being. But James's radical experience does not necessarily commit him to this position. Slater notes, "What his doctrines of radical empiricism and pure experience effectively amount to, then, is a version of *objective idealism* , since they entail the view that reality is most basically composed of a mental substance or substances that transcend any individual mind. While admittedly counter-intuitive, it should be noted that this idealist way of conceiving reality is every bit as 'realistic' as materialism. Indeed, James would argue that it offers a *broader* account of reality than materialism, since it treats experiences and experienced relations as real features of the universe and not as unreal 'projections' upon it" (Slater 205-206, n.64). Slater maintains that for James, individual experience is always of the real but does not exclusively determine it. [6]

In one of the most fascinating sections in the book (in the middle of her chapter on Experience), Professor Craig ties Levinas's and James's seemingly disparate empiricisms together. She writes:

> James shows that not everything we feel or do is decisive or distinct. In fact, most of what we feel and do remains murky and entangled with several simultaneous feelings and actions. But this essential ambiguity does not render action or feeling meaningless. On the contrary, the blind spots and sheer darkness in the human psyche are among the most significant aspects of James's psychology. Levinas takes the reality of ambiguity as an indication of meaning that transcends the visible world and reach of knowledge. He ultimately locates such meaning outside the psyche in another person. The *other* becomes the flesh and blood manifestation of James's field of experience fringed with a

> 'penumbra that surrounds and escorts it' [PP 1:255], edged with a ' *more* that continuously develops'" [ERE 71]. (Craig, 85)

This is a brilliant reading of James's empiricism into Levinas's ethics. I have never read Levinas as offering anything but a formal ethics—or as agreeing with James that life, or ethics, was a "turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair [PU 7]" as Professor Craig offers in the conclusion to her chapter on Experience. The play between my experience of the world, and the situation and function of the other as the horizon of that world, allows Professor Craig to write Levinas back into philosophies of existence in a manner that quite frankly makes sense.

If this is the case, if Levinas adapts radical empiricism and its underlying pragmatic metaphysics, then there truly may be no difference that makes a difference between them. The wider-self with which James's ethical subject must align herself is not radically distinct from Levinas's ethical subject face-to-face with its neighbor. My reading of Levinas as emphasizing asymmetry and diachrony at the expense of or in place of any kind of pragmatic empiricism that I find persuasive in James, is simply inadequate. Reading Levinas as a radical empiricist is an especially thought-provoking suggestion.

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Notes

[1] In this regard, differentiating between James's pragmatism and his radical empiricism and identifying a strand or two of realism in his thought, I follow Michael Slater (Slater, 183-216).

[2] "Conceive yourself, if possible, suddenly stripped of all the emotion with which your world now inspires you, and try to imagine it as it exists, purely by itself, without your favorable or unfavorable, hopeful or apprehensive comment. It will be almost impossible for you to realize such a condition of negativity and deadness. No one portion of the universe would then have importance beyond another; and the whole collection of its things and series of its events would be without significance, character, expression, or perspective. Whatever of value, interest, or meaning our respective worlds may appear endued with are thus pure gifts of the spectator's mind" (147).

[3] See Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* ; James 1956 ("Is Life Worth Living"), 44, 51-2:

> We of the nineteenth century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical

philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any God of whose character she can be an adequate expression. Truly, all we know of good and duty proceeds from nature; but none the less so all we know of evil. Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, - a moral multiverse, as one might call it, and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we are free in our dealings with her several parts to obey or destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such of her particular features as will help us to our private ends. If there be a divine Spirit of the universe, nature, such as we know her, cannot possibly be its *ultimate word* to man. Either there is no Spirit revealed in nature, or else it is inadequately revealed there; and (as all the higher religions have assumed) what we call visible nature, or *this* world, must be but a veil and surface-show whose full meaning resides in a supplementary unseen or *other* world.

Religion has meant many things in human history; but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists. A man's religious faith means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained. In the more developed religions the natural world has always been regarded as the mere scaffolding or vestibule of a truer, more eternal world, and affirmed to be a sphere of education, trial, or redemption. In these religions, one must in some fashion die to the natural life before one can enter into life eternal. ...We have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again.

[4] James, "Imagination" in *The Principles* , vol. 2, p. 49.

[5] Alfred Schütz connects James' theory of the fringes with the phenomenological conception of *horizons* . Husserl, Schütz notes, differentiates between an inner and outer horizon. Each corporeal thing has an inner horizon, "which refers to the 'stream of different appearance aspects' in which the thing came to our native perception." Additionally,

There is an outer horizon. First a *spatial* one, formed by the coexistent co-objects, which I do not have actually in view, but which I can possibly bring into view since I can anticipate the typical style of experiencing them. Analysis of the spatial outer horizon starts with the relations of the perceived object with the background from which it detaches itself, and ends with the totality of the surrounding world as the last horizon for each of its objects. Secondly, a *temporal* horizon, first and foremost temporally extended in objective time: the actually perceived object is the same as the one perceived yesterday or to be perceived tomorrow. (Schütz, 449)

[6] Slater's book is particularly helpful in unpacking the various and often conflicting commitments one finds in James's pragmatism and radical empiricism. See esp. Chapter Six: A Pragmatic Account of Religion.

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