Knowing Other-wise: Philosophy at the Threshold of Spirituality
JAMES H. OLTHUIS, Editor

This collection of essays is designed to find a place for ethical talk in postmodern philosophy. As we wander through these essays, what we find is a plea for ethical discussions to once again become the 'mother tongue' for ontological and epistemological dialogues. Each of these essays makes a case for ethics and either shows how ontology without ethics is devastating or how ontology presupposes an ethics in the first place. While the authors all agree on the primacy of ethics, they disagree about whether the study of ontology actually presupposes or simply requires an ethical analysis.

The central theme in this book — namely, the idea that ontology and epistemology without ethics is dangerous — is developed against the rational ideal of the Enlightenment, where reason violently silences all marginal others. This oppressive ideal, already critiqued by Derrida, Foucault and Lévinas, continues to be a threat against the possibility of communication with the other. The demand for ethics found in this collection, founded upon a recognition of how the ethics of rationality has failed us, takes up Lévinas' question, “Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality”? How it is possible to talk about the other, how we ought to talk about the other, and finally, how the talk of the other is inescapable (since the other is always irredocibly brought to our attention as our limit) are some of the weighty questions developed in this book.

Knowing Other-Wise looks to "...understand what the renewed contemporary interest in spirituality means for philosophy" (20). This spiritual reawakening marks a reaffirmation of a self that stands despite the fashionable deconstruction and dissembling of subjectivity. Leaving the Cartesian self in its ashes, we are able to find another different self, since "...the fact that the modern self of absolute agency is an illusion does not demonstrate that there is no such entity as a self...there is still room for an agent self...a gifted/called self, gifted with agency and called to co-agency by..."
The self and the other, found through their intersection and limits, re-emerge not from reason but, rather, from an awareness of responsibility and mutual affection. The impulse towards the other is not a product of a rational and controlled agent. Instead, the movement towards the other is already undertaken every step of the way, as we see in our limits the face of the other as a powerful force beyond our control. The force and claim that the other has over us ushers in the recognition that addressing and encountering the other is our existential condition. In short, these authors show that it makes good sense to talk "...of a core self of continuity, coherence, and agency" (246).

But how are we really to address this other? After acknowledging that we cannot escape the other, our authors have tried to see how it is possible, and in what manner, we may speak of and for the other. A few of these authors are very aware of the problem of how, if the other transcends reason, we can ever be in touch with that which transcends and cannot be contained within reason. This problem reaches its climax when we ask whether speaking of the other is even possible and, if so, in what manner we ought to do this. This dilemma also gets translated into the question of how we may speak of god; for, as Olthuis puts it, "...postmodern voices are declaring that the death of God finds its completion only in the death of the self" (236). How can we speak of that which both transcends language and is also, at every linguistic frame and turn, necessarily limited by our words? Can we speak at all of the other or of god? Is speaking necessarily a violence against the other? But what of remaining silent? Is silence already a speaking? If we speak of god do we then claim to speak for god? (229) Can we ever avoid speaking violently? In recommending silence have we not already spoken of the other; isn't it already too late? Smith develops this last question in, what I consider to be, one of the better essays in this collection. I say 'better' not because he comes up with a 'better solution' but because he is tackling a 'better' question; that is, one that seems like it should be on the tip of everyone's tongue when trying to work ethics in and out of postmodernism. In short, 'better' here means more relevant, urgent and pertinent.

Given the fact that we cannot help but have already spoken, our authors suggest that we must try to occupy some middle ground where we avoid speaking violently but also avoid not speaking. But why must we try to occupy this middle ground? What reason, what justification, can be given? Even in our appeal to reasons and justifications are we again not reverting back to foundationalism? I would like to see these questions addressed explicitly by each author. I feel as though the dinner buffet had been swept away just after I found something tasty. Sadly, I must admit that I am not convinced that we ought to try to occupy this 'middle ground' or that this is something we can will or try to do at all. Is the willing and trying to do what
is ‘right’ not again just another masked crusader of Reason riding high on its illusion of being steered by a prevailing and conquering subject? Not only do I find myself deeply desiring a good motive for seeking such a ‘middle ground’, I further find myself wondering whether any ‘middle ground’ is possible given that all language necessarily cuts, limits, and excludes.

The possibility of ethics goes hand in hand with the very demand for an ethics. This demand, piercing to the heart of each piece of work in this collection is, itself, a little unstable. Whereas for Lévinas this demand would “…already be a manifestation of ‘the ethical relation’“6, it is not clear what position our authors would take in this matter. While ethics is shown to be necessary it is not always obvious that the ethical relation is either original and/or unavoidable. With or without Lévinas’ help, it is still apparent that our authors have not addressed Robert Bernasconi’s serious objection precisely against such a demand.7

As we question the possibility of ethics or, more specifically, the possibility of occupying a ‘middle ground’ in language, we only find a description of what this ‘middle ground’ would look like. Smith describes it as ‘good story-telling’ where good news is announced (218).8 These ‘good’ stories are not ‘the story’ for, in recognizing that ‘certainty’ is an illusion, we come to see our story as only one of many (229). These ‘good’ stories are stories of healing that are told well. In telling a good story well we are revealing and attesting to what meant good news for us (229-30).

So now my question becomes: how can we tell a good story from the others? What makes a good story good? Is it good because it is delivered as such or is it good because it is received as such? It seems as though the goodness consists of a bit of both. What troubles me here is how the good story, told well, may be understood as good in light of some appeal to an ‘intention’ of the subject who delivers the story. I’m not sure that we have to wind back to such an appeal but we certainly run the risk of doing so in this book when we find that the good story, told well, relies upon the speaker’s ability and desire to only speak to others about what he/she believes to be beneficial.

But still, I ask, why prefer this ‘good story-telling’ to something else? Certainly there can be nothing in the world itself that is more ‘properly’ revealed through good story-telling. In response, I suppose our authors might say that we tell good stories in response to a call that we receive as a gift.9 Could we not equally say that there is a call to tell bad stories?

It is by no means a failing on the part of our authors that these questions emerge, for they already develop from the destruction of foundationalism. Nonetheless, I do not feel at all satisfied that the authors in this collection thoroughly addressed these questions. Despite this, I find that this book acted as an effective agent towards crystallizing some of the more pertinent
questions we need to ask in our attempt to find ethics a voice in the postmodern discourse. This book's strength lies in the way that it presents itself as an impulsive plea; the reader can't help but get the feeling that something must be done. We find such a passionate urge in Olthuis' insightful remarks: "...if one tarries silent on the threshold because metaphysical claims to certainty and warrants for power are illusions to be overcome, have we really overcome them?" (243). I find myself provoked by this book to ask difficult and unanswered questions, inspired to look for answers to these questions, and all the while moved with an all important "urge to connect" (248). And is this not, after all, what we are looking for in a good book?

Notes

1 Tamara Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainsley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Lévinas" in The Provocation of Lévinas: Rethinking the Other, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood (London: Routledge, 1988) p. 176.

2 This is essentially what H. Hart argues in the first paper in this collection entitled "Conceptual Understanding and Knowing Other-Wise", pp. 19-53.

3 Kuipers' essay explores to what extent we can find, in Derrida and Rorty, talk about selves as agents who respond to others.

4 Indeed, H. Hart asks this very question on page 34.

5 Olthuis' immediate solution to this is to think of grounding as beyond logical grounding, where "experiences of empathy, trust, and belonging, for example, are everyday sources of existential grounding" (p. 244). Unfortunately, not much time is spent developing this idea of grounding and, therefore, it fails to answer some of our more difficult 'why' questions.


7 Bernasconi argues that "the demand that deconstruction provide an ethics betrays not only traditional presuppositions about the possibility of generating ethical systems, but also a miscomprehension about the nature of deconstruction, confusing it for one philosophy among others. Hence in the face of the demand for an ethics, deconstruction can reply...that the ethical relation is impossible and 'the impossible has already occurred' at this very moment" (ibid., p. 135).
Olthuis, in his own words, gets the same point across with his talk about ‘good connections’. See, pp. 247-48.

See, for instance, pp. 244-49.

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*The Stories We Are: an Essay on Self-creation*
WILLIAM LOWELL RANDALL

The hermeneutical conception of the self as embedded within a temporal and narrative structure has been variously defended in recent years by the likes of Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, David Carr, Anthony Kerby, and Mark Johnson among others, and has established its credentials as one of the pre-eminent contemporary philosophies of the self. According to this view, the human subject is a profoundly social being the identity of which is constituted in terms of a life history with a beginning-middle-end structure and plotlines the function of which is to hold together and thus render coherent the scattered events and experiences that make up a life. As a hermeneutical theory, the narrative account of the self has most often placed some emphasis upon the social, and in particular the linguistic, dimension of selfhood. Human understanding and identity are likewise situated within finite perspectives of language and culture, raising questions about human autonomy in general, and in particular — in discussing the self — about the possibility of authentic self-creation. Whether the self may be conceived both as embedded within linguistic and other social practices, as constituted within particular horizons of understanding, and yet capable in significant measure of freely constituting itself is a question of considerable importance to the hermeneutical account, and one which William Lowell Randall persuasively answers in the affirmative in *The Stories We Are: An Essay on Self-Creation*.

“This is a book,” Randall writes, “about not only *having* a story but *being* a story as well,” and “about self-creation through self-storying.” (p. 4) The concept of self-creation is articulated in hermeneutical terms as a creative reinterpretation of one’s personal history within particular narrative structures, or stories as he prefers to call them. The self is capable of serving in the roles of protagonist, narrator, and coauthor alike with respect to the story that it itself is, and is by no means to be viewed merely as a product of social forces. Self-creation, self-actualization, and autonomy are conceived by this author as quasi-aesthetic notions all referring to the capacity for imaginatively refashioning experience through its reintegration within self-chosen plotlines.