

Subjectivity, vulnerability and temporality: The accusation

J. Peter Burgess

Aims

Contribute to the analysis of the concept of 'accusation', in particular in Levinas's *Otherwise than being* (1974).

Unravel the concept of accusation and its relation to the subject.

Analyze the meeting place of three valences or modes of the concept:

1. As moral concept;
2. As juridical concept;
3. As a correlate of subjectivity itself.

The project: the ontology of insecurity

Hypothesis: Insecurity is primordial.

Phase one: Insecurity understood as uncertainty. Nietzsche, Foucault, Lacan, Butler

Secondary insights:

- The role of the unknown in stabilizing knowledge.
 - The relation between values and security (Nietzsche)
 - Security as a kind of ethics (Foucault)
 - Full security as death (Lacan)
 - Centrality of vulnerability (Butler)

Phase two: Ontology of insecurity: insecurity and primordial to being

Analysis of: Heidegger, Husserl, Bergson, Dewey, Levinas, Deleuze, Benjamin.

Levinas: both a critique of the ethical foundation of subjectivity and of the ontological primordially of ethics. Ethics as *first philosophy*.

Subjectivity is being hostage

Chapter IV of *Otherwise than being*, sub-chapter *Substitution*, section 5 'Finite freedom'

To underscore:

- Subjectivity--hostage--subjection
- The self-present ego
- A covered-over origin

- A wordless and answerless accusation
- Responsibility
- Subject position as deposition
- Violence
- Persecution
- Justice

Situation

Levinas (1806-1995). Lithuanian, Jewish origins. Emigrated to France, studies in Strasbourg, Freiburg (Husserl, Heidegger). Early, pre-war, works present both Heidegger and Husserl for the French public.

Totality and Infinity (1961): alterity, subjectivity, morality and ethics. Thematisation of the face.

Otherwise than being (1974): language, sensibility, subjectivity, and temporality

Back up...

Subjectivity and responsibility

Levinas opposes the post-structuralists in his defence of the subject, but with reservations.

Subjectivity is formed as alterity. In *Totality and infinity* (1961) it is a relationship to the other, to the face of the other. In *Otherwise than being* (1974) the other is not another person, but an interior other.

The subject is not identical to consciousness.

The ethical subject is not waiting for an empirical encounter...

Responsibility

The relation to the other precedes the relation to the self.

Not about moral choice. Moral choice concerns conscious subjects, whereas Levinas is interested in pre-conscious movement.

The same can 'responsibility'. 'Responsibility' for Levinas is an obligation to respond that precedes conscious choice.

I am responsible for the other because my very subjective existence is bound up with the subjectivity of the other. This cannot be chosen.

Called an 'obsession' since it cannot be avoided, cannot be escaped. I am the 'hostage' of the other. I am persecuted by the other. Subjectivity is subjection (not Foucauldian).

The subject is 'for the other'.

'I means here-I-am'

Ethics and responsibility

Ethics as first philosophy. It is not subjectivity that precedes ethics, but ethical responsibility for the other that precedes subjectivity.

Subjectivity is not theoretical (Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger), but rather *ethical*. The notion of 'responsibility' founds the subject. Response-ability.

Subjectivity as responsibility. Not responsibility as response to moral obligation or legal regulation. Responsibility as response. Not an *act* of response (based on a pre-constituted subject, positioning itself relative to an empirically coherent content).

The subject is founded through subjection, by being held 'hostage'.

What is an accusation?

The notion of accusation appears only 6 times in *Otherwise than being*, never in *Totality and Infinity*.

1. Moral accusation: attribution of more properties to an individual moral subject. By virtue of some empirical or objective fact;
2. Legal accusation: A procedural juridical operation of ascription of legal status to a juridical subject. Meaning dependent on the juridical process, rule-based, etc.;
3. Levinasian accusation: A correlate of subjectivity itself, linked to and determinate of vulnerability, insecurity, contingency and risk.

The subject is under accusation. The position of the subjection is already a deposition. ***What does this mean?***

Grammatical and legal origins

Linked to 'accusative': the effect of verbal agency.

Appears in Middle English from the Latin *casus accusativus*. Refers concretely to 'relating to accusation or a (legal) case'.

Greek origins: *Accusativus* translates *aitiaktike* 'showing cause'

An accusative grammatical form used with any transitive verb is one which indicates cause.

To the old question of legal scholarship of the distinction between moral and legal accusation: Levinas adds a third--'subjective accusation' or 'accusation of the subject',

The phrase, 'The waiter brings the food': A primal accusative configuration that 'things impact things', embodied in language. The saying of the phrase, the thinking of the phrase is different than content of the phrase, though inseparable from it. My relation to

it, my understanding of the things and the actions, puts me in the world, connects me, obliges me, accuses me of complicity in existence.

My implication in this causality is not empirical.

My experience and understanding of events is not abstract. The accusative is the index, the reminder of my implication in any events, the world engaging me, calling me, accusing me.

This is the condition of law and of justice

The 'other' opens for the possibility of a multiple others, lays the foundation for society.

The source of social superstructure and of law is the primordial injunction.

The primary foundation for both responsibility in the common sense and of law, does not come from an 'ethical thing' or a 'legal thing'. They stem from a primordial accusation.

Levinas: 'It is through the condition of being hostage, that there can be in this world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity'.

The other (le prochain, the neighbor, the next) is not empirical, not historical, but rather ethical.

Any accusation is already a self-accusation. This self-accusation is the pre-condition of both law and morality.

ANNEX

The saying and the said

Saying is ethical, said is ontological. My saying is my exposure to the other, my vulnerability to the understanding of the other.

'A saying that must also be unsaid'. Philosophy focuses primarily on the said. But saying precedes the said. Not in any linguistic sense. What is said is impregnated with situation of it being said, with the forces and tensions of the discourses from which it draws and the trajectories upon which it will be released. The ethics of the saying is already in the said.

Saying is the place of proximity to the other. It is the exposure to the other, either actually or in the traces of the other that haunt that the discourse in which the saying is said.

Saying has a meaning. Even without the said, without the content.

To say is to approach a neighbour, 'dealing him signifyingness'. This is not exhausted in 'ascriptions of meaning', which are inscribed, as tales in the Said. [...] Saying is a condition for communication, as exposure.

The saying is 'a non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other.

Performativity of ethical language: I am not (only what I say).

Subjectivity is a kind of speaking that always includes an *accusation*.

Otherness, proximity and justice. The relationship to the other, the play of presence and absence in the 'face' is the origin of morality.

Sensualism

The subject is inseparable from the body with which it is associated. The subject maintains an objectifying relation to the world, mediated by language. Movement from intentionality to sensing.

The subject (in Otherwise than being) is sensual. The subject is intentional-sensual. Stretches the Husserlian notion of the intentionality as a mode of consciousness.

Subjective life is a sensual experience of life. The subject is subject to the material conditions (and pleasures) of its existence. Whereas Husserl was a theorist, Levinas's subject is in the world.

The subject, ethics, and the ethical calling-into-question of the subject happens at the sensual level, not at the level consciousness (Critchley).

Substitution: What the subject needs to be like in order for ethics to be possible: the possibility of substituting one for the other (sacrifice).