

# Obligations in Contemporary Theatre and Performance Practices

## The Subjective Ethics of Meisner's Repetition Exercise: The incompatibility of objective morality and the performative moment.

---

### INTRODUCTION

With this paper I am asking us to take a step back from a conventional view of obligations and ethics in contemporary performance. Rather than assessing whether the theatrical event meets a set of obligations or ethical standards that we set for it, I want to ask whether we might find an ethical framework inherent in the process of the performative moment itself. This will separate out the question of whether a performance practice is ethical in itself, from whether it conveys an ethical meaning, and whether it has ethical consequences.

The performance practice that I will be examining in my search for an inherent ethical framework is The Meisner Technique, and in particular Sanford Meisner's Repetition Exercise. In taking this one example I do not mean to hold it up as the only ethical performance practice, or a model that might be universally applied, but I will claim that the unique qualities of The Meisner Technique allow us a particularly clear view of the issues that I will be discussing.

In particular I assert that the Meisner Technique, as represented in the Repetition exercise, operates according to a subjective ethics – one built on the individual perspective of the participants. The immediate charge to which my argument might be subject is one of moral relativism, and at a superficial level, this charge is apt. A subjective ethics has no objective, measurable rules from which it takes its authority, but builds its moral framework afresh in each instance, and from each perspective that it operates from. Although it lacks the black and white rules that give an objective ethics its security, it demands that those practicing it adhere to a rigorous process of ethical

behaviour. Therefore it is not the outcome that is measured according to ethical standards, but each phase of the practice.

It should be noted, at this early stage, that subjective ethics and objective ethics are not mutually exclusive. Rather they are alternative perspectives on practice that might be switched between in order to assess different aspects of it. I would argue that if either of these perspectives is neglected, a performance practice risks losing moral authority. This works both ways and a subjectively ethical practice that forgets objective moral judgement is at much risk of losing its moral compass as an objectively ethical practice is that ignores the subjective dimension. I will return to this wider discussion at the end of this paper, but as I believe that the subjective dimension of practice is more often overlooked, my focus here is to explore this side of the scales.

The Repetition exercise is performed by two actors who stand facing one another. The first will make an observation about the second who then repeats this back to the first. In the first level, called Mechanical Repetition, this is verbatim repetition, so if the first says, 'You have a blue shirt,' the second will say, 'You have a blue shirt.' Once this has been sufficiently explored, the class moves on to the second level, or Repetition From Your Own Point of View, where individual perspective is admitted. Now if the first says, 'You have a blue shirt,' the second will say, '*I* have a blue shirt.' If the second actor doesn't believe that the observation is correct, they might say, 'I *don't* have a blue shirt.' At the third level, called impulsive changes, either actor is allowed to depart from the terms of the original observation if they have the impulse to do so. So with the blue shirt example, after several repetitions the first actor might read their partner's behaviour and state, 'You're self-conscious,' which becomes the new observation to be repeated until one of them has the impulse to say something else. The new observation might also be something about themselves if this is what the impulse dictates. For example, the person who made the initial, 'blue shirt', observation might be impelled to confess, 'I feel under-dressed', which would then become the repeated phrase.

This all makes much more sense when you see the exercise being practiced, however, so here is an example from the Masterclass DVD, released by The Sanford Meisner Centre.

[PLAY VIDEO]

### OBJECTIVE VS SUBJECTIVE

My desire to identify a subjective ethics is inspired by the discourse of phenomenology in which phenomena occurring to the subject as experiences are treated as the raw data for philosophical arguments about the nature of reality.

A phenomenological examination of objects in the world brackets the issue of the objective truth of the objects, and focuses instead on the phenomena – how the objects present themselves to the consciousness of the subject. Husserl makes the case that objects in the world can only ever be grasped in an adumbrative fashion (through an infinite number of perspectival presentations, in each of which it is given only partially), but phenomena appear to a subject as whole and complete regardless of their relation to any objective truth. Husserl claims that phenomenology is potentially a more powerful method than the natural sciences because of this greater grasp of its target material (Husserl, 1970: 29-30).

The phenomenologist suspends any question of objective truth, of the sources or the validity of experience, from the consideration of that experience itself. This *epoché* forces them to turn their attention on to what they can grasp with their senses, and away from conjecture and argument about the causes of these phenomena or any objective truth that they may suggest. We can see that a similar suspension of judgement about objective truth is built into the Meisner Technique by Meisner when he states that he wants to rid his acting methodology of ‘all that “head” work’ (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 36).

The Meisner Technique makes this concrete for the actor by making it clear that it is what they themselves perceive (subjectively) that should determine their behaviour rather than what they

believe their character would do, because they view this character from the outside (objectively). In this way the Meisner Technique brackets aspects of the objective world in favour of the perception that the actor has of them. In Husserl, this is the principle that the transcendental phenomenological reduction actualises (Husserl, 1980: §50), and Merleau-Ponty sets this as his primary methodological approach when he advocates a 'return to the phenomena' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 1).

The emphasis on subjective perception over objective judgement in The Meisner Technique makes the perspective of the subject vitally important. Meisner's programme, from the observation exercises, through Repetition and Independent Activities, stresses that what matters in the student's work is not the 'right' or 'correct' answer, but what they perceive of the world around them (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19). Meisner repeatedly makes it clear to his students that their acting should spring from what matters to *them*, what gives *them* the impulse to act (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 157). Every observation they make of their environment, or their fellow performer in the Repetition exercise, is couched in terms of how *they* see it (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 21). This stress on the impulses and feelings of the individual actors might easily be interpreted as a reification of the 'essential self' of the actor, but might just as legitimately be seen as an awakening of perspective that shifts the focus away from the actor's self as a 'centre of meaning' and disperses it into the relationships the actor has with their environment and their fellow performers.

The emphasis of perspectival phenomena over objective truth is a defining quality of phenomenology. Edmund Husserl founded phenomenology as an explicit challenge to what he called the, 'natural attitude', in which objective truth is taken as a natural, unconstructed and self-evident aspect of the world (Husserl, 1970: 3). In place of this 'natural attitude' or 'naturalism' that informs some approaches to the 'natural sciences', Husserl notes that an observer experiences phenomena prior to gaining any access to 'objective truth', and that such 'objective truths' are in fact constructed from the experience of perspectival phenomena in a secondary movement of the

intellect (Husserl, 1970: 29). This means that the 'truth' that can be constructed is built upon a foundation of perception and is therefore posterior to it. Fundamentally, Husserl argues that every act of perception must be made from *somewhere*, from a 'zero-point' of perception, as opposed to the material world being presented in an objective manner that ignores the presence of the observer and the act of perception (Husserl, 1989: §18).

Martin Heidegger reinforces Husserl's challenge to 'naturally' objective views of the world with his exploration of '*Das Man*'. This term translates literally as 'the they' and refers to the general outlook on the world that tends to challenge and level any innovative interpretations of it (Heidegger, 1962: §27). Although Heidegger's opinion of '*Das Man*' is ambiguous, given that it is the general interpretation of the world that renders it sensible to some degree, he makes it clear that for somebody to actualise themselves as an authentic *Dasein*, they must overcome the generalisations that *Das Man* forces upon them and deal instead with the rich complexity of their actual encounter with the world that they perceive (Heidegger, 1962: §51). In a striking parallel, Meisner insists that his actors should not adhere to what others believe that they will perceive, and what their impulses will be when they perform, but that they should open themselves to what they actually encounter from their specific perspective (Meisner and Longwell, 1987: 19-20). One of the prime motivations for Meisner's forceful removal of the concept of character from his acting methodology appears to be that it denies the actor's own perspective on the world and gives them an abstract idea of what they should be perceiving, rather than allowing them to deal directly with what they actually perceive from their particular perspective. Meisner drives this home to his class by saying, 'That's you. That's you in person. Your observation was straight, unadulterated observation. What you observed, *you* observed, not a character in a play' (ibid, emphasis in original).

A phenomenological approach to Meisner's Technique is therefore particularly appropriate given the similar importance the perspective of the subject is given in both situations.

However, issues of subjective perception versus objective judgement are made imperative for us when Emmanuel Levinas shifts the focus of his phenomenology from ontology to ethics, or from questions of what exists to how we should behave.

### LEVINAS DISCOURSE – REJECTION OF TOTALISING THEORIES

The context of Levinas' perspective on The Other is his more general opposition to 'totalizing' theories of the world. He believes that when a philosopher tries to formulate a theory which accounts for everything, they effectively enslave the world within their own perspective (Cerbone, 2006: 137). The only time that such totalising theories falter is when the subject comes 'face to face' with the Other (Levinas, 1969: 199). Because The Other escapes our grasp of them, they are fundamentally different from us. The subject is forced from an ontological interpretation of the Other, to an ethical approach to them because of their inability to completely grasp them. However, once The Other's 'infinity of ... transcendence' is acknowledged, discourse is possible (ibid).

### LEVINAS SUMMARY AND COMPARISON WITH MERLEAU-PONTY

Levinas vehemently objects to the tendency of Western philosophy to totalise the world or, in other words, to incorporate everything within a single theoretical framework. Taking up the proposition from the tradition of phenomenology that no two subjects can share the same perspective on the world, and adding to it the permanent possibility of The Other refusing the subject's perception, he argues that, 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed' (ibid). Fundamental to the ethics that Levinas proposes is the inviolability of The Other. Because the defining quality of The Other is their transcendence, any attempt to deny this by wholly encompassing them within our perception of the world would be unethical; to accept the unknowable bounds of The Other is to treat them ethically. Levinas asserts the primacy of ethics to ontology on the basis that, 'Preexisting the disclosure of being in general

taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; pre-existing the plane of ontology is the ethical plane' (Levinas, 1969: 201).

Having established the inescapable alterity of The Other, he uses this as the basis for discourse which is an interaction that authentically connects the subject and The Other through their irrevocable difference.

### LEVINAS' ANALYSIS OF REPETITION

If we are now to apply Levinas' subjective ethics to the Repetition exercise, a very interesting picture emerges. From this perspective, two subjects face each other, and when the first person makes an observation about the second, this is no more than the speaker's own perception and cannot presume to describe anything about the other subject as a subject. Furthermore, within this act there is an implicit acceptance that The Other transcends the speaker's perception of them and any description they may make of this. Because of this transcendence, the first person cannot predict their partner's reaction to their observation and the observation is therefore expressed in an environment of uncertainty. In practice, although concepts of transcendence and respect for the inviolability of The Other may be foreign to a Meisner-based studio, the sense of electric uncertainty that results from these underlying processes is often apparent. The second person listens to the initial observation and repeats the phrase from their own perspective including a judgement of the validity of this observation from their own point of view. However, because of the absolute difference between subjects, it is discourse rather than communication that is established. This is not a communion of meaning, but the interaction of two distinct perspectives, neither of which could ever completely inhabit the point of view of the other. For Levinas, intersubjective reality is never established because no subject can capture their entire perspective within a single statement, or indeed any number of statements. Just as The Other remains eternally separate from the subject and can never be encompassed by the subject's perception of them, The Other could never express what defines their alterity to the subject. Discourse allows the two participants to alter their own

perceptions of the world under their partner's influence. According to this interpretation, they use the difference of The Other in order to change their own perspective on the world, without ever completely sharing The Other's perspective. A performance that relies on discourse is one that is not based in the individual's being, but on their actions in the world in the face of The Other. In 'Repetition from Your Own Point of View' we witness one step of discourse, distilled down to its most basic elements: one subject making an observation about the world, and a second subject either confirming this or denying it from their own point of view.

### LEVINAS ANALYSIS OF IMPULSIVE CHANGES

The incorporation of impulsive changes in the Repetition exercise allows discourse to develop. When the actor's partner shows an as yet hidden side of themselves, this is evidence of The Other's power of refusal. Refusal in this sense means that The Other cannot be encompassed by the perception of the subject, even if they so desired to be. Thus the emergence of a new feature in the appearance of The Other reinforces their alterity. When such a feature comes to the foreground of the observer's perception and they state it, they do not define The Other, but acknowledge the change in their own perception of the world and thereby continue to develop the discourse being held between the two. According to Levinas, by acknowledging the change in the appearance of The Other, they endorse their transcendence. By expressing the new foreground of their perception, they are fundamentally changing their relationship with the world and in doing so they are in turn showing a previously hidden or refused aspect of themselves to their partner. The presentation of this new aspect may then lead to the same process of impulsive change in their partner, and thus fuel the continuance of the exercise.

### SUMMARY OF LEVINAS' PERSPECTIVE

Because The Other cannot be totalised within the perception of the subject, their behaviour reveals to the subject a constantly unfolding entity. Every new aspect of their behaviour shows an as yet

unseen side of their subjectivity. Even if The Other were to attempt to conceal their reactions from the subject, this refusal is in itself a new aspect of their behaviour. By focusing on each other's behaviour and allowing the dialogue to change according to their impulses, the students bring the alterity of The Other to the foreground of their perception and directly shape their own behaviour and perspective according to it. They do not, and cannot, capture the whole of the other person within their perception, but by fixing their attention on their absolute otherness, they are forcing themselves into constant contact with that which escapes them. This destabilises their identity and removes the potential for them to *be* anything in the face of The Other. This is a direct demonstration of each student using the encounter with The Other in order to shape their perception of the world in such a way as to deny themselves stable being and to thrust themselves into the flow of action.

### SUBJECTIVE ETHICS IN MEISNER

While the Meisner Technique prevents the actors making objective moral judgements in the moment of performance, outside that moment they are free to do so. This constriction of the actor's focus in the moment of performance is similar to Nick Moseley's recognition that the Meisner actor may consider questions of character outside the moment of performance, but never from within it (Moseley, 2005: 126). In fact, according to Levinas, to do so would be unethical in that it would force them to withdraw from a 'face-to-face' encounter with The Other and lead to the actor basing their behaviour on totalising theories about the world that necessarily limit the transcendence of The Other.

Derrida astutely concludes that Levinas' ethics, 'can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself' (Derrida, 1980: 111). By this, Derrida is describing the way that Levinas' ethical approach is undermined and discredited by any attempt to make objective judgements because of its foundation within the subjective realm. Its basis in the experience of the subject means that to step outside this, and to attempt to reconcile that

experience with objective judgement totalises the experience into overarching moral frameworks that are inherently unethical according to Levinas. A model where both subjective and objective ethics are respected might involve the company deliberately creating the conditions under which their work might meet an objective belief structure (such as feminism or Marxism might impose) outside the performative moment, but when they are encountering one another within the work to put these objective frameworks aside so that they might deal with meeting the other person 'face-to-face' as a full person, and not simply the representation of a character, idea, or concept.

### CRITIQUE OF STROPPEL

This hypothetical situation might be more clearly grasped with reference to Elizabeth Stoppel's generally perceptive feminist critique of Meisner in 'Redefining Acting: The Implications of the Meisner method.' She cites the example of a particular female acting teacher who uses the Repetition exercise to emotionally manipulate one of her students by encouraging them to behave in a certain way toward their acting partner. Stoppel's objection here is that, 'Rather than seeking to validate women's own emotional control as subjects, the particular construction of the repetition exercise has the potential to foster the false cliché of women as victims of their emotions' (Stoppel, 2000: 115). Stoppel's core concern here is that such a use of the Repetition exercise, 'could be manipulative and contradictory to feminist concerns where ethics override the "successful" product at all costs' (ibid). Fundamentally, she includes the proviso that the exercise *could* be harmful to feminist concerns, 'when used in this manner' (ibid). The simple answer to this critique of the Repetition exercise is that if used in a feminist company, it should not be used in this way.

This leads me to what may initially appear to be a controversial claim, that it is not the actor's function to make abstract moral judgements about the work in the moment of performance. There is nothing to prevent the actor from making such judgements and to evaluate potential and on-going projects in terms of these criteria, but such objective decisions are separate to, and in Meisner's method detrimental to, the practical work of moment-to-moment performance.

The way that Stroppel characterises the Repetition exercise in her article is as a potential tool for the disempowerment of women, when really it is the interference in the subjective ethics of a 'face-to-face' meeting by an external direction that pushes the encounter towards an objectively determined outcome.

If the acting teacher layers an emotional circumstance upon the 'face-to-face' encounter between performers, as Meisner himself did, this should not be a condition that leads the performative moment to breach the objective ethics of the group concerned. If this were to happen, the company might pause, tweak the circumstances and begin again.

What is important is that this corrective action should be taken outside of the performative moment. If the performers were to partially withdraw from the face-to-face meeting in order to mould the encounter into one that meets their objective standards, they would be dehumanizing their fellow performer by reducing them to an object, and not treating them as the infinitely transcendent being that Levinas portrays them as.

If, as performance practitioners we allow the ideological imperatives of ensuring a performance or working process has an objectively determined ethical meaning, and that it leads to particular ethical consequences, to allow us to forget the subjective ethics of encountering one another in the performative moment with respect of our full human-ness, the foundations of our work may be compromised to the extent that we may have no more moral authority than the social ills we seek to address.

**Bibliography:**

- Doob, Nick. (1985). *Sanford Meisner, Theater's Best Kept Secret*, from the TV Series *American Masters*, New York City, The Playhouse Repertory Company and WNET.
- Gray, Paul. (1964). 'The Reality of Doing.' *The Tulane Drama Review*, 9(1), Autumn, pp. 136-155.
- Heidegger, Martin. (1962) *Being and Time*. John, Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. (1969). *Totality and Infinity*. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press.
- Meisner, Sanford. (2006). *Sanford Meisner: Masterclass*, [DVD] The Sanford Meisner Centre, Open Road Films.
- Meisner, Sanford and Longwell, Dennis. (1987). *Sanford Meisner on Acting*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Meisner, Sanford. et al. (1976). 'Looking Back: 1974-1976.' In *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol.28, No.4. 'Reunion: A Self-Portrait of the Group Theatre', December. pp.471-552.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Colin Smith (trans.). London: Routledge.
- Moseley, Nick. (2005). *Acting and Reacting: Tools for the Modern Actor*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Pitches, J. (2006). *Science and the Stanislavsky Tradition*. Routledge: London.
- Shepherd, S & Meisner, S. (1977). 'Sanford Meisner.' in *Yale/Theatre*, Vol 8. No. 1&2, Spring.
- Shirley, D. (2010). "'The Reality of Doing": Meisner Technique and British Actor training' in *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 1:2, pp.199-213.
- Stinespring, Louise. (2000). 'Just Be Yourself, Derrida, Difference, and the Meisner Technique.' in David Krasner ed. *Method Acting Reconsidered, Theory, Practice, Future*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Zarrilli, Phillip, B. (2002). 'Introduction (Part I)', in *Acting (Re)Considered*, 2nd edition, New York: Routledge, pp.7-22.