

Tina Chanter

Time, death, and the feminine: Levinas with Heidegger

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The rejection of biological essentialism that was, perhaps, necessary in earlier stages of feminist and anti-racist politics, she argues, obscured important differences among members of racial, gender, ethnic, or other oppressed groups, and the way in which their oppression took shape around the characteristics of diverse human bodies.

Tina Chanter's rich and rewarding text addresses one of the most important issues in current feminist thought: the significance of human embodiment. The rejection of biological essentialism that was, perhaps, necessary in earlier stages of feminist and anti-racist politics, she argues, obscured important differences among members of racial, gender, ethnic, or other oppressed groups, and the way in which their oppression took shape around the characteristics of diverse human bodies. Chanter's argues that the work of Immanuel Levinas provides rich resources for a feminist rearticulation of the complex issues of body, race, and gender.

She begins her complex argument by noting two related shifts in Levinas' thinking. The first is in Levinas's account of time: "In the early work he is at pains to emphasize the tradition's neglect of the instant, and its specific dynamism, as distinct from the dialectic of time. In his later work, Levinas is . . . more interested in emphasizing the alterity of the future and of the past" (32). The second shift is the move away from Heidegger, but it also underscores the importance of alterity because, in contrast to Heidegger, "For Levinas, it is not death that individuates me, but the other" (36).

This emphasis on alterity leads Levinas to question the ontological difference. In *Totality and Infinity* he seems to reverse the opposition "by giving priority to beings over Being," but in *Otherwise than Being* he argues that the infinite must be allowed to signify from "beyond the ontological difference" (37). Chanter argues that what this "beyond" might mean opens the question of how ethics is related to ontology because "a thorough investigation of this relationship reveals precisely the import of corporeality in Levinas's philosophy" (39), which she links to sexual difference. Her reading, however, refuses either to reject Levinas's thought because of its use of traditional feminine imagery or simply to accept the familiar stereotypes. She suggests instead that "the feminine remains the privileged unthought in Levinas's philosophy" (57), a third path that leads her back to time and the body.

This return is guided by Levinas's concepts of representation and enjoyment. Representation here can be understood as the way a subject relates itself to a knowable external object. Enjoyment, by contrast, is an ecstatic overflowing of representation that cannot be reduced to knowledge. Representation is also dependent on "dwelling," which is clearly marked by the feminine in Levinas's work, but one condition of representation is an Other totally distinct from

the feminine, which remains within the realm of the same. The model for such an Other is the infinite God discovered by Descartes to be the necessary condition of his own existence.

Closely related to representation and enjoyment in Levinas's thought is his distinction between the saying and the said, which is another way of understanding how lived experiences overflows and nourishes representation and language so that it can never be captured in a fully present present moment: "the saying registers the failure of language to contain what it would express." But Chanter notes that the distinction between the saying and the said is an "impossible [one] and it thereby functions not as an organizing thematic, but precisely as a disordering, disruptive force" (145-146). This chiasmic dyad is what allows Levinas to shift his focus from the dynamism of the instant to the alterity of past and future within a single coherent account of time because both are ways the saying exceeds the said of time, as understood by Heidegger and the tradition.

At the same time, "Levinas marks Heidegger's philosophy . . . as his constant point of departure" (187). This ambivalent relationship to Heidegger arises, in large part, from the tragic historical time the two thinkers share. One chapter of Chanter's book is devoted to "Thinking Ethics. . .in the Wake of the Shoah" (189), which she regards as "thinking impossibility" because one can only approach it "either by transforming the Shoah into something manageable" or by elevating it "into an event that defies our categories for thinking" (190). We can also, however, give and hear testimony,<1> understood by Levinas in terms of language as a saying without a said that "makes sincerity possible," and in terms of religion as saying in the name of the infinite Other (192). Against a tradition that reduces the other to the same and a Heideggerian ecstasy that reduces the same to the other, "Levinas introduces a relation from which both terms absolve themselves—the relation of the face-to-face" (249).

Chanter concludes by noting again that a "less generous" feminist reading of Levinas would recall how he "reiterates the most traditional stereotypes" (253), while an "infinitely generous" one might "take its cue from the sense in which maternity hesitates between the saying and the said," while Chanter herself reminds us that "the feminine as such remains captive to its preparatory role in Levinas's work" (259).

I would like next to raise two sorts of questions about the reading of Heidegger that emerges in Chanter's book. These are not objections to her project or her main argument, but comments on aspects of Heidegger's work that her focus on Levinas may have led her to interpret too narrowly, obscuring important possible resources for feminist philosophy in Heidegger's thought.

As already noted, Chanter draws from all of Levinas's published work, but her references to Heidegger are primarily to the early work, especially *Being and Time*. She explains that "The high esteem Levinas has for Heidegger is based principally on *Being and Time*" (6), but her choice to follow Levinas in this seems counterintuitive given the traditional division of his work into early and later periods based in part on his own reservations about the "subjectivism" of *Being and Time*, an issue important to both Chanter and Levinas. Nor does Chanter refer to any of Heidegger's work that might suggest a less subjectivistic reading of *Being and Time*, such as this passage from "The Origin of the Work of Art": "The resoluteness intended in *Being and*

Time is not the deliberate action of a subject, but the opening up of human being, out of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being” (Heidegger 1975, 67).

Why does this matter? Perhaps it doesn’t, given that Chanter’s book centers on Levinas. But the almost exclusive focus on Heidegger’s early work may give readers a limited sense of the resources his thought provides for the liberatory politics Chanter envisions. For instance, one key question for Chanter is “what it means to designate the possibility of the Nazi Holocaust as somehow inscribed in the very essence of Western thinking” (7), but she does not refer to Heidegger’s work on technology, such as “The Age of the World Picture” where Heidegger very clearly, if very subtly, delineates that inscription: he argues in the appendices that “Certainly, through Plato’s thinking and through Aristotle’s questioning a decisive change takes place in the interpretation of what is and of men” (Heidegger 1977, 143), then links this change, first, to modernity, and then both to his critique of “subjectivism” and to Nazi ideology (1977, 152-153).

It is probably unfair, however, to expect Chanter to extend her discussion of Heidegger beyond the texts Levinas addresses, so, I will turn to her reading of *Being and Time* itself. I have raised questions about Chanter’s account of inauthenticity elsewhere (Holland and Huntington 2000, 45) but a related question could be asked about whether the ontological difference, like authenticity, can be understood as a three-part relation, as well as a simple dichotomy. This is suggested, for example, by reading the above passage from “The Origin of the Work of Art” in a way closer to *Being and Time*, which would consider resoluteness to be “the opening up of Dasein out of its captivity in beings, to the openness of Being” (Heidegger 1975, 67, translation modified). On this reading, Being could occupy the place of the “infinite” Levinas believes should be allowed to signify “beyond the ontological difference.”

None of this, of course, amounts to a defense of Heidegger. Chanter is quite right that “Heidegger failed to pose the question of bodily significance” (12) and lacks “a serious and sustained consideration of others” (96). It is also largely true that “the feminine is conspicuously absent from Heidegger’s thought” (252), and that these three lacks are an important, if not insurmountable, obstacle to basing a liberatory politics in his work.^{<2>} On the other hand, Heidegger’s work also lacks the traditional and, I would say, dangerous sexualized imagery that even Chanter finds in Levinas’s thought. Given the (false) choice between a thought that returns us to Descartes’s body and Descartes’s God, and one that arguably returns us to Descartes’s disembodied mind, I’m afraid that I am sceptical enough of the benevolent Father to be ungenerous and prefer the latter. At the same time, it is Chanter’s valuable reading of Levinas that has given me the understanding to do so.

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