

“No one is more self-sufficient than Rousseau”:

Dependence, Vulnerability and Levinas’s New Ethical Subjectivity

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“No one is more self-sufficient than Rousseau,” Levinas proclaims in his 1935 book, *On Escape*, a statement that could be easily dismissed as a passing swipe at the 18th century thinker.¹ No doubt, Levinas would have ambivalent feelings about Rousseau, whose philosophy is often cited as influential in the French Revolution and the development of the French Republic. Yet, Levinas’s stab at Rousseau’s emphasis on self-sufficiency is not simply a throwaway line; self-sufficiency lies at the heart of a humanism that would develop out of modernity and to which Levinas offers a sustained response. In short, “self-sufficiency” sums up everything that Levinas believed went wrong with modernity.

Levinas’s announcement accurately and succinctly characterizes Rousseau, especially if we recall the 18th century French philosopher’s thoughts on education.² His comment directs our attention to the fundamental problem with that philosophical position sponsoring an approach to education. Among other themes explored in this 1935 work, the most noteworthy is Levinas’s emphasis on the body and the role that embodiment plays in the formation of our identities. His phenomenological description reveals that our embodiment requires our vulnerability and dependence.³ Our bodies demand our attention and thus, our first responsibility is to feed them, clothe them, and protect them. Our primary needs betray our belief that we are free in the sense that Rousseau celebrates.

Levinas’s writings follow the trajectory that begins with these early essays from the 1930’s. In striking contrast to Rousseau’s philosophical position—a position that dominates and

defines much of modernity—Levinas’s writings advance the view that we are essentially dependent on others and this dependence is part of what it means to be human. As we see in his later philosophical writings, especially *Totality and Infinity* and then *Otherwise than Being*, subjectivity is defined by one’s ethical response to the other, not by one’s freedom or ability to make autonomous decisions. Interestingly, this thread entwines with another, that of his treatment of the feminine. In his early formulation of the ethical relation, the feminine inaugurated the experience of alterity and then developed into a transcendental condition for the possibility of the ethical, i.e., it provided the means for the subject to transcend to the level of the ethical, while not participating directly in the relation.⁴

Levinas ultimately names the feminine, defined as the maternal body, as the paradigm for the ethical relationship itself.⁵ However, he does not expect that it is only women who either are or should be capable of ethical response. His use of the maternal as a simile—“the psyche is *like* the maternal body”—assures us of that.⁶ Rather, it is the feminine, in this case, the maternal body, that provides us with the best description of that which he cannot otherwise describe—an unwilled, irrecusable, responsibility. He uses the feminine to define the ethical, but it is the ethical that defines us, all of us—men and women—as human. Again, in contrast to Rousseau, his view of subjectivity simultaneously endorses and rejects a rigid emphasis on sexual difference. His philosophical project exploits this originary dependency, revealed by our own primary needs and our original relationship to the maternal body. In contrast to Rousseau’s aversion to dependence, dependence forms the ground for Levinas’s radical subjectivity and the ethical project based on that subjectivity.

Although Levinas gestures towards this change through the trope of the feminine, we see in his philosophical essays collected in *Humanism of the Other* (1967-1971) and his writings on

Jewish education, collected in *Difficult Freedom*, a direct philosophical challenge to the mythology of self-sufficiency that characterize Rousseau's political philosophy and much of the modern Enlightenment project. In short, "self-sufficiency," and the educational models this produced sum up everything that Levinas believed went wrong with modernity. Levinas's ethical project exchanges self-sufficiency for dependence, vulnerability, and turning toward the suffering of the other—the new traits of ethical subjectivity—and his educational model describes how we might cultivate this subject.

¹ Another way of reading the development of *Émile* is Rousseau's focus on self-preservation.

Hence, his insistence that the only book *Émile* should read before becoming an adult is *Robinson Crusoe*. For an interesting reading of this book in light of Levinas's philosophy, see John Llewelyn, "What is Orientation in Thinking? Facing the Facts in *Robinson Crusoe*, in *In Proximity: Emmanuel Levinas and the 18th Century*, Melvyn New, editor (Lubbock: Texas Tech Press, 2001), pp. 69-90.

² Levinas, *On Escape*, translated by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 50. Published in French as *De l'évasion* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana 1982), 91.

³ When thinking about Rousseau's *Emile*, it is difficult not to think about one's own practical experience with children.

⁴ See *Time and the Other*, translated by Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. Originally published as *Le Temps et l'autre* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1979; 1st ed. 1947) and *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969. Originally published as *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'exteriorité* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971; 1st ed. 1961). See also, Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: the Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁵ See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being; or, Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981. Originally published as *Autrement qu'être, ou, Au-delà de*

l'essence (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974). Hereafter cited as OB/AE followed by the respective page numbers.

⁶ See *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 67. Translation altered: “Psychisme comme un corps maternel” (AE 107).