

Book Review

Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas* (Oxford University Press, 2015)

The body of work left to us by Emmanuel Levinas provides us with no shortage of philosophical problems. Levinas, in fact, appears to be consistently interested in creating problems for his readers. In his recent offering, *The Problem with Levinas*, Simon Critchley points to a central and lasting issue with the work of Levinas. The problem with Levinas, as presented by Critchley, has to do with his acceptance and critique of Martin Heidegger's grand indictment of the idealism of western philosophy. Levinas embraces Heidegger's critique of intellectualism, but points out the tragic fatalism of finitude that is left behind. Heidegger's Dasein is properly and primarily concerned with its own finitude and death. Here, for Critchley, lies the problem that Levinas wrestles with from the beginning to the end of his long career: is there any escape from the tragedy of finitude? This is *The Problem with Levinas*.

The book takes the form of four lectures, with the tone and informality of oration. Critchley's clever and irreverent humor has long been the hallmark of his lectures and panel discussions. Readers will find more of his wit in this book than anywhere else in Critchley's writings. This is not accidental. He suggests that the dynamics of *drama* might be a better lens through which to think about Levinas's big problem, so it seems fitting that these lectures read like transcripts of a dramatic performance.

Critchley notices that Levinas frequently invokes the notion of drama and the terminology of theater to describe his philosophical moves. Rather than think of Levinas as primarily staking philosophical or moral claims, Critchley suggests that Levinasian philosophy is principally dramatic. Though *The Problem with Levinas* is informal and refreshingly irreverent, it does not fail to stake its claims with careful and intimate readings of Levinas's texts. The framing of Levinas's philosophy as drama resonates both with Levinas's language and with the unique approach taken by Levinas in his critiques of traditional philosophy. Rather than a formal argument that investigates premises, Levinas uses the dramatic stage of phenomenology to demonstrate the inadequacies of philosophy. Heidegger provides a kind of comedy, Critchley claims, because he demonstrates the farcical inadequacies of "the intellectualism and theoreticism of traditional philosophy" to dispose human beings to their world, their lives, their history and their deaths (134). Levinas, while embracing Heidegger's critique, flips the tables and turns Heidegger's critique into a comedy. Heidegger wrestles us free from the strictures of intellectualism but leaves us with nowhere to go but death. Levinas points out that Heidegger has rightly robbed us of our delusional idealism, but leaves us inescapably riveted to our finitude. Comedy has turned to tragedy.

Critchley believes that Levinas is far better at creating problems for philosophy than he is at providing solutions. This is far from an insult to Levinas or his work; it is an indication that Levinas has made a truly brilliant discovery. As he proceeds through his lecture series, Critchley outlines the mixed results of Levinas's own efforts to provide an escape from the tragic fatalism of Heideggerian philosophy. Levinas demonstrates that we are riveted to our bodies and we appear to be lodged in a brutal existence, but he then suggests that the tragedy of finitude is broken up by the encounter with the infinite, particularly in the encounter with the other person. This idea, that the other person provides salvation by breaking open the tragedy of finitude, is Levinas's one big idea.

Yet Critchley finds that Levinas's efforts to demonstrate this move often run into trouble.

In his effort to talk about the movement of substitution, in which the self might undertake the suffering of the other, Critchley finds Levinas too close to masochism. When Levinas turns to the gender, and particularly to the "woman" to explicate the dynamics of the intersubjective relation, Critchley points to trenchant critiques by Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray. Where Critchley thinks Levinas makes his best progress is in the fascinating Section IV of *Totality and Infinity* in which Levinas writes of the "Phenomenology of Eros." With a profound meditation on *The Song of Songs*, Critchley closes his lectures by extending and expanding Levinas's own reflections on love to better answer the problem of escape. In the final sections of the book Critchley affirms that Levinas has found the right *problem*, but hopes to think past Levinas in a manner that would not be pre-Levinasian. Critchley's *The Problem with Levinas* is comedic through-and-through; he seeks to do better than Levinas at turning Heideggerian tragedy back into comedy. This book is comedic in the more common sense as well; it is sometimes genuinely amusing.

The Problem with Levinas is conversational and approachable; Critchley's examples are colorful and engagingly irreverent. Readers expecting a cautious, serious monograph will be disappointed. Critchley pauses to give advice to graduate students, to joke and ponder whimsically. Some of these moves are the remnants and fragments of spoken performance, and others are what he calls "a fiction, a conceit" (vi). The book does not fail to provide a close and very personal reading of the work of Levinas, and they appear to be faithful readings of those texts. Critchley has been engaging and critiquing Levinas in various ways for many years, and in this very personal book we find the reason for this sustained interest. *The Problem with Levinas* "is the right problem" (132); it is philosophy's most important problem.