Tal Sessler

Levinas and Camus: Humanism for the Twenty-First

Century.

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The recent spate of books comparing the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to that of others is welcome, not least because the claims to radical originality sometimes made by scholars on Levinas's behalf do more to render his thought dubious than to excite interest. After all, if it is true that the subject shoulders an extraordinary responsibility in the face of alterity, wouldn't someone have noticed this before the mid-twentieth century? Recent studies of parallels between Levinas's central ideas and those of Plato, Nietzsche, Adorno, and others do a great deal to lend him credibility. Tal Sessler's *Levinas and Camus: Humanism for the Twenty-First Century* takes a worthy place in this group.

One of the most useful things Sessler shows is that Camus develops an ethics of the interhuman in which the antagonism we feel before others, rather than being an initial reaction to their otherness, is an attempt to blind ourselves to our immediate sense of obligation. This idea, close to the core of Levinas's ethics, appears counter-intuitive, and yet if it is true—if it is true that the subject's first reaction to the other is responsibility rather than hostility—then human life is shot through with ethics in a way that many philosophical positions do not allow. When Camus writes that 'if men kill one another ... they prove, at the same time, that they cannot dispense with mankind; they satisfy a terrible hunger for fraternity' (27), he renders the Levinasian idea compelling. And indeed, though Camus stops short of Levinas's infinite responsibility, he develops what might be called a 'Levinasian hostility' further than Levinas himself. As Sessler shows, Camus explains mass murder and terror as attempts to fulfill what Levinas calls 'metaphysical desire'. Metaphysical desire operates mainly in Levinas as a positive concept: it is a desire for a transcendence that cannot be found in the world and that draws us to approach the other with generosity and openness. But Sessler is surely right to show us, through Camus, that it is this very desire that gives rise to 'the power to kill and degrade' (27).

This analysis of desire is the backbone of Sessler's book, and the strongest element of the comparison between the two thinkers, emerging ultimately in an illuminating correlation between Levinas's nausea and Camus's absurd. These, Sessler argues, are not states of being but rather tensions between a desire to get out of oneself and the inability do so, between a desire for clarity and the awareness of the necessity 'to remain in an immanent mode of existence with all the dread and anxiety inherent therein' (59). For Sessler's Camusian Levinas, the desire to escape oneself into clarity is both metaphysical desire and the pull of what Levinas calls totality, and the key to developing

a moral self is to retain the desire without attempting to fulfill it. Sessler shows how, in their early works *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *On Escape*, Camus and Levinas develop this aporia as inescapable; later, in *The Rebel, Plague*, and *Fall* (Camus) and *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas), they offer the interhuman as the best way to live in the aporia without attempting to escape it. It is from Camus particularly that we learn who it is who wishes to escape the aporia. Sessler quotes: 'historical revolt, rooted in metaphysical revolt, seeks to eliminate absurdity ... by taking control over the world, making murder its central tool' (55). In the rejection of this alternative, and the insistence that we leave the desire unfulfilled, we have the development, in Camus as well as Levinas, of a proto-Derrideanism, a to-come that never comes, a non-redemption that stands as our only hope of redemption (60).

I do have several complaints about Sessler's argument, and they are not minor. The first involves a misreading of Levinas's 1934 essay, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. Sessler asserts that the essay shows modern liberalism as the flowering of Judeo-Christianity, but this is not the case. While Levinas does draw a historical line from one to the other, he suggests that there has been a degeneration in the concept of freedom such that, in liberalism, thought runs the risk of becoming a game. Indeed, the preface that Levinas wrote for the essay in 1990, which informs us that one of his purposes was to ask whether 'liberalism is all we need', is enough to contest Sessler's reading. In addition, where Levinas speaks in the essay in his own name about human embodiment as a salutary check on license, Sessler reads it erroneously as Levinas's description of the philosophy of Hitlerism (22).

Second, Sessler's discussion of religion misses the mark. He argues—correctly, I believe—that Camus 'rejects all forms of "leap" or transcendence' (65), but asserts that at a certain point Camus became more open to the idea of working alongside Christians in the struggle against totalitarianism; this turn, Sessler suggests, is exemplified in Camus' portrayal of Father Paneloux in *The Plague*. The argument seems to me very thin. Camus was never personally averse to cooperating with Christians, nor did he ever, as Sessler states he did, accept the idea of a 'normatively and epistemologically valid type of religiosity' (8). There does not seem to me to have been any change in his thought on these matters, and Sessler offers no convincing evidence of one. Levinas's religion is also oddly treated. Not only does Sessler speak throughout of Judeo-Christianity rather than Judaism, he flattens Levinas's distinctive form of Judaism into simple ethical monotheism, retracting both its radical humanism and also its messianism. A more fruitful argument might have been made to the effect that the variety of Judaism Levinas espouses, which rejects religious consolation and stands as pure ethical demand, might have appealed to Camus more than the 'religion' he knew and rejected.

Third and most important is the question of whether Camus and Levinas define the interpersonal in the same way. Sessler descries Camus's interpersonal as a 'nous sommes', implying that Levinas's could also be so described. But it could not. The Levinasian interpersonal is not the realm of the *nous*, but of the *vous*: it does not involve a collective engaged, shoulder to shoulder, in a struggle for justice but two people, face-to-face, in a relation that is compromised by the necessary entry of the third party with his inevitable 'we'. At times Sessler appears to have an excellent grasp of the way Levinas sees the relation between ethics and politics; his line 'where politics is, ethics shall be' (52) is exactly right and perfectly put. However his too easy conflation of Camus's *nous* with Levinas's *vous* misrepresents both thinkers. At the heart of Sessler's book is an argument that they come to the interpersonal to address an aporetic tension in human existence, but this argument is not of so much interest if they come to a different interpersonal.

There is more happening in this tightly written study, including hints of what both thinkers owe to Nietzsche, and a solid and illuminating account of Levinas's Zionism. All in all, it is a thought-provoking study of the work of men who share a 'metaphysical humility' (53) that emerges in a rejection of what Camus's character Rieux describes as 'heroism and sanctity', in favor of alleviating the suffering of individuals.

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