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Justice, Shame, and Being Weary: Facing All the Others

Levinas argues that justice emerges as the face to face relationship is (inevitably) troubled by the third, that is, all the other faces that have need and that claim one’s responsibility and care. As Levinas asserts, to respond to the face of the other always entails bypassing the faces of all the others, which is the realm of justice. Consequently, justice always manifests as an impossibility that disquiets the ethical claim of any singular face of the other. The responsibility of justice is infinite, as there are always innumerable faces that claim responsibility. This means that justice is always a place of weariness and fatigue. Justice calls us out of ourselves incessantly, but to some degree impotently. It is for this reason that the responsibilities imposed by justice are always haunted by shame, one’s feeling of being exposed as falling short in the responsibility to care for others equitably. This exposure leads to evasion. Shame involves exposure of one’s inadequacy before the other(s); it is felt as toxic. To feel shame normally leads to weariness, lassitude, fatigue. One troubling means of evading shame is to co-assemble shame with object-seeking negative emotions, such as anger, outrage, contempt, resentment and disdain. This allows shame to be externalized, to contain its disquiet, but its aim is hostility, being allergic to the other. In contrast, belonging to justice without succumbing to fatigue or to the lure of “virtuous” aggression means finding ways to co-assemble shame with compassion or other attachment emotions in a way that is emotionally positive, that allows one to escape being riveted to the self of negative, self-affirming emotions and to *face* all the others, vulnerably but eagerly; this will be explored in this paper.