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The Consequences of a Heliocentric Epistemology

Jennifer Scuro

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Abstract

In this paper, I critique the Western tradition’s epistemological investments and priorities in both word and deed. The ‘heliocentric’ metaphors of light and sight implies: “I’ll know it when I see it.” This primary assumption of a heliocentric epistemology and there has emerged a tradition that has uncritically rooted its epistemological metaphors in this heliocentric metaphors. In doing so, has preserved an imperialistic approach to alterity. Using Levinas’ ethical metaphysics, by troubling the ‘interestedness’ of the eye as it seeks out essences, guides epistemological claims, and demonstrates a kind of epistemic ‘deafness,’ I hope to re-direct the work of the eye, opening it up toward the possibility of alterity.

The goal of this project is to problematize the idea that the different sensations come from their respective physiological components (sight from the eyes and sound from the ears), beginning with sight, and, therefore, I want to also problematize the desire for objectivity that can be satisfied by this assumption. In this paper, through a phenomenological approach, I outline three consequences of a heliocentric epistemology: 1) that objectivity often

unsuspiciously crosses over into objectification; 2) that sensation, particularly sight, as a starting point for knowledge, is in fact a kind of ‘numbness’ and can be insensitive to the Other; and 3) a heliocentric epistemology cannot be ethically receptive to and especially not affectionate toward alterity.

Introduction

The narrative of the heliocentric (and Western) tradition of knowledge-formation easily begins with Aristotle:

All human beings by nature desire to know. A sign of this is our liking for the senses; for even apart from their usefulness we like them for ourselves – especially the sense of sight, since we choose seeing above practically all others, not only as an aid to action, but also when we have no intention of acting. The reason is that sight, more than any of the other senses, give us knowledge of things and clarifies many differences between them. (*Metaphysics* 980a21- 26)

Arguably, this seminal description of knowledge and our affection for sight-based knowledge-formation has not altered much in Western philosophical thought. Even Descartes, archetypical of the heliocentric tradition, uncritically adopts his position about the mastery and possession of nature from Francis Bacon (Ribe 1997, 47),¹ and supports a representational theory of sense perception. Descartes’ development of a theory of optics carries a more questionable assumption about the status of corporeal nature as well.

Descartes’s doctrine [is] that the purpose of sensory perception is to preserve the mind-body composite, not to provide knowledge of the essential nature of things. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the *Dioptrics* is to “master” human vision by raising it from a mere means of self-preservation to an instrument of scientific knowledge. (42)²

Still built on a Cartesian model of epistemology, the scientific determinations of both the nature through sight and light (and the subsequent creation of technologies that will make seeing-that-entails-knowing more powerful) serve the goal of mastery over the natural world in an imperialistic approach toward knowledge-formation. From Descartes:

All the conduct of our life depends on our senses, and because sight is the noblest and most comprehensive of these, inventions which serve to increase its power are undoubtedly among the most useful there can be.³

Interestingly, in his ambition to perfect our vision of nature, Descartes employs a standard of “clear vision” which includes “the ability to see simultaneously the greatest number of objects possible” (Ribe, 56). ‘Seeing more’ is a goal in service to ‘seeing better’; what we seek to ‘see better’ is the corporeal world as it is composed of ‘objects’. The goal of his study of optics is both to “see better” and to “see more” (60).

There has been little relief in our contemporary expression of these epistemic imperatives of “seeing better” and “seeing more.” The chief priority in thinking about the world, (including all externality and, therefore, *alterity*) is to interpret experience in terms of ‘clear and distinct ideas’; in this way, a demonstrated ‘clarity’ (of vision, of ideas) regarding ‘external objects’ [*res extensa*] has remained a standard for epistemic power.⁴ The passivity of consciousness as it receives sense-data (yet not a reception for alterity) has led to the peculiarly Western style of knowledge-generation which fundamentally desires and seeks out spectacle.

This desire has ‘feminized’ both objects of the natural world and forms of knowing that do not meet the Cartesian standard of clarity in ideas, constructing distance between sensation and the reception of sense. The body of the world is given its place – its externality – in relation to consciousness, such that ‘nature’ remains understood as an aggregation of seen objects that

(must and do) yield to masculinized project of objectification. The desire for spectacle and clarity seems sated at the same time especially by technologies that provide an exacting lens for vision-based surveillance.

The reductionism and compartmentalization of sensation as if it were sourced only in the “five senses” (with sight being the most preferable mode of sensation), limits the possibilities of how we might ‘sense’ exteriority. Here, I want to suggest a philosophical and feminist intervention⁵ into the covert ways that the heliocentricism of traditional epistemology has denied the possibility of a more feminist and fundamentally ethical sensibility. To build upon this possibility, I argue, is to begin this intervention with Marilyn Frye’s call for a loving eye complemented with Emmanuel Levinas’ idea of the ‘listening eye.’

In Frye’s call for a “loving eye,” she describes an attunement within perception that counteracts and provides an alternative for the “arrogant eye.” The arrogant eye functions in a “phallocratic culture” in which the arrogant perceiver “falsifies” and “also coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes” (1983; 52, 67). Where the arrogant eye has dominated traditional epistemology, the loving eye, as she describes it,

knows the independence of the other. ... The loving eye is one that pays a certain sort of attention ... [having] a discipline but *not* a self-denial. The discipline is one of self-knowledge, knowledge of the scope and boundary of the self ... where one’s self leaves off and another begins. (75-76)

Levinas suggests a similar shift in perception and attunement with his “listening eye” against the work of ontology:

Behind being and its monstration, there is now already heard the resonance of other significations forgotten in ontology, which now solicit our inquiry. ... Once again, for the “listening eye” a silence resounds about what had been muffled, the silence of the parceling

out of being, by which entities in their identities are illuminated and show themselves. (1981, 38)

We will take the 'listening eye' here as indication of a play on the meaning of 'sense' as it may be understood through an ethics of alterity. Western ontology has so supported an "absolute exposition" of beings (human and non-human) that, according to Levinas, it loses the "verbalness of verbs" and the "inexhaustible diversity of works" (40). Especially in response to this latter problem of ontology, Levinas argues that there is a resonance that can be awakened by exegesis. The attunement to beings remains deaf to this resonance through ontology when "entities make a show" and entities are "fixed in or by nouns" in which one "can show oneself ... [as] profoundly deaf as in the deafness of hearing only nouns in language" (41). In this way, we can also argue how the work of the (ontological) eye has been gendered;⁶ producing essences that are deaf to the verbality of existence and seek to expose being for the sake of fixing them to the exposition and for the sake of having and saying nouns (including for the work of claiming "natures" and "qualities").

Following Levinas' play on the idea of the 'listening eye,' I think this *mixing of metaphors*⁷ will allow me to make (further) trouble with the heliocentrism embedded in moral and epistemological claims. There is serious philosophical content in the feminist critique of our shared desire for empirical objectivity (and the way it has contributed to the obvious forms of objectification, for example, of women's bodies). I am adding to this critique the ethical imperative of adding a further intelligibility to the epistemological contributions of touch and listening, over and against the dominance of sight-based knowledge. This intervention is not only an attempt to speak to and defend a more 'feminist' sensibility in epistemological claims, but also to give place for the possibility of knowledge-generation that is rooted in ethical sensitivity.

In problematizing the idea of knowledge based on *sensation* and an aggregation of sense-data, dominated by the desire to see better and to see more, I am making a move toward a more feminist *sensibility* in the sense of Frye's call for a loving eye. This move should include, more importantly, demand for *sensitivity* toward alterity.⁸ This ethical sensitivity is an alter-epistemology to traditional phallogocratic and heliocentric epistemology. This alter-epistemology will be not only more feminist in its orientation but possibly more *affectionate* in its regard to the otherness of the Other.

Consequence One: The 'fine line' between Objectivity and Objectification

How might we make the work of the ontological, arrogant eye, the one that desires to 'see more' and 'see better,' suspect? Trinh Minh-Ha satirically plays out the narrative of the desire for spectacle that underwrites so-called "scientific" discovery, renaming the author of *The Sexual Life of Savages*, Bronislaw Malinowski, the Great Master. She rescribes the anthropological claims of the book as "a form of legal voyeurism" which is motivated by gossip (1989, 69). As she states it, it is a "conversation of 'us' with 'us' about 'them' ... in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless, barely present in its absence" (67). The voyeuristic desire is masked with an intention scientific as the ethnographer inserts "light, cold, objective remarks between novelistic descriptions ... What is put forth is not the interpretive aspect ... but the observational aspect" (69).⁹

It is curious how we have (at least historically) talked ourselves into thinking that 'seeing' can be 'knowing' and that observation can be neutral in its intention, erasing the arrogance (the aggressiveness?) of engaging alterity by way of spectacle. By 'watching,' 'talking

about' and, in effect, stripping 'naked and speechless' the other of our interest, we silence – or at least fundamentally render ourselves indifferent to – alterity and suppress the other as a thought-object through our epistemological claims.

Rae Langton serves my argument well in her outline on how women have suffered an “epistemic injustice” by having been excluded from knowledge-building and being counted as knowers (2000, 132). In “Feminism in Epistemology: Exclusion and Objectification,” she outlines the consequence of there being too ‘fine a line’ between objectification and objectivity. As she describes it, the sin of omission includes a sin of commission; not only have women been left out historically from knowledge-generation, but that women are in fact *hurt* by the exclusion because it is not remedied by simply letting women in (134). She argues that the commission is effected by the blurred relationship between objectivity and objectification, exercised by the norm of “Assumed Objectivity” (140). She borrows from Catherine MacKinnon to show this blurring: “Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it” (135).¹⁰ In this way, the position of Assumed Objectivity surreptitiously makes a claim about nature while, at the same time, disguising the normative stance. The desire-laden projection of the knower objectifies.¹¹

Best stated by Langton, “Assumed Objectivity has bad consequences for women” (142), she, in the end, I think, offers the provocative account of how we could come to believe in a quasi-objective way that women are submissive. In this case, the claim that women are submissive, armored with stance of Assumed Objectivity (as if observed submissiveness of women is assumed to also be a natural submissiveness), supported by biased social and political structures, is perceived true because the claim assumes to be describing an objective reality.

Therefore, *women*, as traditionally excluded from a position of objective knowledge-generation, *come to believe their submissiveness*. We come to see ourselves as the so-called 'objective' claims have come to see us. Because women have been left out and have not been given much opportunity to know themselves as generators of knowledge, they consequentially cannot provide much alternative and end up exemplifying the objectivist claims.

Consequence Two: Sensation versus Sensitivity

Sensation and sensibility are ... not situated at the surface level of reception and interpretation of "reality," but active processes that are the product of social and historical forces [citing Haraway, 1988]. A view of identity that privileges the present and the visible, ... risks disembodied sensibility if it assumes that sensation is a direct line to "reality" and "truth." (Corker 2001, 41)

The "closed phallogocentric signifying economy," as Butler reads Irigaray, "achieves its totalizing goal through the exclusion of the feminine altogether" (1990, 9). This economy is established with Baconian and Cartesian assumptions about methodology, in which, as Hans Blumenberg describes it, "light" is thought of as being at man's disposal. "Phenomena no longer stand in the light; rather, they are *subjected to the lights of an examination* from a particular perspective ... It is the conditionality of *perspective* and the awareness of it, even the free selection of it, that now defines the concept of 'seeing,'" (1993, 53).¹² The interest of a 'free' and 'objective' perspective makes 'seeing' the linchpin for interpreting all other sensation. The passive reception of externality (world as 'sensed') is already edited and censored for the privileging of this perspective. Sensitivity to externality is exchanged for a 'sense' of perspective (the distancing and heightening of the self apart from and distinguished from the self who 'sees'). As Blumenberg

describes it, “The eye wanders, selects, approaches things, presses after them, while the ear, for its part, is affected and accosted. The eye can seek, the ear can only *wait*” (1993, 48).

And Blumenberg argues a historical alignment of sight with freedom and hearing with tradition. The desire to manifest the object of interest as present, free from prejudice, is to also be free of the ‘handing down’ of tradition – so that “man” will be expected to “see it himself” (49). The continued exclusion of the feminine here rests with the insufficiency of relying on tradition combined with fact that women did not often get to inhabit the position of an objective perspective.¹³

In describing this consequence, I want to ‘make trouble’ with the traditional idea of sensation because it carries such normative bias. Following Mairian Corker, by troubling the normative assumptions of sight-based epistemology, we open up a mode of reading for alternative dispositions of sense, such that,

sensibility is ... used as a metaphor for the embodiment of these dispositions, specifically in people who sense the world differently. Further, sensibility must, by its very nature, take biological difference and socio-cultural difference to be mutually constitutive, rather than to regard either or both as given, and this troubles the impairment/disability binary. (2001, 36)

And, as she argues it, there needs be a more ethical and philosophical framework for liberating these biases that have been borrowed from scientific positivism (35).¹⁴ In her effort to “Disable Sensibility,” Corker describes what a “blind sensibility” offers:

blind sensibility can sense a community consciousness that displaces the opposition between public and private life. From a position that says “you look like what you are” – which, *in a visio-spatial world*, bears traces of the Cartesian “proof” of self-identity ... [– thus] reinforces the rational consensus that dis-ables blind sensibility. ... [Yet] it imagines a world in which sight doesn’t figure in the traditional sense. But for this imaginary to enter the

plurality, [we] must value absence by re-constructing the unity of sensory embodiments. (46)

To decenter the metaphors of the heliocentered interpretation of sensation (as it is ‘sense-data’) is to free up more feminist alternatives to making experience intelligible. There has already been a “privileging of the visible and the present” (Corker 2001, 37)¹⁵ such that we have lost not only the ethical capacity to sense the other, but the aesthetic possibility— an *affection*¹⁶ — for alterity as well. The aesthetic possibility is borne from an ethics of alterity; the radical openness to another renders the self dis-posed and dispossessed. When Levinas describes the death of a proximal other, he describes this disposition as it is inconsolable, its *radical sensitivity*: “it is emotion *par excellence*, affection or being affected *par excellence* ... as if humanity were not consumed or exhausted by measurement, as if there were an excess in death. It is a simple passage, a simple departure — and yet source of emotion contrary to every effort at consolation” (2000, 9). The ethical disposition — to be genuinely and deeply affected by alterity — is intrinsically related to a sensitivity and affection for that other as they are other and as they pass.

Yet, I think, to supplement Corker’s approach, we cannot just value absence but alterity in order to break the metaphors of heliocentricism. The shift here would have to be from *sensibility* (as Corker is suggesting) to *sensitivity*, implying the ethico-existential importance of otherness.

What would be required for this ethico-existential sensitivity for alterity and alter-existence? A good working example is Cixous’ call for women to ‘write themselves’ against the fact that women are taught, “you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid. ... And so we have internalized this horror of the dark” (2000, 389).¹⁷ Yet, she follows that: “*The Dark Continent is neither dark nor*

unexplorable. – It is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable” (393).¹⁸

In this way, as the epistemological metaphors for the way we sense and come to know the world have been built, employed and validated in Western phallogocentric discourse around ‘light’ and ‘sight’; so, knowing means to dis-cover, un-veil, illuminate, reveal, unmask, reflect, (even) explore, and examine; metaphors that are especially questionable in that they imply that “to see” is “to know.” In this way, even Corker’s challenge of a blind sensibility is still a reflection of this logocentrism; as it is also with Cixous’ ‘unexplorability’ of woman as she is trapped in the ‘horror of the dark’ because the metaphors have already bound her to the dominating demands of sight and light. The alternative here is to subtract from the dominance of the seeing subject by – in perhaps a risky way—mixing the metaphors.

“Unfortunately,” as Lisa Walker describes it, because the possibility remains that

sensitivity to issues of dominance and subordination does not immunize us against playing out old patterns in our work; to take up those issues is to risk revealing where we are still attached to the colonizing modes of thinking that structure our society. The possibility of breaking out of those modes of thinking lies precisely in the willingness first to take the risk of revealing our links to them and then to unravel the dense configurations of discourses that form those links to begin with. (1993, 871)

We need still to connect and problematize the way in which ‘subjecthood’ relies on and prioritizes experience through the eyes.

Cathryn Vasseleu explains how both Derrida and Irigaray assess Western heliocentrism, including how Western philosophy has become a “photology” [Irigaray’s term], (1998, 9). And, the critique of Irigaray has been that, in an effort to demonstrate the “(dis)associative metaphors” of the visual to the intelligible (14), Irigaray, in the end, only “reconstitutes a

dichotomy between touch and vision.” In order to avoid this path of re-establishing a dichotomy between senses, here I want to ‘confuse’ the metaphors so that we could understand how to ‘sense’ (and be sensitive to the possibility of) what is other than *object*, *externality*, or *absence*.

Consequence Three: The Neglect of Receptive Affections

In this intervention, and to defend the mixing of metaphors, I want to return to Levinas to build a position for an alter-epistemology: challenging the centrality of seeing as well as the demands for “good lighting”¹⁹ (And isn’t ‘good lighting’ *essential* to a pornographic culture?). I would like to offer an idea of epistemic sensitivity; a ‘receptive affection’ for alterity that can suspend the imperative to fix being ‘in our sights’ or satisfy interest in the spectacle. I begin this return to Levinas with his phenomenological account of the death of the beloved other. In *God, Death and Time* (2000), the death of a close and proximal other, alters the face of the other to a mere “deathmask” that can no longer speak from the position of alterity. By this account, in Levinasian ethics, the Self fundamentally desires the Other. Yet, in death, what we look for is no longer there; the loss of the expressive response and responsiveness of the other’s face returns us to an ethico-existential position of subjection.

What I think is provocative here about Levinas’ exegesis of the another’s passing, in the way death is described as “beyond biological processes ... phenomenologically,” is the idea that, with this death, there is a surprise of meaning: “the event ... overflows the intention” (2000, 12-13). The way the self is both put into question and made responsible by the departed other (“an ineffable responsibility” [12]), means that death, as he describes it, cannot be spectacle: “the spectacle of death is not bearable – or is so only for the masculine sensibility – ... [death] is a scandal, a crisis” (14). The loss of a proximal other re-minds me, not of my own death,²⁰ but

what it is to be called out by “*affectivity without intentionality*” (17). In this way, “Ethics slips into me before freedom” (176).

What is at the heart of this question of *affectivity* is Levinas’ reading of desire. In order to develop the phenomenological significance of this receptive affection (versus merely the “affected” state of the subject²¹) – a “passivity or passion” that interrupts the subject – would mean a suspension of the visible, in which the visible indicates “what perhaps pornography is ... [such that] love is a concupiscence, an investment by the *I [je]*. In love, the *I think* reconstitutes presence” (222). The significance and value for this disruption of the invested and intentioning ‘I’ needs a better name because the sense of self (as intending subject) is undone. The sense of self – recognizable and cognizant, having an easy and long-standing relationship with sensation through the traditional phallogocentric and heliocentric hegemony, only really open to seeing better and seeing more, loses place. In the affectivity of the other who passes, is a passion and overthrowing of the sense of self. Here, I make the demand that this sensitivity has both ethical and epistemological weight because it makes the desire for clarity and spectacle non-sense. This *sense for alterity*, this sensitive and receptive stance, opens the self to an interruption of its expectations, intentions, and investments and is a posture that resists heliocentric norms and an alternative site of knowledge-generation.

This sensitivity – which I hope could be understood as an affection toward alterity rather than just a threat to our sense of self – is “neither vision nor aiming.” As a receptive affection, it is neither speculative nor teleological in its reception of alterity (117, 139, 222), yet epistemologically significant because it is “a placing without grasp” (220).²²

Paul Davies examines the way in which Levinas has made the claim that: “The visible caresses the eye. One sees and hears like one touches” (1993, 252).²³ The metaphors of the face gives access to, but at the same time resisting, the position of the other in relation to experiential determination. Davies suggests that the awkwardness of the descriptions of the face also contains an appeal to ‘obviousness’ in order to make otherness intelligible; so that, “the experience of another’s face, the phenomenon of another’s face, is so extraordinary it is as if it were neither experience nor phenomenon” – a “radical paradoxicality” to say the least (1993, 254-255).

So, the face is not an object of experience.²⁴ It is not a presence available by way of consumptive examination and analysis. Resistant to a heliocentric epistemology, the face does not yield to “lights of [scientific] examination” (the work of seeing under the heading of experimentation and deduction);²⁵ instead the face speaks, issues commands, both “invites and forbids” (Davies 1993, 260). Citing Levinas as he discusses the meaning of the face with Philippe Nemo, Davies describes it accordingly:

The potential for examination detracts from the puzzling immediacy of the encounter: “access to the face is straightaway ethical [*d’emblée éthique*].” Instead of being seen, the face commands. In its nakedness, its vulnerability, its lingering just this side of thematization ... It speaks. Nemo responds to this move from vision to speech, from the face as an appearance to the face as prohibition, by remarking that “war stories tell us that it is difficult to kill someone who looks straight at you.” (*ibid.*)²⁶

It is in this conversation that Levinas states, “There is an essential poverty in the face ... In this sense one can say that the face is not ‘seen.’ ... It is uncontainable” (1985, 86-87). By shifting the meaning of sense – so that the face is an existential relation and not just sense-experience – the encounter with the face challenges our sense of perspective.²⁷ Levinas teases out a non-economic ‘place(-holder)’ for alterity: so that the sense of self is neither a dominant (as it might be in

sensation) nor in a subordinated position (of *sensibility*). The exteriority here of alter-existence cannot be actively determined by consciousness, grasped by the economy of signs. The extra-economic disorients normative and dominant senses of selfhood and world and then initiates possibility for the sub-ject to undergo revision.²⁸

But if sensitivity to alterity does not really arise from the existential significance of death, but instead, we allow that listening eye also to mean a loving eye, then, as Levinas argues it, “we come back to [a] love ‘as strong as death’ [or stronger?]... What we call, by a somewhat corrupted term, love, is *par excellence* ... my receiving the other – and not the anxiety of death awaiting me” (2000, 105).²⁹ Here, perhaps the ‘reception’ can begin – the sense for alterity – epistemological in that it is an “awakening”³⁰ or even “vigilance”³¹ for what is other than for me and of myself.

The **minimum** given to these receptive affections (“awakening” and “vigilance”) is that the subject is in the position of *non-indifference* in relation to alterity. Non-indifference “or desire, as a ‘tendency’ distinct from erotic tendencies” (112) is without “the model of fulfillment” (114), is a position of an “impoverished knowledge” (*ibid.*). The **maximum** given to receptive affection is the possibility of ethical substitution; what Levinas calls, “the one-for-the-other.”³² It is identity only insofar as it is “the identity of the assigned of him [*sic.*] who is responsible and cannot be replaced” (157). Levinas attributes to this “I” position of ‘altered affection’ (if you permit the phrasing) as *dis-appointed*, vulnerable in susception [*susception*]³³ that is also the locus of a ‘tearing away’ [*arrachement*], (158-159).

This alter-epistemology is grounded ethico-existentially; it does not seek to free the self of constraint or to establish and maintain identity (even as an alternative identity). This alter-

(almost non-)epistemology, comes from a “tearing out” with experience, such that “affectivity ... does not reduce to experience ... [but] is *transcendence*” (214) and, as Levinas puts it, is “more ancient than exhibition” (218). It is a not freedom to be or a liberation of the self but only *goodness* that is the ultimate ‘orientation’ of this epistemic demand of receptive affection. Following Levinas: “To be good is a deficit, [and] it is withering and stupidity within being; but it is excellence and elevation beyond being ... [it is] otherwise and *better* than being” (Levinas 2000, 223-224). If the loving eye is even possible, it must begin with a sensitivity – affection and receptiveness – for alterity.

Further Considerations

In “light” of the challenges presented in this paper, I feel compelled to ask about what it is to ‘see.’ What then is the claim that can be made by the work of sight?³⁴ Can watching/observing really ‘tell’ us anything that can be affected by and attentive to alterity, or, again, as a minimum, at least be *fair*?

Without much of an agenda, I offer Corker’s conclusion:

When we begin to think in this way, we open up the field of possibility to dialogue across difference at the “deep” level of signification, which is what I mean by “sensing,” without dictating “which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized.” To sense disability is to transcend identity politics in the search for inclusive societies, but it is also to challenge those who claim to have the authority in the philosophical interpretation of disability. (Corker 1993, 47)³⁵

I think what I might be presenting here, at least by way of suggestion, is that there is no act of ‘brute sight.’ Clearly, (hmmm, interesting how hard it is to get away from the metaphoric!) there is nothing ‘natural’ that can be claimed in what merely comes by way of the eye. Western

epistemology has, for far too long, trusted the work of the eye (as 'brute sight' – if even that assumption is permissible) as foundation for knowing the world and others in the world. Is it an accident that the perverse logic of racist discourse emerges from a *hunting* and *grasping* epistemology?³⁶

If, as Levinas suggests, “the possibility for knowledge to be meaning is not equivalent to the necessary reduction of all meaning to exhibition” (2000, 211), and that this insomniacality of the listening eye is to “sober” subjecthood (210), then the kind of ‘sense’ I am writing toward is one that is not arrogant or aggressive but does need to be taken seriously. The risk of defending an ethical sensitivity, going beyond the defense of a feminist sensibility, is the way it can be dismissed as effeminate. It is not identity (or alternative identity) that needs recognition, but the kind of possibility of receptivity – open to and giving place to alterity – that needs ‘recognition.’ In respect to Corker’s conclusion, beyond identity politics, the “field of possibility” needs defense so that it does not become ethically neutral, especially if it is to remedy and respond to the extensive *neglect* of alterity by the Western heliocentric tradition. If this survey of consequences for what I have described as a heliocentric, Western masculinized epistemology does not follow with an ethical injunction, (as in the kind I’m borrowing from Levinas, quite heavily, I admit), then there is no *urgency* to Corker’s call and to the field of possibility to transcend identity politics. And doesn’t there need to be a *stronger yet intelligible* demand behind the call for a loving eye in order to counter the dominance and seductions of the arrogant eye?

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Endnotes

¹ Ribe outlines how this is the case in three ways: 1) "science is 'to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe'"; 2) "that there is no fundamental distinction between the natural and the artificial ... [and] that man has no power over nature except that of motion"; and 3) "Descartes shares Bacon's conviction that one who would master nature must consent to be her servant: 'Nature to be commanded must be obeyed... Towards the effecting of works, all that man can do is to put together or put asunder natural bodies. The rest is done by nature working within'," (Ribe 1997, 47).

² Ribe also claims, "Accordingly, the first task of the *Dioptrics* is to gain practical or 'artisanal' knowledge of two distinct but intimately related objects: light itself and the human eye. The practical intent of Descartes's treatment of light is revealed by the explicitly instrumentalist character of his derivation of the law of refraction, which avoids any consideration of light's 'true nature'" (1997, 44).

³ Ribe is quoting Descartes' *Dioptrics*, from *Oeuvres de Descartes*, Vol. 6, (Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds. Paris: Vrin, 1982-1989), pp. 81-82, 82-83.

⁴ To this point, Ribe argues, in "particular, the ambition to summarize 'all the conditions that are required for [vision's] perfection' implies that nature is not a source of standards but is itself subject to the higher standard of Cartesian rationality" (53).

⁵ This intervention is philosophical and feminist. Philosophical in the way Levinas employs interventions that interrupt the self-same and everyday equivalences of meaning and feminist in the way Irigaray interrupts the circuits of phallogocentricism. See Tina Chanter's anthology, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Penn State UP, 2001).

⁶ The direction of my argument will not discuss much of the 'gaze' in order to take a different tack on the Western heliocentric legacy.

⁷ I'm also thinking here of an example I was given to me by my colleague, told to her by her teacher regarding writing (in particular, by hand): 'the hand has an ear.'

⁸ From *Cambridge Dictionary Online*:

Sensation: the ability to feel something physically, especially by touching, or a physical feeling that results from this ability; a general feeling caused by something that happens to you, especially a feeling which you cannot describe exactly.

Sensibility: an awareness of or ability to decide about what is good or valuable, especially in connection with artistic or social activities.

Sensitivity: understanding what other people need, and being helpful and kind to them; easily influenced, changed or damaged, especially by a physical activity or effect.

⁹ Levinas would go further on the Western significance of light: “The light whose brilliance the eyes admired is the same light that directs those eyes toward the given. And those eyes – which are bound to their innate covetousness, which aim at things and perceive, and which have the ruse of hunters ... become an industrious gaze. There is consequently an affinity [*convenance*] between secularity ... that becomes ontology ... and the good practical sense of men gnawed by hunger ... Every practical relationship with the world is representation, and the world represented is economic” (2000, 165-166). This practical sense and masculinized affinity runs counter to my attempt to describe the sensitivity for alterity that comes by way of receptive affection (Part Three of this paper).

¹⁰ Quoting Catherine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987), p. 50

¹¹ Langton also quotes and cites Marilyn Frye’s ‘Arrogant Eye’, “The arrogant perceiver ... coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes ... He manipulates the environment, perception and judgment of her whom he perceives” (138, quoting Frye 1983, 67).

¹² Blumenberg describes how the metaphysics of light and sight were built through the history of its metaphors. He also argues that, “The demand for the *presence* of the object under study is the point of departure for the modern idea of science, and in Bacon and Descartes, this demand is formulated in opposition to *auctoritas*. ... Implicit in this reproach is the assumption that reason does not need to ‘hear,’ because it can, at any time, make objects under study accessible to sight (experimentation) and insight (deduction). ... in the attitude of ‘hearing’ (i.e., being dependent on a tradition), there is often a hidden insufficiency ...” (48-49).

¹³ I want to footnote an alternative approach to the epistemic emphasis on ‘light’ and good ‘lighting’ that stems from Nietzsche’s critique of the Apollinian/Platonic model of knowing being (and, in this way, extending a feminist reading through Nietzsche’s existentialism. See Deutscher 2006.). For example, In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche revives the pre-Socratic concept of the Dionysian (484) in order to resist the ways that Western ontology has been unable to ‘spiritualize sensuality’ (488): “The moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato on is pathologically conditioned; so is there esteem of dialectics. Reason-[virtue]-happiness, that means merely that one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark appetites with a permanent daylight – the daylight of reason. One must be clever, clear, bright at any price: any concession toward the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downward*” (478). [Cited from *The Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. NY: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1968].

¹⁴ To this she notes, “That is to say, the signs ‘deaf,’ ‘blind,’ ‘paraplegic,’ ‘hearing impaired,’ ‘visually impaired,’ and ‘mobility impaired’ are the result of the empirical procedures of scientific positivism. These procedures ritualize particular signifiers, associated with disease, pathology and deviance, within dominant discourse.”

¹⁵ Corker citing Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997, 143 n. 6), *Exceptional bodies: Figuring physical disability in American literature and culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹⁶ Here, I think Levinas describes this affectivity best: as it regards the death of another, it is a “departure without return, a departure ‘with no forwarding address.’ Death – as the death of the other [*autrui*] – cannot be separated from this dramatic character” (2000, 9).

¹⁷ Cixous employs the metaphor of apartheid here.

¹⁸ Cixous goes on to describe the laugh of the Medusa, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing ... For when the Phallic period comes to an end, women will have been either annihilated or borne up to the highest and most violent incandescence. Muffled throughout their history, they have lived in dreams, in bodies (though muted), in silences, in aphonic revolts.” (393-394).

¹⁹ Here I’m playing with Blumenberg’s articulation of irony imbedded in the epistemology of “discovery.” The modern world comes to be known through ‘artificial’ lighting and the ‘optics of prefabrication.’ He argues that it is situation of “coerced vision” dominated by “technologically pre-cast situations and aspects, the modern extension of sensory spheres has not become a source of freedom” (1993, 54).

²⁰ Levinas clearly addresses Heidegger on the meaning of death as more than mere threat to my being; Heidegger has it so that “the source of all affectivity is anxiety, which is anxiety for being” and yet, Levinas considers the possibility that “annihilation could introduce us to a meaning that is not limited to nothingness” (2000, 13).

²¹ Here, as in the affectedness of a more ‘hedonistic’ desire: it is a “Desire of a different order than that of affectivity or the hedonic activity by which the desirable is invested, attained, and identified as an object of need. ... A desire without hunger, and also without end” (221).

²² The metaphor of the ‘grasp’ in Levinas is important epistemologically because that is how he reads how the Western tradition has approached the other. He questions the work of “gathering together” that Heidegger attributes to authentic Dasein, “This appropriation, this *Ereignis* [with the mine-ness of death]... concerns *Dasein* as properly its own ... where *Dasein* gathers itself in its proper meaning. ... Gathered together ... would not the *esse* of Dasein be dead, would it not be close to a thing and so, exhibited behind glass, exposed, like a portrait in a museum?” (2000, 34-35). The rigidity of the ‘grasping’ Dasein, engaging being out of an effort to ‘gather it together for itself’ shows the (still masculinized) intent behind this epistemic stance. So that we do not replace sight with touch (and substitute the heliocentric metaphors with ‘fleshy’ ones like caressing [Irigaray] and grasping [Heidegger]), receptive affection must (again) be a sensitivity that *mixes the metaphors*.

²³ Davies is quoting Levinas’ “Language and Proximity” in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 118.

²⁴ See Davies on this point (1993, 253).

²⁵ See note 12, re: Blumenberg.

²⁶ From Levinas’ *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985), pp. 85-86.

²⁷ Literally, “viewpoint.”

²⁸ From Walker: “The readings of feminist theories that follow shift between analyses of how “woman of color” and “butch” become essentialized as authentic subaltern identities signified by their visibility as “other,” theoretical moves that lead to the displacement from the field of radical subjectivity of those who do not “look like what they are” —women of color who can “pass” for white and femme lesbians who can pass for straight” (1993, 869).

²⁹ Levinas is citing Vladimir Jankélévitch, which he says, “Love, Freedom, and God are stronger than death. And vice versa!” (From *La Mort*, [Paris: Flammarion, 1966], p. 391)

³⁰ Levinas discusses the trauma to consciousness of an “awakening” to alterity: signifying the “putting into question of me [*moi*] by the other [*l’autre*] that takes the form of an appeal to my responsibility, that confers on me an identity. ... in which the conscious subject is ... split apart [*scindé*] but by excess, by transcendence: there we find the disquietude of time as awakening. This disturbance by the other puts into question the identity in which the essence of being is defined. This fission of the Same by the untenable Other at the heart of myself, where disquiet disturbs the heart at rest, ... this is awakening, this is temporality” (2000, 100-111).

³¹ This “vigilance” toward the other is not only the ‘wakefulness’ implied by the ‘awakening’ but the “keeping watch [*la veille*], which does not consist in keeping watch *over* [*veiller-à*] (something)” (2000, 208). Levinas describes the “insomnia” of this vigilance as “a metacategory ... [that] is the tearing of that resting within the identical” (209).

³² The “one-for-the-other” is heightened by the death of an other insofar as the other, ethico-existentially speaking, is “entrusted to me” [*m’être confié*], (2000, 12). Ethical substitution is exemplified by the giving the bread out of one’s own mouth to another. It signifies a tearing up of *jouissance*, of enjoyment in the self-same, and, for Levinas, “is openness, not only of one’s own pocketbook, but the doors of one’s own home, a ‘sharing of your bread with the famished,’ a ‘welcoming of the wretched into your house’ (Isaiah 58)” (1981, 74).

³³ Literally, the act of taking in another, as in a mode of ‘reception.’

³⁴ Motivating my question, to some degree, is Martin Jay’s account of the rising critique of ocularcentrism: “our increasing interest in the truths of interpretation rather than the methods of observation bespeaks a renewed respect for the ear over the eye as the organ of greatest value” (1988, 309) He describes the range of the authorship (quite abruptly, I think): “there has been a remarkably pervasive and increasingly vocal hostility to visual primacy in France ever since the time of Bergson. Whether in the philosophy of a Sartre or a Lyotard, the film criticism of a Metz or a Baudry, the feminism of an Irigaray or a Kofman, the theology of a Levinas or a Jabès, the literary criticism of a Bataille or a Blanchot, the literature of a Robbe-Grillet or a Bonnefoy, one can find a deep-seated distrust of the privileging of sight. It is even evident in the last place one might imagine, the visual arts themselves, if the explicitly ‘anti-retinal’ ... art of Duchamp is any indication. Perhaps because of the long-standing domination of Cartesian philosophy and the no less powerful role played by spectacle and surveillance in the maintenance of centralized political power in France, the reaction against ocularcentrism has taken a particularly strong turn there” (308-309). My response to this move toward hermeneutics is that Jay’s account may be too dismissive of what is at stake in the alternatives – an opportunity to position meaningfulness and an intelligibility of experience so that it does not commit the sins of *omission* and *commission* (See Langton on this point). Jay goes on to argue, (specifically regarding Jacques) “Ellul’s critique of ocularcentrism can be adduced but by now its overdetermined status should be obvious. So too should some of its problematic implications. It is worth dwelling on them for a moment before passing on to what I think are some of the deeper sources of the anti-visual discourse that has

prepared the way for the popularity of hermeneutics today” (310). He argues in the case of Ellul’s position: “Rather than essentializing sight, hearing or any other sense, it is far more fruitful to tease out their multiple, even contradictory potentials and recognize that different cultures at different moments have stressed some over others. At present, if the recent popularity of hermeneutics is any indication, we may well be entering a new period of distrusting vision, an era reminiscent of the other great iconoclastic moments in Western culture. Before we allow the pendulum to swing too far in the new anti-visual direction, however, it may well be worth pondering the contradictory implications of the humiliation of the eyes” (313).

³⁵ Citing Butler, (1999). New preface to *Gender trouble*, 2nd edition. New York: Routledge, viii.

³⁶ Hunting and grasping are Levinas’ metaphors and both have been discussed in the notations of this paper.