



## Earthly passion(s): Essays towards an emotional ecology

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The emptiness of hunger [...] emptier than all curiosity, cannot be compensated for with the mere hearsay of what it demands.<sup>1</sup> Levinas (2004: 72)

To All, which all love, I say no. If any who deciphers best,

What we know not, our selves, can know,

Let him teach me that nothing...

John Donne<sup>2</sup>

The essays that follow reveal both the pervasiveness and the complexities of affective entanglements with ecology. Amongst other things they chart difficulties in recognising and owning up to even having such feelings, not to mention trying to give an account of them to others. Emotions seem deeply personal, the very core of our inner experience. And yet they arise through our exposure to the world and expose us to that world's patterning and its vagaries; they trouble as well as affirm our sense of self-identity. Emotions draw us out of our shells or make us withdraw, touch us, affect us, alienate or connect us. Perhaps we might even begin to think of this patterning of exposures, each to each other and to the environing world, as itself constituting a kind of communicative ecology.

There are certainly barriers to thinking in this way. So many aspects of contemporary society serve to relegate emotions to an entirely subjective realm, denying their efficacy and legitimacy in fields of activity that lay claim to a certain objectivity (for example, in the economic or scientific evaluation of environmental policies). Of course, showing one's emotions may be deemed acceptable in certain restricted circumstances and ways, but again this is precisely where some-one is expected to demonstrate the presence of

a real and concerned individual underlying their actions; think of the 'passionate', but actually minutely controlled and rehearsed, expressions of the presidential candidate. It often seems that emotions acquire legitimacy only to the extent that they can be induced, managed, controlled and enlisted by the powers that already structure society. While to be emotionally involved is not always deemed a fault, its public expression is only tolerated under well-defined parameters, only when it suits certain dominant interests.

That said, and despite difficulties in expressing feelings that challenge accepted norms, our daily lives are still awash with emotions. And though there may be problems in representing and communicating emotions in the dominant language (see, for example, Irigaray's critiques of phallogocentrism<sup>3</sup>) such difficulties are not just a matter of the quantity or specificity of words, nor is it the case that words themselves fail to affect us. Rather, such issues might indicate a limit to language in a different, Levinasian, sense (although it could certainly be theorised in other ways, for example, Lacanian or Irigarayan, or Deluzian). From this perspective such difficulties in expression are themselves caught up with the limits of thinking of passions as (merely) subjective, as things to be identified with and categorized as the sole property of a specific and isolated individual, perhaps especially the kind of isolated individual that is assumed to underlie the world-dominating social, economic and political form taken by our current neoliberal 'consensus'. This modern individual certifies his (and this is a masculine ideal) autonomy precisely by exerting this (reflexive and rationalistic) sovereignty over the primordial ooze of the passions – by shaping them, giving them direction, putting them to service, directing and supervising them, reigning them in or, when social circumstances allow, *letting* them rip. Of course, he can *attend* to his feelings too, but such attention usually instantiates rather than challenges their subjectivity, much as the shepherd's attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel (2004) *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Pittsburgh: PE: Duquesne University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Donne, John (1984) *Negative Love or The Nothing* sleeve notes to John Adams Harmonium ECM Records.

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray, Luce (1985) *This Sex Which is Not One* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

his flock in no way alters where the locus of power over their lives and deaths is presumed to lie.

Now Levinas's philosophy radically undercuts the numerous ways in which we tend to recuperate the affects others have upon us in ways that allow us to place our subjective consciousness centre-stage. From Levinas's perspective, to *recognise* a feeling, like hunger, is already to *cognize* it, to force it to play a role in the constitution of a supposedly sovereign self-conscious individual. To *own up* to *having* a feeling, is already a kind of claim of *ownership* – the emotion is mine and mine alone. To try and *say* something about our feelings is, inevitably, to have them concretized in what is *said*, it is to 'identify' them, to place them within an ontology (and an ontology where the subject holds a special place). It is to uncritically accept the primacy of the subject as something always already existing here and there (*Da-sein*). But, Levinas argues, before and beyond this subjection of sensing to the ego, before *my* sensing (something), *my identifying* (identifying myself with or labelling) that sense, before even intentionality, there is a corporeal exposure, a sensing that is a suffering and an enjoyment of others who have nothing essential in common with and are in no way reducible to my-self. This exposure can, he claims, only be understood as *ethics*, but not an ethics that starts with a ready constituted subject that only later finds it in her or his heart to care for others, but an ethics that is nothing less than the incessant troubling of the subject, an ethics that both precedes and can suddenly lay bare our self-centred pretensions. "To give, to-be-for-another, despite one-self, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's own mouth, to nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting" (Levinas, 2004: 56).

This sounds like an impossible ideal of self-abnegation, but it is really something quite different. It is a challenge to the primacy of the subject as an ontological foundation for life and the rejection of every philosophy (whether ontological, epistemological, or ethical), that begins with a ready-formed and/or a self-possessed subject.<sup>4</sup> For Levinas, human life is, before anything else, an involuntary passion occasioned by the proximity of others, and this passion is a sense of exposure. Levinasian philosophy could not begin with 'sense data' already artificially stripped of any emotional complexities so as to make them more amenable to objective philosophical analyses. But nor can it begin with a subjective I, that in the very act of thinking about itself, grounds its own existence. Before and beyond subject and object, is a "sensuous affection" (Lingis in Levinas, 2004: xxxii), which is not to understand affects as isolable things, but in their *complicity*, their lawless anarchic involvement and incorporation into the ipseity, the singularized fabric of differently embodied and composed living beings; "life lives off its sensations" (Lingis in Levinas, 2004: xxxii). Of course, we inevitably recuperate something of this exposure into our self-understandings, but beyond and troubling this recuperation are always traces of non-identity, of illeity. This illeity, this being in response to exposure to others, is "a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me" (Levinas, 2004: 12).

In a sense then, and despite his explicit humanism, Levinas (2003)<sup>5</sup> might be understood as offering a way into an incipient emotional *ecology*, a patterning of exposures to others that leaves its traces even in the core of the most self-possessed and self-interested individual. And the trace of a response that occurs despite *me* introduces (indeed for Levinas necessarily introduces) a responsibility for the other with whom we come face to face

(although it might also be thought of as introducing just a *possibility* of an ethics, a seed that might germinate even after years of dormancy).

In saying this we should be clear that Levinas does not restrict his analysis to, or even focus directly on, emotions as usually understood, and he is very far from expressing any interest in ecology (but see the essays in Edelglass, Hatley and Diehm, 2012).<sup>6</sup> However, he might still be understood as offering a radically different way to think about affective (and ethical) community, and one that subverts dominant strands of modern social and political theory. For the patterning of exposures Levinas speaks of is not a matter of mutual interests, or of an inter-esse, an arena of competing *beings* alone or in combination, an egoistic free market (an arena Levinas (wrongly) thinks defines and circumscribes the political realm). It is not a matter of "calculation", "mediation", "commerce" or "exchange" (2004: 4), where "beings remain always assembled, present [...] a present without fissures or surprises, from which becoming is expelled" (5). The patterning of exposure – the passions engendered by others – transcends, exceeds, and is antecedent to such restrictive models. Perhaps then an emotional ecology tries to say something about a more-than-just-human, and different to human, worldly illeity, the traces and the responsibilities to the otherness of the 'natural' world that calls us, despite our-selves.

This approach may also help make sense of some of the problems we have in speaking about emotions, and especially speaking about emotions regarding the more-than-just-human world, a world that dominant powers and strands of thought dismiss as lacking subjectivity altogether.<sup>7</sup> To put it bluntly, if emotions are subjective and only humans are subjects then any emotional community (in an ethical sense) is either limited to interactions between these ready formed human subjects, or exists only so far as it informs the consciousness of such subjects *qua* their being subjects. This means there cannot be an actual *ecological* community in any sense other than the 'objective' sense of scientific ecology and that to say anything about *feeling* a sense of emotional/ethical community with the 'natural' world is simply irrational – the mere painting of 'our' subjective emotions onto an ethically indifferent world – for such a community is, on such a view (ontologically) impossible. But if patterns of exposure to others transcend and even subvert the ontological precedence given to subjectivity, if ethics is, as Levinas claims, first philosophy, then no such barriers exist (and even Levinas's own humanist attempts to limit ethical community to humans are revealed as a residual attachment to an essential (ontological) difference that divides humans from the rest of the natural world). Rather, we might say, a passionate involvement in the world is a calling that precedes and interrupts subjectivity and not something invented by or subsumed under subjectivity. To be sure, the attempts to *say* something about this will almost inevitably be re-incorporated into the dominant discourse, into what is *said*, but such saying also informs the creation of radically different communities of responsibility.

What I want to suggest here then is that Levinas's work can speak to the unpredictability of the passions that are potentially (though for him necessarily) ethical in the ways they lay bare our presuppositions, their elemental exposure of the limits of consciousness. It speaks to an absolute challenge to our sense of self, of

<sup>6</sup> Edelglass, William, Hatley, James, Diehm, Christian (2011) *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

<sup>7</sup> It may also facilitate a productive departure from current ways of thinking about the relation between emotion and affect, where many of those interested in affective accounts tend to regard talk of emotion as implicitly, if not explicitly, tied to an ontology and a system of representations that prioritises a sovereign 'subject'.

<sup>4</sup> Although interestingly and rather bizarrely, Levinas regards politics as a realm almost entirely composed through competing egos in a very Hobbesian fashion.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel (2003) *Humanism of the Other* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

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