

FROSH, STEPHEN. 'The relational ethics of conflict and identity'. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 2011, 16,3, pp. 308-24.

'Relational ethics' is a big-boned term Frosh uses to signify a number of ideas that are generated from psychoanalytic theory, social science and philosophy, and can augment our ways of 'thinking about and promoting efforts to *link* with otherness across fractures of hurt, oppression and suffering' (pp. 225-6). In particular, Frosh wonders to what degree relational ethics can open up the defended identities and closed interfaces between the Israeli and Palestinian communities. He relies on the recent work of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin and cultural theorist Judith Butler whose Jewish-ness profoundly affects their identities and the complexities of their sometimes critical stance towards Israel. He also relies on the perspectives of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas as crucial in fleshing out the ethical foundations of his thesis.

Frosh is a formidable researcher and his breadth reminds me of a quote from Jung somewhere in the collected works in which he acknowledges his own tendency to 'poach the reserves' of philosophy as a way of illuminating his own view. A century ago, there was a deep reticence about any cross-pollination of ideas particularly between philosophy and psychoanalysis. In that era, Jung and Freud were attempting to make psychoanalysis into a 'legitimate' scientific enterprise just as philosophy was attempting to rehabilitate itself in a scientific age. Phenomenology, as a sub-discipline of philosophy emerged out of this effort in the thought of Husserl and later Heidegger. They sought a new foundation or rehabilitation of the theories and methods of philosophy. Both of these thinkers profoundly influenced Levinas and emphasized the hiatus *prior to and between* human thought and action while Frosh's primary interest is in understanding and promoting 'efforts to *link* with otherness *across* fractures of hurt'. In other words, Levinas views the *irreducibility of the gap* prior to and between thought and action in human relatedness as foundational to the ethical relation, while Frosh is interested in *bridging across the gap* between a subject and the other.

This paper focuses particularly on the political conflict involving Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, as viewed through the lens of relational ethics. As Frosh sees it, the

capacity to acknowledge hurt and to take responsibility for the hurt one causes is fundamental to an ethical relationship (p. 227). Recognition, acknowledgment and responsibility are key concepts developed in the body of his text. He contrasts recognition as variously depicted in social theory to Benjamin's intersubjective emphasis on taking responsibility for others grounded in a bi-lateral recognition of one separate subject relating to another, or what she calls 'subject-subject' psychology (Benjamin 2000). Building on the work of Winnicott, particularly in his use of the developmental stage of 'object use', she depicts the destructiveness inherent in human relatedness as an ongoing and endless cycle involving the establishment of mutual recognition followed by omnipotent negation that constitutes a 'never-ending tension between complementarity and mutuality' (Frosh 2010 p. 132). Benjamin implies that the gap between the subject and the other can eventually be bridged through trust achieved in object usage and the eventual recognition of the other's real separateness and the pleasure of being autonomous.

Butler challenges the viability of an approach whose basic assumption is that destructiveness *can* be overcome. Her perspective partly coincides with that of the Levinasian subject as constituted through trauma in a non-dialectical and asymmetrical relation to the other. From its very origins, the subject is affectively predisposed towards being receptive to the address of the other and experiences that as being 'held hostage' to the other's pain. This can result in violent impulses to regain an illusory freedom from a tormenting sense of obligation that we can never evade (Levinas 1969 p. 199). Presence before the other also evokes shame, a shame that arises when our nakedness to ourselves is revealed, one that cannot be escaped (Levinas 2003 p. 63). Thus Butler states: '... the meaning of responsibility is bound up with an anxiety that [always] remains open, that does not settle an ambivalence through disavowal, but rather gives rise to a certain ethical practice, itself experimental and seeks to preserve life better than it destroys it' (p 232. Butler 2009 p. 177). For Butler, again borrowing from Levinas, it is the fleeting but profound awakening to the sensorial and penetrating trace of the other's human frailty and to 'the precariousness of life itself', that is fundamental to radicalizing political

theory (Butler 2004).

As Jews, Benjamin and Butler defend an ethos of accepting social responsibility for Israel's violence towards Palestinians - actions taken in the name of all Jewish people, including those who live outside Israel. However taking such a stance has a number of *precarious* repercussions, not the least of which is to be accused of Jewish anti-Semitism. This predicament results in a quandary. Benjamin asks; 'What do you do when you live in a [Jewish] society where you are a perpetrator and everyone is in denial of that?' (p. 235). Frosh describes the friction provoked by any criticism of Israel (by Jews) because it tends to be interpreted as a betrayal. In the face of this experience, criticism of the Jewish violence towards Palestinians evokes at best only painful and provisional acknowledgement. As a consequence the author asks profound questions such as: What damage have I done if I am a critic of Israel? For what wrong can I be called into account? How can acknowledgement come about without resulting in a self-abasement that will poison as much as it will cure (p. 236)?

An important omission in Frosh's discussion regarding Levinas's insertion of the ethical relation into the political realm was Levinas's own ambivalence about whether the Palestinian can be considered a 'neighbor' or not. While Levinas implies that justice is awakened through an ethical relation with the 'neighbor', he could not condemn the murders inflicted in the massacres at the Chatila and Salora camps in 1982, and is infamously noted for remarking – 'in alterity we can find an enemy' (Caygill 2005 pp. 289-297). It is these occasional statements about actual political events that reveal Levinas' own personal struggle with responsibility for the other and the subsequent relationship between ethics and action (justice) - the basic human struggle that Frosh is addressing.

Frosh gravitates towards Slavoj Žižek's extension of Levinas's esoteric, albeit profound view of justice through the presence of the third party (*le tiers*) or what Levinas also refers to as the 'neighbor'. There are a number of tensions in Frosh's rather abstracted discussion of Žižek's critique of Levinas, leaving the reader with only a vague sense of the Levinasian platform from which Žižek departs. The most basic tenets of

Levinas's ideas about the ethical relation are omitted by the author, which leaves the reader unprepared for Žižek's discussion of the third party. For Levinas, for example, the ethical subject pre-exists consciousness. That is, consciousness is a belated trace (*nachträglich*) of a sensorial affect, an affect that is due to the traumatization of being held hostage to the enigmatic ethical command of the other (Critchley 2010). In other words, a sense of justice is born from a subject's pre-conscious predisposition to ethical responsibility, awakened through suffering and introduced by the awareness of *not* another but of the many. This awareness liberates subjectivity, the act of thought and a call to responsibility. While Levinas implies that justice is deduced through an ethical relation with the neighbor, he leaves us puzzled as to how this might occur. Žižek's important essay addresses Levinas's crucial silence on this point. Our understanding of the 'hiatus' between ethics and justice that is so crucial to the discussion could have been sharpened if the author had contextualized the concepts with primary text material or critiques (his or others –for instance, Derrida 1997, Caygill 2002, Critchley 2010, to name a few). An over-reliance on the exegesis, comparison and commentary of intellectual arguments other than his own throughout the paper is in my opinion, a minor deficiency.

If analysis is at root an ethical undertaking, then a responsiveness to the fractures of hurt and suffering that occur in the reality of being in the world with others is crucial. Frosh's article contributes an important ethical perspective by highlighting how important cultural identity and its dilemmas may be when working with Jewish patients or others in similar ethical/cultural contexts. His discussion highlights how profoundly culture affects our capacity to be in the world with others, and underscores the ethical urgency of a response to the 'command' of the many, ignited through awareness of the other.

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