

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Moments of Disruption: Levinas, Sartre, and the Question of Transcendence by Kris Sealey

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Book Reviews

on World War II, his commentary on Flaubert, and de Beauvoir's perspectives. In the concluding chapters, Hulliung tends toward speculation at the direction of Sartre's thought at the time of his passing and potential fulfillment of gradual shifts toward reconciling historical context with his view of the human condition. At these points the argument becomes less convincing. The final chapter, on Sartre's promise in the conclusion of *Being and Nothingness* to devote a future work to ethical questions, attempts to associate his encounters with history with a move toward addressing or reformulating social contract theory—suggesting that Sartre's deployment of historical thought, notably in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, provides some hints as to what such a treatise might have revealed. This is a somewhat frustrating conclusion to what is largely an intriguing text that presents history as the site of Sartre's grappling with the need to both contextualize his analysis of the human condition and to reconcile the extremes of human behavior with his vision of the human condition

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Kris Sealey, *Moments of Disruption: Levinas, Sartre, and the Question of Transcendence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 212 pp., \$26.95, ISBN: 978-1-4384-4864-0 (paperback)

Kris Sealey's *Moments of Disruption* reads Levinas and Sartre for their points of proximity despite seemingly fundamental differences in their conceptions of subjectivity, transcendence, and the relation to the other. The argument relies importantly and interestingly on teasing apart the formal theory each thinker offers and the concrete examples used to unpack and expand that theoretical point of view. Sealey argues, "When Sartre's concrete analyses are placed alongside Levinas's, they not only reveal a 'subject in disruption' similar to Levinas's, but they also exist in tension with a formal account of transcendence that prioritizes freedom at the expense of passivity" (3). On Sealey's reading, then, Sartre is not only *more* like Levinas than standard readings allow, he is *less* committed to the primacy of

freedom than traditional readings of *Being and Nothingness* insist. Central to Sealey's book is a provocation to the prevailing wisdom which says that one is *either* a Sartrean or a Levinasian—either for freedom or for ethics. She shows not only that these thinkers can be read together but that when they are so read the picture of Sartre's early work as offering little in the way of an account of ethical subjectivity must be significantly revised.

The book begins with Sartre's early conception of subjectivity as articulated in *The Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*. The subject that emerges from Sealey's reading of the formal analysis of these texts is the familiar Sartrean subject conceived as a pure nothingness, a freedom able to transcend all particularities of its situation. Indeed, the subject's situation—understood, for example, in terms of its socially ascribed racial or gender identity—is far from being a limit on the freedom. It is thanks to its situation that the freedom arises as freedom (39). This Sartrean conception of the subject, also described in chapter 1 in terms of “transcendence-as-intentionality,” is contrasted with the early Levinasian notion of the subject as simultaneously riveted to being and achieving a certain distance from that being—dubbed “transcendence-as-excendence” in chapter 2.

By providing these accounts of transcendence side by side, Sealey sets the reader up to appreciate the central moves of her overall argument. First, already in the early chapters of the book she points out the striking overlap in the concrete phenomena treated by Sartre and Levinas. While it cannot have escaped readers that both philosophers offer treatments of shame, nausea, or insomnia, the overlap is rarely remarked and has never, to my knowledge, been given the kind of extensive treatment that Sealey devotes to it. This in itself should provide much food for thought for readers interested in a particular post-Heideggerian account of human facticity. Moreover, not only does Sealey show that Sartre and Levinas describe these limit phenomena in similar ways, she argues persuasively that when we attend to the concrete analyses of the early Sartre, it seems as if he ought to have developed a formal conception of subjectivity much closer to Levinas's notion of an ethical subject disrupted or divided from itself.

This observation is hammered home over the next two chapters as Sealey deftly reads Sartre's *Nausea* as providing an illustration of exactly the sort of subjectivity Levinas describes. Roquentin's “nausea is a revelation of a more primordial positioned and *affected* solitude, on which free subjectivity then stands” (92). On Sealey's reading, the Roquentin who cannot shake off or sufficiently separate himself in any way from his experience is anterior to the Roquentin

who is the intending subject of experience. The novel's phenomenology thus exposes "an aspect of identity that is precisely *not* free to engage in a reflective exercise" of the famous Sartrean freedom. And although this other form of subjectivity, or this recognition of another dimension to subjectivity, "is not part of Sartre's formal ontology, his concrete description of nausea clearly resonates with this idea of a passivity underlying the work of freedom" (92).

For Sealey, the subject peeping through a keyhole, the woman letting her hand be held in the café, the homosexual, or the hiker before a rock face, are further examples of concrete descriptions that do more and other than what Sartre would have them do. All of them significantly undermine the picture of freedom in relation to existence that dominates the first half of *Being and Nothingness*. The Sartrean subject turns out to be riveted to its own existence in much the way that Levinas describes in early works such as *From Existence to the Existent* and *Time and the Other*. The subject surges up on the ground of existing, claims a kind of distance from that ground, but ultimately cannot free itself entirely.

In the descriptions of nausea and shame, in particular, Sealey gives life to the possibility of a Sartrean understanding of subjectivity that is more nuanced and attentive to embodiment. This also suggests to Sealey the possibility of a subjectivity disrupted by alterity and potentially responsible in a manner closer to Levinas's famous analyses. It is this "concrete" Sartre—or the concrete Sartrean subject that emerges through the examples—that resonates with Levinas's picture of ethical subjectivity. The final chapter of the book turns more explicitly to the question of each philosopher's reading of "the Other" and to the ethical ramifications to be drawn from their respective philosophies.

Moments of Disruption tellingly disrupts the usual ways in which Sartre and Levinas are read (or, more precisely, *not* read) together. Equally, Sealey's book serves up a view of subjectivity interesting in its own right and deserving of consideration beyond its origination in any particular figure or text. Whether this particular conception of subjectivity is grounded uniquely in the phenomenological-existential tradition is a larger question that remains to be answered, and it would have been interesting to see Sealey tackle a broader contextualization of her ideas alongside a decidedly welcome contribution to the understanding of two important twentieth-century French philosophers.

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