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THE RELATION BETWEEN ONTOLOGY AND ETHICS IN THE THOUGHT OF EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

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The relationship between ontology and ethics constitutes the heart of the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas. I think that it is not an exaggeration to say that almost all the issues the Jewish thinker reflects –on language, the State, God and death, freedom, fecundity, etc.– are nothing but specific occasions that he uses to clarify and develop his more general conception of this relationship.

This article does not pretend to be anything else but a brief survey of the work of Lévinas from the perspective of one question: is it possible to reconcile ethics and ontology, as they are understood by Lévinas? In other words, is it possible to perform –as it seems to be demanded not only by the philosophy of Lévinas but by Judaism itself– the task of serving the Other as God himself –without excuses, without conditions, without limits– and to perform this task “ontologically”, that is to say, without falling into a spiritualism of “good intentions” that forgets that the only way of approaching the Other is with actions, with material help, with the construction of a more just society? I think that in the answer to this question depends the validity of the original proposal of Lévinas and a key to understand the many possibilities it offers as well as some of its limits.

1. Lévinas and his vision of ontology

The idea of the *I* as something self-sufficient is one of the essential marks of the spirit of bourgeoisie and its philosophy (...) The bourgeois does not confess any internal tear and he would be ashamed of not having enough self-confidence. He is essentially conservative, but his conservatism is an anxious one. He is worried about the problems and the sciences as a defense against things

and their unforeseeable conduct (...) But this category of sufficiency is based on the image of Being as the things offer it to us. They are (...) Being is, there is nothing to add to this expression as long as, in a being, we only consider its existence. It is the expression of the sufficiency of the fact of being about whose absolute and definitive character nobody, it seems, could doubt. And, in fact, occidental philosophy never went further than this¹.

Lévinas has described, in an incomparable way, the immanent world of Being, the de-divinized and, because of this, closed-in-itself world of what it is. This is a space that does not know any kind of exteriority, which apparently nothing can disquiet and that, according to Lévinas is the point aimed from its very beginning by the philosophy born in Greece. The immanence of Being tranquilizes the bourgeois, but it induces nausea in the person who thinks. It makes a bargain with anyone who gives in to its charms, but produces an unbearable sensation of claustrophobia in the person who decides to follow his own suspicions to the end and verify that, effectively, for the world to be at hand it must not admit an exit. In other words, Being must be the first and also the last word.

This double face of Being, tranquilizer and hypocrite, is masterfully described in the distinction between Being as “*es gibt*” and Being as “there is” (*il y a*), a distinction that began to germinate in his first reflections on the thought of Husserl, reaches more precision in his critical analysis of the work of Heidegger and, it could be said, will continue to grow in density and lucidity until the last works of Lévinas. Let us consider, in first place, the genesis of these two basic concepts.

1.1. Husserl from Heidegger

Practically all of Lévinas’ work on the thought of Husserl before 1959 is a critique of phenomenology based on intuitions taken from the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In this work, Husserl is introduced –in the best of cases– as a predecessor of the new and rich thought of Heidegger. It is from Heidegger on that the real value of phenomenology appears, together with a certain narrowness that comes from the excessive conservatism of its founder. Lévinas’ criticism of Husserl in this period can be summarized in the following points:

- Though Husserl admits the plurality of the ways that reality presents itself, our knowledge of Being implies a theoretical position at its base.

¹ “De l’évasion”, *Recherches Philosophiques*, V, 1935–36, pp. 373–392 (Livre de Poche), pp. 91–93.

From this follows many important consequences and a particular conception of Being or ontology:

- On a superficial level, reality is reduced to an object of contemplation and the *I* to a contemplator not involved with the world; a contemplator who reflects about life, but does not live.
- On a deeper level, reality hands itself to the subject who always remains master of the situation.
- The domination of the subject has a predetermined style: it is domination through evidence and light. This domination is known by the name of “truth”.
- Far from being limited to the field of Logic, the domination of the subject extends itself to the whole of reality: absolutely nothing can get into a man without his consent, that is to say, without its reduction to full light.
- The ultimate condition of the domination of the subject over reality is the domination over himself, self-understanding, self-sufficiency. If it is not said that the subject can be established as the absolute beginning of itself, it can, at least, control this origin, reduce it to something intelligible. “Origin that does not bind” is the expression used by Lévinas to refer to this kind of passive autonomy by which the subject constitutes itself.
- In terms of time –that is the way in which Husserl understands ultimately the constitution of the *I*– the subject is originally “present time” or “presence”. Neither past nor future –neither “retention” nor “protention”– overwhelm the representative capacity of the *I*, or what is for Lévinas the same, overwhelm the present.
- The ultimate inspiration of the philosophy of Husserl coincides with the ultimate inspiration of Western thought: freedom understood as autonomy or independence. The other side of this attitude is the fear of all that cannot be controlled, of what could threaten the internal harmony of the subject. It is, then, a question of an attitude taken with respect to reality more than a problem with a particular phenomenological description of reality.

On the other hand, the points by which, in the opinion of Lévinas, Heidegger surpasses his teacher are the following:

- Understanding as being and not as an exclusive or primordial task of theoretical reason.
- Existence as obedience to Being and not as autonomy; consequently, the world as not only an object that the subject contemplates but also something that imposes a demand on the subject.

- A dramatic relationship with the world as that upon which the subject stakes his existence, and not the inoffensive analysis of an unshakable interiority.
- Time as Being, and not as the “horizon of understanding”.
- Anguish and not the tranquility of control as the ultimate mood of an authentic relationship with the world.

These affirmations summarize briefly what Lévinas considers to be a victory of Heideggerian thought over the phenomenology of Husserl. It is, in fact, a victory full of doubts. Furthermore, it is a victory –as it is in part shown by the fact that there is only one article in which Lévinas praises Heidegger’s achievements²– in which the Jewish thinker will not remain too long. The persistence of the concerns that can be read from the very beginning between the lines in his critique of the phenomenology; his disappointment with the person of Heidegger and the consequent shadow projected over his thought; his encounter with Maurice Blanchot or, even more importantly, his discovery of Jewish thinkers so radical as Franz Rosenzweig– all of these things allow him to separate himself and even oppose certain tendencies in European thought.

1.2. Heidegger

Lévinas initially believed that there was no better antidote against the egotism of the *I* than the unconditional obedience to Being proposed in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Nevertheless, it will not take long for him to feel disappointed and to discover that behind the idyllic relation between Being and his obedient “shepherd” exist at least two perils: 1) the persistence of the autonomy of man in front of reality –autonomy in which Lévinas deepens more and more, of which he will discover a new manifestation and which he finally will call with a Heideggerian term: *es gibt*– and 2) the anonymous infinitude of nonsense over which, mysteriously, this ordained world is constructed –the ultimate face of Being, involuntary brought to light by Heidegger and which Lévinas call *il y a*: “there is”.

Lévinas thinks that, if it makes no sense to go back to “pre-heideggerean positions” considering existence and existent as two separate entities, it is possible, nevertheless, to reject a perfect correspondence between these two terms. The existent is not, just and without further considerations, its existence. This “gap” between the existent and its existence will allow Lévinas to speak of “existence without existent” and to use many pages to describe the difference between the two. “There is” and “*es gibt*” are, thus, the two fundamental ways in which

² “Martin Heidegger et la ontologie”, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger*, CXIII (1932), n. 5-6, pp. 395-431.

existence separates itself from the existent. To these two modes correspond, on the part of the existent, the names of “uneasiness” (*mauvaise*) and “conscience”.

a. Being as “there is” (*il y a*)

Heidegger, thinks Lévinas, has made evident the real face of Being, which up until now the history of philosophy has considered in a too benevolent and naive way. If philosophy had divinized the Infinite and seen in it a kind of super-being protector of the human, Heidegger would have opposed any other infinitude apart from the infinitude of existence itself, an anonymous existence without bounds. In this way we pass from the company of the Infinite to the loneliness of infinitude.

Yet, even if all this is true, is it possible to keep considering Being with the attributes of generosity that Heidegger grants it and that are implied by the term *es gibt* –from the German *geben*: to give? Lévinas believes that it is not. The mistake of Heidegger consisted, thus, in failing to realize that the evil of Being was not outside itself –in the limit, in nothingness– but that it was intrinsic to it. Existence, conceived of in this way, is called “there is” in opposition to the Heideggerian *es gibt*. In turn, “nausea” or sometimes “horror” are the more common names Lévinas uses when he has to describe the existent that drowns and perishes in it. Let us try to describe this terms with a little more precision.

The incapacity of Being as “there is” to found the existent is called “anonymity”. Anonymity signifies, thus, no-truth, lack of essence, speech without a face, noise (*remue-ménage*). In it disappears –disintegrates, because of its lack of foundation– all beings including human beings.

Like “anonymity”, the “infinitude” attached to Being carries a negative connotation. In the writings of Lévinas, the infinitude of “there is” has at least four meanings. In the first place, “there is” is infinite in the sense that it is supposed and implied in every human action: nothing can escape from its desintegrating influence. Its influence extends to all things –from the most solid to the most sublime. The second sense is understood in relation with death and its incapacity for liberation: philosophical reflection is forbidden from supposing that death represents an entrance into absolute nothingness and, consequently, a surpassing of –a liberation from– Being. The impossibility to return to our own origin is the third mode of the infinitude. Like the future, the past does not seem to offer any evidence of transcendence. For Lévinas, what keep us from returning to our origin are not the limitations of our own condition, but just the nonexistence of something that could be considered original or foundational. Finally, infinitude appears as an excess of light and evidence. The absolute malleability of every given thing and its submission to our knowledge, allow us to discover

that the bottom of reality resembles a tragic game. Everything is malleable because it lacks a foundation. Even the deepest introspection does not allow us to affirm ourselves in something different from the quicksand of “there is”.

If in the beginning, as we have already noted, Lévinas had thought that the obedience to Being was the solution for the dangerous self-sufficiency of Western man, he discovers now that such an obedience is simply impossible. Obedience supposes an order and a voice who commands, but Being-as-there-is is not an order but a mockery, “noise” that invites us to build in the same moment it begins its work of disintegration, an “infernal non freedom” that leaves the hands free of all those whom it knows are trapped in a cell without an exit.

The uneasiness in which Being “produces itself” as “there is” –the most fundamental reference of the existent to the existence– is called “nausea” or “horror”. As “nausea” the uneasiness differs from the Heideggerian *Angst*. In Heidegger, *Angst* aims to reveal the ontological difference. In contrast, Lévinas’ nausea stops in the de-personalization of man. De-personalization made evident in every intent for transforming the verb “to exist” into a noun or, what is the same, in every intent to rescue a being from the clutches of Being.

b. Being as *es gibt*

In spite of all this, there exists in the ontology of Lévinas a second moment or level in which the existent seems to recover from the disintegrating action of the nonsense. In the opinion of Lévinas, in the original instant in which an existent assumes its existence, there takes place a double movement of unavoidable acceptance and rejection. It is precisely this rejection, this non-immediate dissolution of the existent in “there is”, that makes possible the advent of the conscience and the arise of the *I*.

Among the terms the Jewish thinker prefers to describe this particular original step back, probably the two most common are “fatigue” and “laziness”. Lévinas refers to them as “phenomenon prior to reflection and in which it is possible to apprehend the fact of birth”³, “concrete forms of the union of the existent to its existence”⁴. Without getting into a detailed analysis of these notions, we should point out that they represent two concrete images of the “disagreement” between the existent and its existence. They are images that are, in some sense, describe the other side of the forced acceptance of Being: a “delay”, a “reproach” in front of the indissolubility of the agreement involuntary made with existence.

³ *De l'existence à la existant*, Ed. de la Revue Fontaine, Paris, 1947 (Vrin², Paris, 1990)., p. 30.
From now on: DEE.

⁴ DEE, 28.

It is rejection or rebellion that constitutes, in the opinion of Lévinas, the existent as such and that allows the advent of the realm of the *I* (*le Moi*), Realm of “the Same” (*Même*), the compass of Being-as-*es-gibt*, and ultimately existence without –that has forgot about– its condition of “there is”.

In Being understood as *es gibt* there exists a kind of indestructible circle or unity between the *I* and Being: Being entitles the *I* to self-sufficiency and, in turn, it receives the same favor from the *I*. If Being as “there is” strips the subject of all authority, Being as “*es gibt*” convinces him again of his self-sufficiency and his power.

On the other hand, the freedom of the subject does not contradict his obedience to Being. In conscience, Being reveals itself, but it is far from being an authentic “other” of the subject. In this way, it is possible for Lévinas to say that “Heideggerean freedom is obedient, but this obedience built freedom up without questioning it, without revealing its injustice”⁵.

In philosophy, the self-sufficiency of conscience has been understood, most of the time, as understanding: the establishment of the sense of things in a solidly constructed world or, in the same way, the reduction of every particular thing to a Totality that precedes it. To exist is to comprehend the particular in relation with Totality. The circle formed by the self-sufficiency of man and the self-sufficiency of Being –the *es gibt*– is commonly named by Lévinas with the term “Same”. In the realm of the Same, power and understanding are interchangeable.

This self-sufficiency of man, though, continuously gives the impression of being an illusion. In the opinion of Lévinas, the ultimate control of the existence over the existent and the failure of man’s dreams of self-sufficiency are the most evident in the impossibility of escaping from the imperialist dynamism of Being, that is to say, from Being’s tendency to assign to each thing a relative place and value inside the absoluteness of Totality. In other words, it is the incapacity to recognize the Other as it shows itself with sufficient clarity that man is nothing else but a puppet of the self-affirmation of Being. “Being is” and there is nothing man can do to stop it.

Man has no choice: either he must accept a Being that apparently found him and the tyranny that this entails or he must recognize the primacy of the “there is”, where Being loses its totalizing power but where, at the same time, all truth and all subjectivity dissolve.

If it is possible to point out something in common shared by all the different aspects of the separation of existent and existence, this could be a kind of “protest against the irremediable”. In other words, it is a protest *a posteriori* and

⁵ *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Vrin, Paris, 1949, p. 170. Hereafter, EDE

without the possibility of giving the existent all his rights back. “Escape” (*évasion*) or “desire to escape” are the terms chosen by Lévinas to name this protest. “Escape” here means “desperate intent to be free of Being’s clutches”. To be a human being is to protest in vain. Ultimately this is a nausea that comes from the very fact of the absence of any sort of relief. In a strict sense, “the desire to escape from Being” is a contradiction, because, as we have noted before, the “desire to escape” is a feeling of uneasiness that includes, necessary –or, better, is born from– the absolute impossibility of getting out of Being.

The extreme conscience is the conscience of no-exit (*sans issue*), and, in this way, no the outside, but the idea of outside, an obsession. An outside thought as the impossibility of the outside⁶.

A pain without exit, in the absolute sense of the word⁷.

1.3. The return to Husserl

The rereading and revaluation of many of Husserl’s assumptions allows Lévinas to hope for a “peaceful” solution of the drama of existence. A series of writings, almost all of them of the year 1959⁸ gives the impression that Lévinas has finally discovered in the Husserlian “life-world” a source of meaning that neither leads us to Totality nor dissolves in the infinitude of meaninglessness.

This new approach to phenomenology was made possible, fundamentally, by the patient analysis of the concepts of “sensibility” and the “internal consciousness of time”. If it is impossible to introduce here a detailed report of the Lévinas’ reflection on these issues, we can try to summarize their most important aspects in the following three points.

The first thing that attracts the attention of Lévinas in his new reading of phenomenology is the Husserlian affirmation of what can be considered the “infinite bottom of the conscience”. Lévinas rediscovers Husserl as a philosopher who, starting from the things themselves, traces them back to their foundation tirelessly and without making any concessions. He never intends to close the system. The only thing that could be in contradiction with this march is the claim of reaching an insuperable end, of finding the limits of knowledge. The uninterrupted critique Husserl makes of stability, the unending will of liberating

⁶ *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier, 1975, p. 63. Hereafter, SMB.

⁷ SMB, 67.

⁸ Cfr. specially: “La ruine de la représentation” Edmund Husserl 1859/1958, *Phaenomenologica* IV, The Hague, M. Nijhoff, 1959, 73–85 (republished in EDE, 125–135); “Réflexions sur la ‘technique’ phénoménologique”, *Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie III, Troisième Colloque Philosophique de Royaumont*, Paris, Minuit, 1959 (republished in EDE, 111–123); “Intentionnalité et métaphysique”, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger*, CXLIX, 4, 1959, 471–479 (republished in EDE, 137–144).

thought from the “norms of adequateness” and the horizons that surround it, allows Lévinas to find a formulation he has been looking for since his first critiques of phenomenology: the dissolution of Totality or, in other words, the “destruction of all dogmatism”.

On the one hand, if this were the only phenomenological answer of to Lévinas’ criticism of Western thought, we could say it does not represent a very big achievement. Actually, was not it the step advanced by Heidegger in relation with Husserl? And, was not it precisely –even if Heidegger did not admit it or was not fully aware of it– the path which leads us unavoidably to the bad infinitude of “there is”?

But the investigation of Husserl bring to light another idea that goes always hand in hand with the affirmation of the infinitude of conscience: the permanence of the *I*. All the originality of this ultimate bottom of conscience discovered by Husserl rests in a kind of simultaneous passivity and activity in which the subject never disappears, never ceases to be present. The radical fidelity of Husserl to “what is given” allows him to assert, on the one hand, the destruction of all the horizons of the conscience and, on the other, the subsistence of the *I*.

The Husserlian “life” –as it is interpreted by Lévinas– takes place “behind the conscious subject”, without the subject being fully aware of it –in opposition to bourgeois life in the “*es gibt*”–, but –and this is the difference with the “there is”– not without me. “The constitution of an object is protected by a pre-predicative world, which itself, though, is constituted by the subject”⁹. In the philosophy of Husserl, thinks Lévinas, the final word is “simultaneity”, “fluctuation” –between the *I* and the reality, between freedom and obedience– and this fluctuation continues, “without having to sacrifice either of the terms”¹⁰.

There is still a third point, in some sense a natural conclusion of the first two points, and of enormous importance for our reflection. Lévinas believes that this uninterrupted exposure of the *I* to the novelty of life is an authentic receptivity of the “other”:

The fulfillment of conscience surpasses any prediction, any expectation, any continuity, and consequently, it is all passivity, reception of the *other* breaking in the *same*¹¹.

The philosophy of Husserl separates itself from the ontology of Heidegger in the very place in which Lévinas thought it was most closely united, that is, the impenetrability of the *I* in relation with the teachings of the Other. It is in the

⁹ EDE, 133.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ EDE, 156.

overcoming of this deficiency – which Lévinas thought intrinsic to Western philosophy – where the real importance of this “return to Husserl” resides, I think.

Nevertheless, Lévinas will not go deeper into these ideas and, what is even more difficult to understand, will soon abandon this train of thought and return to his primitive distrust of truth, which, he will continue to associate unfailingly with Being¹².

The stance of the Jewish thinker regarding ontology will be basically set in stone with the publication of *Totalité et Infini* in 1961. Lévinas affirms there, once more, that the relation between the *I* and Being is a kind of pact of mutual non-aggression, in which Being allows itself to be modeled and does not protest against the arbitrariness of the *I*; and the *I*, who suspects that such an easy construction of truth can only be sustained in a total and fundamental lack of meaning, also stays quiet and works as philosopher, bourgeois or even tyrant.

It would have been very interesting to know, though, what would had happened if Lévinas had continued in this line of study, the conclusions of which he never openly rejected.

2. The relationship between ontology and ethics

According to Lévinas, the only thing that can save man from the corrupted atmosphere of existence is ethics. In other words, by ethics he means the recognition of the infinite value of the Other and of the obligation I have to serve him. Our response to this order saves the neighbor and ourselves from being a part of the Totality, makes us unique, and, in spite of all the complaints of our egoism, makes us generous. On the other hand, ethics can grant us all the gifts that meaningless denies us: it saves us from disintegrating, places solid ground under our feet – a foundation older than history and deeper than every influence –, and allows us to hear a clear voice that neither sounds anything like our own nor has anything in common with an unintelligible noise.

Ethics is totally different from ontology. In the same way there is nothing in common between generosity and egoism, order and mockery, service of the neighbor and killing, Good and Being radically excludes the other. The work of a good philosopher is precisely to reveal each of these two dimensions in all their purity and keep them apart so they do not contaminate each other. Ethics is out of the reach of Being and is immune to its evil: here is the first piece of good news that Lévinas’s philosophy offers.

¹² Cfr. for example, the articles “De la conscience à la veille” (1974) and “Herméneutique et au-delà” (1977) included in *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée*, Paris, Vrin, pp. 34–61 and 158–172. Also, *Dieu, la mort et le temps*, Grasset-Fasquelle, Paris, pp. 157–160.

But to leave ethics and ontology as two definitely separated realms does not seem to be Lévinas' purpose. Two are the reasons he has to try overcome this separation. In the first place, he wants to address the problem of the origin of truth or, in the words of Lévinas, the problem of the "fissures of Being". Actually, if it is impossible for meaningless to be the origin of meaning –if the "there is" can only be the origin of an ordained Totality through a miracle or by chance–, where does truth come from? At least, how can the *I* keep itself distant from Being and name it? How can he stand over the quicksand of existence and become an existent?

The second reason to pursue peace with ontology is the fact that as Lévinas likes to say, "it is not possible to serve the other with empty hands". The service of the neighbor cannot be just "good intentions" because, as Lévinas says again and again, "when everything is interiorly consummated nothing is consummated at all"¹³. The only way of serving the Other is with words, with actions, with things and, finally, with just laws and institutions.

2.1. Ethics at the root of Being

a. Ethics, truth and meaninglessness

The first objective of Lévinas –to justify the "fissures of Being"– is one of the issues that he patiently discussed in *Totalité et infini*. Even so, I think the answer given in this book is not fully satisfactory. Lévinas' proposal to locate ethics at the foundation of truth, in other words, his attempt at a kind of communion between ontology and ethics is ambiguous. In many cases, it contradicts the purity and separateness of Good and Existence demanded in other chapters of the same work. It is the case, for example, of the concepts of "dwelling" (*demeure*) and the "feminine presence of the Other"¹⁴ in the realm of Being, of the necessity that the *I* separated in its egoism and for this separation to be possible– "keeps a door, at the same time open and closed to the outside"¹⁵, etc. Formulations like these claim a miraculous balance between the two realms and provide for the creation of an intermediate point that participates only in the goodness of each of them and constitutes a smooth path between one and the other.

In his second major work –*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*– Lévinas touches again upon the question, this time using more precise terminology and, above all, not allowing the discussion to venture into ambiguous territory that could create false expectations about a harmonious relationship between

¹³ *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1963 (Le Livre de Poche), p. 194.

¹⁴ This two concepts are carefully discussed in the fourth part of the second chapter of *Totalité et infini* called "La demeure".

¹⁵ *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1961 (Le Livre de Poche), p. 159.

en ethics and ontology. Instead, it possesses a greater accuracy that allows us to confirm the definitive and irrevocable character of the separation between them. This radical separation concerns the relationship of ethics and each dimension of Being. Either between ethics and meaninglessness or between ethics and the world of truth, any possible relation is external.

Regarding the first pair –Good and Meaninglessness– Lévinas states that this sickness of separation only admits “a medication external to the ailing”: the “there is” with all its horrors and its incurable atheism is, what we can call, a “phenomenological place”, a necessary space for the appearance of the divinity of the Face. To believe in God requires the constant possibility of atheism. It is necessary to run the risk of giving one’s life in vain and without meaning for the service to the Other be “holy” and free from all egoism. Ethics does not redeem egoism. In fact, it presupposes it.

The same exteriority can be perceived regarding the relation between Good and the world of truth. Good always requires truth but it cannot provide it. It leads us to the truth, but it cannot bring about, in any degree, the miracle of its appearance nor heal truth from its sickness. Behind truth will continue to exist, unwounded, the night of “there is”. The quicksand of the desert lies under the firm and totalizing constructions of which the *I* is proud.

b. Ethics and gift

But if things are like this, if the Good is incapable of redeeming infinite and anonymous Being, we should say, then, that all the concrete gifts born from our Responsibility in front of our neighbor –all my words and all my actions– must drink constantly from both the fountain of Good and the fountain of Evil, from the fountain of meaning and of mockery. And it is not here only a question of truth and its inexplicable “fissures”, but also of all and every work with which the *I* fills his hands when he tries to serve the Other. This incurable dichotomy at the root of every work –incurable because, in some sense, Good and “there is” are each an-archival– will remain in the background of all the subsequent reflections and all the issues touched upon by Lévinas.

The words and actions with which the *I* answers the order of the Face belong, from the first instant –from the very instant in which they were required by the Good– to Totality, or even worse, to the anonymous and sterile night over which Totality is mysteriously constructed. The night renders useless the holiness of man that can name his brother only by echoing the faceless noise of “there is”; it renders sterile a service for nothing and for nobody which seems to exceed, even, the meaning Lévinas gives to words such as “holiness” of “gratuity”.

The treatise of the Jewish thinker about the “involuntary guilt” that every subject must carry upon his shoulder, contains probably one of the best expressions of the problem we are discussing. The man who puts himself at the service of the Other is in this service paradoxically “more and more guilty”; and he is so not only for trying to serve in a limited way a being with infinite rights but also because of his absolute incapacity for giving, that is, of confirming with actions that he recognizes the divinity of the one who addresses him.

In spite of all this, and contrary to what seems to follow from the premises of his thought, we get the impression that Lévinas has never completely given up on a possible redemption of ontology. His efforts to equate the passivity of man in front of aging and his passivity in front of the Other; to interchange the physical and metaphysical sense of the term “sensibility”¹⁶ and, over all, to bestow on death a face¹⁷, make us think that he still holds out for the possibility of a kind of “ethification” of Being. In my opinion, because of the incurable exteriority of every relationship between ethics and ontology, I believe that not even the supreme offer of the *I* in his death –an expression of all the generous actions of man– can be free from the suspicion of being at the same time something trivial and an outrage: even man’s most personal gift is taken from his hands and reckoned as an evil action of Totality and the anonymous. Ethics and ontology resound constantly as two words pronounced simultaneously, neither one of which manages to silence, or even soften, the other.

In this way, and probably against the will of Lévinas himself, Ethics, Being as meaninglessness, and Being as truth, make up until the end, at least in a certain sense, three different and unconnected realms.

2.2. Ethics and justice

We see the same doubts and the disturbing persistence of unsolved problems in Lévinas’ reflection on the socialization of the relationship of alterity. Lévinas, who unlike Rosenzweig supported Zionism, believe that the construction of a just society is possible. A society in which the object of my unconditional service is not only the Other in front of me, but also all the people separated from me by time and space, a kind of society of Gods to whom I must serve as equitable as possible. It is not here any longer a question of serving an unrepeatable Thou with means provided by Being, but a question of serving comparable and measurable beings –the Other as “third”– as if they were unique.

Fecundity and the State are the two more developed answers of Lévinas to this problem. Fecundity aims to correct the injustice that my actions will produ-

¹⁶ Cfr., for example, chapters 2 and 3 of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Martinus Nihjoff, The Hague, 1974. Hereafter, A.E.

¹⁷ Cfr. *La mort et le temps*, l'Herne, Paris, 1991 (Le Livre de Poche), 24; 21; 19; 133. Also, A.E., p. 205.

ce in third people who are temporally out of my reach. This injustice takes the form of an act performed against unrepeatable beings to whom I will, without wanting to, speak anonymously, whom I will try to murder, as I name them with terms taken from Totality. Fecundity pretends that my unique voice, the voice of the elected one, can resound even behind the words other people will hear when I no longer exist. The survival of my Responsibility in my son, the possibility that my son will correct my actions and my words after my death, constitutes the heart of this proposal of Lévinas. In my opinion, it seems that Lévinas' assumption elsewhere of the perfect identity between the *I* and his Responsibility invalidates this proposition. He emphasizes that I am not a *responsible being*: *I am responsibility*. Responsibility is the name of my uniqueness. Nobody but me can serve the neighbor. It is, then, impossible, as seems to be suggested by Lévinas, that a kind of "history of ethics" in which my son continues what I have left unfinished, in other words, that an "uninterrupted Responsibility" can exist that is capable of accompanying the linear time of ontology that stretches on infinitely.

The State is, though, the institution that is more constantly invoked in Lévinas writings as an adequate expression of the service of the Other-as-third. The formulation that best express this proposal of Lévinas is probably that of a "monotheist State". Lévinas thinks that it is possible to create a State attentive to the demands of ethics and open to their correction. To say it in Lévinas' words, such a State is one in which "the man is not only recognized in his rights of citizens but also in his strict individuality"¹⁸. It is a State at the service of the Good and open to its voice. Again, and also in relation with this point, I think that Lévinas underestimates the depth of the rupture that he himself has taken up. The choice for a State is, necessarily, the choice for some type of Totality. In its efforts to do justice, the State must assign a value to each person and distribute rights and duties according to a system of measurement –a Totality– fixed beforehand. The criteria could include the intellectual capacity of each one, or its age, or the money it possesses, or even its race. But whatever the selected criterion is, it is absolutely impossible that, as ethics demands, everyone possess equal rights. For a State to exist it is necessary that "one passes before the other", it is necessary "to compare the incomparable ones" denying, in this way, their otherness.

Now, once we have accepted this first injustice against human dignity, how can the rights of ethics be regained? If we had agreed that the best way of treating everyone with justice is not recognizing the infinitude of each individual, with what authority and with what criterion can we then establish exceptions, protest, and stop the "chaining of politics"? On the other hand, if every way of

¹⁸ Cfr. *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1963 (Le Livre de Poche), p. 126.

measuring the infinite is unjust and arbitrary, what criterion do we possess for choosing between one Totality and another? How can we discern if it is better to classify people by their intellectual capacity or by their race? The State, necessarily and apart from its source of inspiration, is an immanent whole closed in on itself; it is oppression either outside or inside its frontiers.

There is probably nothing left for us to do but to exclaim with Lévinas: “the political law is implacable. The man who was handed over to it will never be recovered”¹⁹. The actual situation of the state of Israel –that was for Lévinas the concrete figure of the State at the service of Good of which he dreamed– is probably a sad corroboration of the truth of these affirmations.

We can say the same thing about the State, thus, that we have said about all the other ethic-ontological proposals of Lévinas about which we have briefly commented: the gift is born from the an-archical commandment of serving the Other, but it is born deadly wounded –or we should better say that it is born dead. In the same point coincide Good and Evil, ethics and its betrayal. That is why, it is possible to say about the Lévinasian man that he is generous to the total giving over of himself, but also aware that his gift is addressed to no one, feeds no one, redeems no one.

There is one quotation in the writing of Lévinas that express with total bluntness and sincerity the tragedy of this situation: “The just ones can still hope that their death will save the world. But, in fact, they died in the beginning and the wicked ones died beside them. Holiness is then itself meaningless. It is completely useless, completely gratuitous. Gratuitous for those who die, certainly, but also gratuitous for a world whose fault such a death should expiate. Holiness is a useless sacrifice”²⁰.

¹⁹ *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Minuit, Paris, 1977, p. 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Streszczenie

Związek między ontologią a etyką w myśli Emmanuela Lévinasa

Związek między ontologią a etyką stanowi istotę filozofii Lévinasa. Celem artykułu było przeanalizowanie właśnie tego związku. Można odkryć przynajmniej dwa sposoby rozumienia i przedstawiania go w myśli Lévinasa. W wielu jego pismach – szczególnie wczesnych, ale nie tylko – ontologia i etyka ukazywane są jako dwa odrębne, a nawet wrogie sobie wymiary rzeczywistości. W drugim okresie swojej twórczości Lévinas próbował „pogodzić się” z ontologią. Filozof – podążając za myślą judaistyczną, która inspiruje jego refleksję – twierdzi, że „nie można służyć drugiemu, mając puste ręce”. Jedynym sposobem służenia Innemu są słowa, czyny, prawa i instytucje; mówiąc inaczej – ontologia. Jednak – i jest to motyw przewodni naszych rozważań – czy można pogodzić ze sobą etykę i ontologię takie, jak je rozumiał Lévinas?

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