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Workshop on Ethics in Jewish Philosophy

"ÉTHIQUE" AND "VISAGE" IN LÉVINAS' PHILOSOPHY

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to analyze the concepts of *ethique* and *visage* in Emmanuel Lévinas' "*Totalité et Infini*" and "*Éthique et infini*"¹ as well as clarify their meanings within his philosophy. The said concepts appear widely throughout the mentioned books. It is precisely for this reason that I have selected what I consider to be the relevant fragments of these books to explain those concepts. As an introduction, I believe it is necessary to point out the origins of Lévinas' philosophy, with a view to outlining the way in which his thought establishes "being in relation" as an essentially human characteristic.

PHILOSOPHY

Lévinas' philosophy "arises" in opposition to the philosophies of totality. This latter concept indicates an attempt which has accompanied Western philosophy throughout its development and can be characterized – in Lévinas' own words – "*...une réduction de l'Autre au Même...*"². This reduction alludes to a category of violence, in which the Otherness of the Other is not respected. This type of philosophy places the value of human life in the sphere of cognitive successes, submitting the individual to and alienating him from the despotic force of the Whole and, thus, reducing the Other into a mere object of knowledge or an obstacle to the freedom of the I. Both Hegel's philosophy of history and Heidegger's ontology – the former affirming a Logos or Universal Destiny and the latter the entity as an expression of Being – constitute excellent examples of the philosophies of the Totality. They claim to understand the world, while succeeding in only reducing everything in their path to an object of knowledge. In terms of Western philosophy, only that which is susceptible to discovery – and therefore, susceptible to

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analysis and proof – is philosophically significant. Ontology is, thus, the truth of Being, immanence, and whatever eludes any demonstrable evidence is a mere utopia or personal belief. This Totality philosophy is an attempt at universal synthesis through knowledge which stubbornly adheres to Western ontology, leading it to highlight the impersonal Being to the detriment of the concrete Entity. It also places synthesis above plurality, synchrony over the diachronic and immanence over the transcendent. Ethically, this was translated into forgetting the other in favor of the Self, which is, ultimately, a reduction of all meaning, according to Lévinas. For this reason, ontology is incapable of giving value to and expressing the significance of what is human. Therefore, a critical reevaluation of the Western philosophical tradition is required – especially of its following three major aspects:

- The primacy of knowledge over the ethical relationship (between the Self and the Other).
- The primacy of the knowledge of the Self with regard to the Other.
- The primacy of the evident (immanence) to the detriment of the transcendent.

According to Lévinas, the point is to produce an inversion. This inversion is based on a defense of subjectivity (namely, responsibility towards the Other) in the face of various totalities (State, Knowledge, Power, etc.) to which it is reduced. That is to say, placing the Other, rather than the Self, in the center of philosophical reflection, and, finally, establishing that which is essentially human is being in relation to something else.

For Lévinas, a thought which respects the sense of what is human cannot base itself exclusively on knowledge and, thus, cannot emanate from the being of the Entity but rather from the Other – i.e., from a concrete face that turns to me and can never be understood through knowledge. Indeed, the human sense resides in disturbing of the Selfness, in agitates him ethically, and the I can only leave itself by being called by the Other, a call that is the outcome of a vis-à-vis or ethical relationship. Beyond the I and oneself lies the sense, which precedes any ontological consideration³. Thus, ethics is considered by Lévinas to be a primary philosophy, "...*celle à partir de laquelle les autres branches de la métaphysique prennent sens.*"⁴. To understand the meaning of what is

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human we must divest ourselves of ontology and look towards ethics, which also implies going from focusing on the Self to reflecting on and taking action with regard to the Other. In summary, Lévinas seeks to replace ontology with the ethical relationship as a primary philosophy, a relationship with the Other, manifested in a face that seeks my responsibility. This is the vis-à-vis or ethical relationship.

ÉTHIQUE

"Une relation dont le termes ne forment pas une totalité, ne peut donc se produire dans l'économie général de l'être que comme allant de Moi à l'Autre, comme face à face, comme dessinant une distance en profondeur – celle du discours, de la bonté, du Désir – irréductible à celle que l'activité synthétique de l'entendement établit entre les termes divers-...⁵"

This is the first statement that we find in the selected fragments and, consequently, the first characterization of such a relationship. It deals with a relationship in which both constituent parts do not form a unity, but rather each preserves its own transcendence. Hence, the Other may be outside the Self, thus preventing their being totally joined. This non-totality of the speakers makes the vis-à-vis relationship a non-violent one, since the Otherness of the Other is respected⁶. This leads Lévinas to affirm that *"Le non-synthétisable par excellence, c'est certainement la relation entre hommes.⁷"*. Thus, interpersonal relationships are not based on individuals thinking together, but rather facing each other. Consequently, a true "union" does not consist of forming a synthesized group, but rather one based on a vis-à-vis encounter. The latter as an ethical encounter is fundamentally a social relationship. Nevertheless, the sociability of this ethical relationship is not, as I have mentioned above, the sociability of the sum total of individualities (synthesis), but rather the sociability of relating oneself to the Other while preserving a separation. Such a separation is possible because, in the vis-à-vis relationship, the Other becomes manifest through an infinite from the face, an overflowing presence, an irreducible Otherness *"comme dessinant une distance en profondeur"*. Thus, the relationship between the Self and the Other is not reducible to

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"the synthetic activity of knowledge". Such an activity would imply an accommodation between thought and the thing that is thought, imposing the Self on the Other. Therefore, ethics based on vis-à-vis relationship is not one arising from knowledge, since the union of the Self and the Other in a totality conceived in synthesis would, as I mentioned earlier, do violence to the radical transcendence of the members with whom they interact. The vis-à-vis relationship is one in which separate beings maintain their transcendence. In this way, "*Le rapport avec Autrui n'annule pas la séparation*"⁸. The vis-à-vis concept also expresses an immediate relationship of interpellation and ethical imperative. The members present themselves directly – i.e., without intermediaries, without artifice, vis-à-vis and openly. In such a relationship, the Other calls upon me to exercise my responsibility. And the Other's rectitude and immediacy transmit an ethical imperative, an obligation.

VISAGE

The vis-à-vis relationship is, then, one where the members face one another, as separate but not indifferent beings, on opposite sides but not enemies. "*...le rapport entre Moi et l'Autre commence dans l'inégalité de termes...*"⁹. What does Lévinas understand by such inequality? That the relationship between the Self and the Other originates in an inequality that comes to mean the impossibility that a third member exist in the said relationship, encompassing the Self and the Other, thus formally determining the Other's Otherness. Inequality means, precisely, the absence of a third party capable of embracing the I and the Other. Therefore, the vis-à-vis relationship manifests itself as a plurality.

"*...Autrui en tant qu'autrui se situe dans une dimension de la hauteur et de l'abaissement...*"¹⁰

and

"*La présence du visage –l'infini de l'Autre- est dénuement, présence du tiers(...) et commandement qui commande de commander.*"¹¹