

Raoul Moati. *Levinas and the Night of Being: A Guide to Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Daniel Wyche. Fordham University Press 2016. 240 pp. \$100.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780823273195); \$28.00 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780823273201).

In a recent collection of essays celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, the editors warn of a stultifying tendency of scholarship on Levinas to rehash the same worn-out themes and tropes. Whatever its faults, the same cannot be said of Raoul Moati's *Levinas and the Night of Being*, which goes against the grain of much of the scholarship by arguing for an explicitly ontological reading of *Totality and Infinity*. This claim may certainly strike readers familiar with Levinas as audacious, given his repeated criticisms of how the ethical relation to the other is not ontological and cannot be accounted for by it. Yet this is not like the ontological description of existence given by Levinas's erstwhile teacher (and later, *bête noire*), Heidegger, which interprets the world through the powers of human discovery and comprehension. For those unfamiliar with Levinas' critical attitude toward Heidegger's thought and expecting a basic introduction to Levinas's thought and themes, this is probably not the book. Drawing from early essays given by Levinas and engaging in close dialogue with other figures in the phenomenological tradition such as Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida, Moati gives a detailed and exegetical reading of *Totality and Infinity* that will be of great interest to the Levinasian scholar as well as the informed reader of continental philosophy. Reserving an important role for the often-neglected ideas of fecundity and paternity, Moati argues for an ontological reading of Levinas' defense of morality. While *Totality and Infinity* (TI) often reads as a point by point rebuttal of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Levinas' ontology tracks the nocturnal face of being, articulating a 'series of events—properly nocturnal events—that ontological comprehension is, structurally, in no position to take up' (13). It is not the case that ethics and ontology are mutually exclusive; rather, ontology is indebted to these 'nocturnal' forebears such as the face, by which there could be anything like the disclosure or meaningfulness of a world in the first place. While it may be questioned whether Moati's interpretation succeeds in presenting Levinas as an ontological thinker, what is incontestable is the freshness of Moati's approach, returning to a much trodden (yet still baroque) text with a very provocative interpretation. Moati advances his tendentious claim about Levinas' ontological project through an exhaustive overview of the major sections of TI; I will follow Moati's basic division of *Totality and Infinity* in its focus on the self, the relation to the other, and the relations beyond the other.

The book begins by tying Levinas' project of defending morality as more than an illusion to his proposal of a regime of being that extends beyond totality and its depiction of reality as warlike. Levinas presents this defense through the lens of an eschatology that escapes history and is directed 'to the end of liberating ultimate events of being from the horizon of objectivity, and thus from history and totalization.' (9). Chapters one through five roughly cover the development of the self through its sensible enjoyment of the contents of experience and the establishment of representational thinking through recollection and dwelling. Moati enlivens and deepens what might be otherwise a perfunctory overview of this genesis of the self through informative contrasts with Husserl and Heidegger. So, for example, Husserl's privileging of the theoretical overlooks the basic point that thought rests on the body and is already conditioned and engaged in affective interface with the enviroing milieu. While contra Heidegger's view, Levinas presents a picture of the self construed not through practical utility and projects but through enjoyment.

Through labor and the establishment of a dwelling, the subject is able to fend off the menace of the anonymous elements and an uncertain future. Along with an emphasis on the economic and

productive dimension of the self, the other emerges in the form of the feminine, which provides a respite and shelter to the self, vis-a-vis the elements. It is unfortunate that Moati does not dwell longer on the feminine, whose role enables the self to develop representational thinking—at least in exploring how the other in dwelling (here Moati repeats Levinas' point that the other is not to be conflated with an empirical man or woman) differs from the other in the ethical relation, as well as the erotic other which Levinas seems to associate with women.

Levinas' extensive focus on the material basis of the separate self sets the stage for the ethical (metaphysical) relation to the other, which is firstly corporeal and involves the disappropriation of the self's world. The intelligibility of this world is underpinned by the discourse between the I and the other in the form of teaching and the ongoing thread of questions and responses between the self and the other. Here Moati highlights the way the other 'presents him or herself in speech and thus comes to the aid of his or her own expression' (115) as critical to the intelligibility and signification constitutive of the world. For Levinas, the other's gaze is already speech, as it speaks from itself through an interpellation that does not undo the world but fixes and establishes it for the self. Moreover, the other does not abolish my freedom but questions and justifies it, consolidating my response to the other. Moati's treatment of time, death, commerce and apology in TI fill in the portrait of a complex world irreducible to unceasing war and violence, as the latter along with commerce and peace rest on the relation to an unpredictable other.

Moving beyond the ethical relation, Moati expands his nocturnal metaphysics to the elusive and opaque themes of eros, fecundity and paternity. Again, a more substantial treatment of the feminine might have helped in expanding the topic, especially with regard to the anomalous status of the erotic other, depicted in terms of fragility and evanescence. Moati confirms the experience of the erotic and the caress as extending 'beyond the horizon of the powers of the self in the nocturnal' (167). The future and my own self which I confront through my erotic experience is that of fecundity and of the child (or as Levinas often writes, not without problems itself, the son), which explode the self's identity as tied to its projects and powers. By turning toward a future free of the limitations imposed through the exercise of one's freedom, Levinas underscores how fecundity severs the self from its past, showing that morality is more than a vain hope and that it promises a new beginning not weighted down by war and death.

Moati concludes by addressing one of Levinas' most perspicuous critics and interpreters, Derrida, who argues in his seminal essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics' that any talk of the other must include some reference to the self—it is impossible for the other to be completely other to the self. But Levinas' intention, Moati argues, is not to discuss an object fundamentally unknowable to comprehension, but to criticize the 'consistent categorical confusion that loses sight of the dissymmetry of the idea of the infinite with regard to those general human powers of intellection that originate from subjectivity or its avatars' (189). Levinas is offering an already sensibly determined self to whom the other responds, expressing itself without having to draw its identity abstractly from it.

One suspects that Derrida might have defended himself against Moati's remarks by pressing him to give a clearer account of the relationship between the sensible ego and the infinite alterity, or of how, notwithstanding the painstaking care Moati exhibits in describing the development of the sensible ego, the Other is to be conceived as independent of the self, especially with regard to the varying senses attributed to it (in dwelling, the face, eros). Further, it is not clear how an emphasis on nocturnal ontology, even if irreducible to human powers of comprehension, does not avoid the issue of thematizing (however imperfectly) the ethical relationship and thus failing to do justice to the alterity it expresses, a charge shared by its more distant ontological cousins. Doesn't speaking of a 'nocturnal enlargement of ontology' (190) only further muddy the waters as to the unique status of

the face? Given such concerns, perhaps it is not surprising that Levinas revises his ideas on the face through the distinction of the said/saying in his later works. Nonetheless, Moati's work stands as a formidable scholarly work of interpretation and will surely invite thoughtful reconsideration of Levinas' classic text for some time to come.

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