

GIVING UP YOUR PLACE IN HISTORY. THE "POSITION" OF LEVINAS IN PHILOSOPHY AND JEWISH THOUGHT¹

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Abstract

In this paper I would like to present the work of Emmanuel Levinas and at the same time provide some clarity on the relation between his philosophy and Jewish thought. After a brief biographical and intellectual orientation, the theme of history and eschatology in Levinas's work will be explored as guiding theme of his thought. To him, history is for the powerful flow of being that undermines ethical subjectivity; eschatology refers to the interruption of history by its other: ethics. In this exposition, attention will be given to his relationship with Rosenweig and Buber. An analysis of the central notion of ethics as infinite responsibility to the other as well as the political thrust of it, namely the search for justice for the other as brother, will be presented as Levinas's philosophical interpretation of eschatology. The question of justice spontaneously leads us to a twin question: to whom am I responsible? Who is Israel? A tension between universal ethical agency and particularistic Jewish identity will be explored. From the preceding discussion conclusions will be drawn relevant to the particularity of Israel and the Jewish religious literature and their place in Levinas's philosophy of history and eschatology. This will allow for a suggestion on how to understand the relation between the Greek and Jewish elements of Levinas's work.

INTRODUCTION

The reason why I, a philosopher, find myself at a conference for the study of the Semitic world is the centenary celebrations of one of the twentieth century's most important philosophers. Emmanuel Levinas was a Jew and a philosopher. At this historic occasion, I would like to present him² by situating his work in the history of Jewish thought. And I shall do so with the aim of furthering our

understanding of his reflection on history and of the relationship between philosophy and Judaism in his work.

I

Born in 1906 from Jewish parents in Kaunas in Lithuania, exiled to the Ukraine as a boy because of Russian persecution of Jews, studying in Stassburg during the aftermath of the Dreyfus crisis in France, Levinas became a student of Husserl and Heidegger in Germany where he was also later a prisoner of war in a Stalag for Jewish-French officers (cf. Levinas's autobiographical essay, "Signature" in Levinas 1976:405-412). When he set out to work in philosophy, he had been thoroughly grafted into a number of histories: child of Abraham, victim of Russian and German anti-Semitism, reader of the Hebrew Bible and its interpretational history, scholar of the western philosophical tradition, inheritor of the privileges and victim of the disasters of democracy, and transmitter of wisdom and law as teacher and as father. Not only did he then have enough to contemplate on by personal experience,³ but by his position in transmission was engaged in history and reflection on it. History is, for Levinas, a problem, a question. An important part of his philosophy will be devoted, implicitly or explicitly, to understanding history (especially the history of Western philosophy) and the interpretation thereof (cf. the essays collected in

¹ This article is a revised version of the paper read at the conference of the Southern African Society for Near Eastern Studies (SASNES), University of South Africa, 11-12 September 2006. I have, however, allowed myself to maintain the form of address.

² Though this article could be read on its own, it is complemented by my article "The constellation subject-women-God in the ethics of Levinas", submitted for publication in *Journal for Semitics* (Wolff 2007b).

³ He declares also that "all philosophical thought is rests on pre-philosophical experiences."// "toute pensée philosophique repose sur des expériences pré-philosophiques" (Levinas 1982b:19).

Frogneux & Mies 1998).

We know him as the author of two corpuses of reflection: one philosophical, the other Talmudic readings. He insisted on keeping the two apart.⁴ The current growing international attention to his work is due to his work as philosopher, and this will also be my perspective: when Levinas writes philosophy he wants to be read, understood, and evaluated as a philosopher; he wants to be part of the history of reflection coming from the Greeks.

II

He was particularly influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger and especially his work *Sein und Zeit*. In this book, Heidegger taught his young reader that whereas the tradition of western metaphysics opened us to ontology, to the study of being, this tradition is paradoxically a history of covering up, or an obstacle to the real question about being (Heidegger [1927]1993, §6; cf. also the commentary on this paragraph by Greisch 1994:95-97). What is needed if one wants to understand being, is to disobstruct our path to it by what Heidegger calls *Destruction*, that is, a de-construction, of the history of metaphysics. This task of a new reflection on the question of being is positive in that it sets out to lead us back (*re-ducere*) to that which gives us truly access to an understanding of being, namely the historicity of the human being, that we are ourselves. If

⁴ Cf. Levinas [1981]1997:126: “I always make a clear distinction in what I write between the confessional and the philosophical texts. I don’t deny that there could in fact be a source of common inspiration. I only claim that it is necessary to draw a line of demarcation between the two as having distinct methods of exegesis and separate languages.”/“Je fais toujours une distinction claire, dans ce que j’écris, entre les textes confessionnels et les textes philosophiques. Je ne nie pas qu’ils puissent finalement avoir une source d’inspiration commune. J’affirme simplement qu’il est nécessaire de tirer une ligne de démarcation entre les deux comme ayant des méthodes d’exégèse distinctes, des langages séparés.” For a first approximation of Levinas’s religious writings, one may consult Davis 1996:93-119.

anyone wants to take up the age-old task of philosophising about *being*, this could be done only thanks to the fact that the philosopher, like all people, *is*. This "is" and "being" should be understood not as nouns (as was so often done in the history of metaphysics), but as verbs. In short, I *am* or exist in such a way that I always interpret the fact of being, albeit implicitly (Heidegger [1927]1993:12). Levinas would summarize: "The whole human being is ontology" (Levinas 1991:13) and it is only from this primordial understanding of time, of the historicity that one is yourself, that world history or cosmic history could be understood.⁵

Initially Levinas was extremely excited about the interpretative possibilities of this philosophy: literally every aspect of one's life is given a place in the movement of understanding. But when Europe became threatened by the possibility of war and after the experience that he had of it, Levinas became convinced that there lurked a big danger in this idea: if being is so much mine that I understand it literally all the time, then I cannot be detached from the happening of being. One is swept away by the blind force of history that has no mercy on the lives of individual people.

The most succinct formulation of this perspective is to be found in the preface of his 1961 book, *Totality and infinity*. In the situation of war, we are subjected to an experience of being in its purest form. War shows to us what being is like: it is an event in which morality is annihilated; it is the large-scale destruction, not of the other and his/her otherness, but the destruction of that to which an identity has been accorded. What has been identified (as enemy), is taken up in a totality of which the most violent potential is war. But anticipating war demands preparation for war, i.e. practice politics, which as Foucault would later say in a different context, is the continuation or the extension of war by

⁵ For an analysis of the relation between the phenomenological, reductional reading of history found in Husserl and Heidegger with that of Levinas, see Taminioux 1998:49-76.

other means. If *being* is like the waging of a war, then the human beings who *are*, are like warriors. Thus, the interdependent terms of rationality, “totality” and “identity” and of ontology “history” and “being”, mutually imply one another and carry in themselves an inherent possibility of violence.⁶

III

This implicit criticism of Heidegger’s ontology and the book that is thereby introduced, has been considerably influenced by *Der Stern der Erlösung*, the important book of Franz Rosenzweig, whom Levinas has called “the only modern philosopher of Judaism worthy of this name” (Levinas 1994b:87). Central to this criticism “purely and simply taken over from Rosenzweig” (Levinas [1961]1998:14) is that of the idea of totality (and its concomitant idea of identity) that is, according to Rosenzweig and Levinas, characteristic of Western reason and at the same time Western politics and culture. Rosenzweig (I follow Levinas’s reading of him here) attempted to overcome this totality by representing reality as consisting of three irreducible entities – God, human beings, world – that do not form a totality (Levinas 1982:13). Though people have tended in the history of thought to reduce reality to one of these, Rosenzweig maintains their plurality before any totality (Levinas 1976:264, Levinas 1987:77). They are however linked (read: *re-ligere* as in “religion”) by three manifestations of time: past (creation), present (revelation) and future (redemption). Whereas the link of *creation* between God and world is always past, God is present to every human being in his/her unique particularity by a *revelation* of love which is also a commandment to love. One is called to an

⁶ Cf. Levinas [1935]1982:127: “Every civilization that accepts being, its concomitant tragic despair and the crimes that it justifies, is worthy to be called barbaric.”//“Toute civilisation qui accepte l’être, le désespoir tragique qu’il comporte et les crimes qu’il justifie, mérite le nom de barbare.”

ever awaiting future of love for others in the form of *redemption*. This human act pulls the others out of their submergence in history and restores them with the capacity to react to history (cf. Levinas 1976:278). The history of the West is characterised by two big truths: Judaism and Christianity where Christianity tends to be equated with the political life of the West (Levinas 1982c:11)⁷ and Judaism or Israel “includes all persons that refuse the purely authoritarian verdict of History” by acts of redemption.⁸

When Levinas then sets out to rethink history, the main thrust of his work was not to reject what he had learned from Heidegger, but rather confront it with the abovementioned elements of Rosenzweig’s work: history or being might have a totalising tendency that reduces everything by means of reason or force to one or other identity, but there is something more. In the preface to *Totality and infinity*, he calls this more “eschatology”. His aim with this is not to convert Greek thought to Hebrew, but under the inspiration of Rosenzweig and the Jewish tradition of eschatological reflection, to introduce something to Greek thought. This is not done on the basis of any notion of the authority of the Jewish scriptures that transmit this imported notion. He would consider this project successful, only if he could make “eschatology” a credible notion to the Hellenistic ear. Later on, I shall address the question of the relation between philosophy and Jewish texts in more detail.

He does so by arguing, like Rosenzweig, against Parmenides, for the plurality of Being. “Being,” says Levinas, “produces itself as multiple and split between the Same and the Other. This is its ultimate structure”.⁹ Without going

⁷ For a discussion on Levinas’s view on Christianity and of its relation to Judaism, see chapter 5, “Israel in Universal and Holy History”, in Caygill 2002:159-198.

⁸ “englobe toutes les personnes qui se refusent au verdict purement autoritaire de l’Histoire” (Levinas 1987:88).

⁹ Levinas [1961]1998:247: “L’être se produit comme multiple et comme scindé en Même et en Autre. C’est sa structure ultime.” I have discussed the inherent paradox in this formulation elsewhere (cf. Wolff 2007, Chapter 3) and shall not go into it further here.

into the uncomfortable formulation, this statement is none the less very revealing of Levinas's project, at least in the first half of his intellectual road. Sameness, identity, history, being, perseverance, and ultimately violence and war are juxtaposed to otherness, eschatology, ethics, and peace. But how does Levinas argue for this ethical eschatology? How does he succeed in introducing Rosenzweig's totality breaking religion of love into his conceptual framework of the interpreting, ontological existence of humans that he learned from Heidegger?

He does this by what could be considered a radicalising reading of the I-Thou philosophy of Buber. Levinas accepts Buber's analyses that argue for a completely singular relation between an I and a Thou, in opposition to the I-It relation (and this is not unknown to Rosenzweig either). He fears however that the symmetry established between me and you could be just another form of totalizing the relation between us under an "us" (cf. Levinas [1947]1998a and [1947]1998b).¹⁰ Admittedly, from certain perspectives human beings do fall under a common denominator. I might describe the other as biologically similar to other members of the species, I might describe the family resemblances in the make-up and behaviour of people from the perspective of sociology and psychology, but this overlooks a crucial aspect of the meaning of the other for me. Just like the history of metaphysics, while seeking to understand being, obstructed our way to a real interpretation of it, so these ways of exploring the other obstructs what is most fundamental about him/her¹¹. This is the other's otherness: something exceeds the characteristics of the other, and that is the appeal that the face of the other makes on me. The meaning of the face of the other exceeds that which could be known or interpreted from the other, it also

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of the textual relation between Levinas and Buber, see Bernasconi 1988.

¹¹ The place of gender in the economy of Levinas's work is explained in Wolff 2007b (forthcoming).

precedes any formation of an "us" between us. The meaning of the other is an ethical imperative that calls on my absolute, unconditional and infinite responsibility. This ethical imperative breaks through my historical and ontological existence in an eschatological manner. There is therefore, originally, no symmetry or identification or reciprocity between me and the other; there is no dialogue between me and the other, before the appeal to my responsibility. I am, as it were, invested with this primordial imperative. Therefore, the origin of any meaning of my existence does not start with my historicity and the particularities of my life, since my historicity is entirely invested by the imperative to be responsible to the other. This imperative is made on me to give myself for the other. I have to give myself, that is, reduce my being, my historical existence, that has all the time been obstructing my recognition of what is most essential to the meaning of it, namely the imperative from the other and my giving of myself which is just the other side of the coin. The meaning of my historicity is to be found in giving it up for the other.

It should be stressed that the originary appeal is made to be from someone without that person's particular characteristics having any importance whatsoever and this imperative is valid for me, completely independent of who I am. The other should be considered "my brother", i.e. my other to whom I am infinitely responsible. The only relief from this extremely demanding conception of ethics that Levinas presents to counter the violence of history, is the fact that I have to think about how to best answer the appeal of *all* the different others. My responsibility for *this* other is alleviated only under the condition that it frees me to give myself more to *that* other. The ethical imperative thus necessitates the question of who needs my help the most. This question of the most effective redistribution of my loyalties and means is the question of justice. Justice is the quest for a political realisation of the infinite ethical appeals. No law, no judicial system can adequately formulate what this asks of me, in fact, justice understood in these terms calls on me to work for the

continual questioning and improvement of the system of justice in which I find myself. Thus ethics breaks into the normal flow of politics like the dawn of the eschatological peace dawns on the unending struggle for existence that comprises human history.

IV

It would seem then that a Jewish intuition, and influences from Jewish philosophers helped Levinas to make the western philosophical tradition attentive to what it could not see anymore because of the primacy accorded in this tradition to what Levinas calls gnoseology, speaking about knowledge, in the exploration of all meaning.¹² Instead of being a derivative of such a discourse on knowledge, ethics would then be originally something outside of it, that is, the other of Western metaphysics that questions or interrupts it. At first glance, one gets the impression that it is Levinas's perseverance in what has been transmitted to him, his fidelity to the family, cultural and religious history that is his, that made this contribution possible. This impression would be enforced by Levinas's introduction of other non-traditional terminology, like prophecy, saintliness, liturgy, etc. And this observation is correct, but the very nature of the introduced Jewish notions, is transformed in the light of what they helped to reveal in Greek. What Levinas held on to was changed by what it helped to discover, namely the primary institutor of all meaning, that is the ethical presence of the other. I shall look at this matter by considering the shift in meaning of the name "Israel" and "Judaism".

Clinging to your place in history, that is what Levinas has since 1934 (cf.

¹² Cf. Levinas [1974]1986:104: "Western philosophy never doubted the gnoseological – and consequently ontological – status of meaning."/"La philosophie occidentale n'a jamais douté de la stature gnoséologique – et par conséquent ontologique – de la signification."

the essay “Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme”, in Levinas [1934]1994) associated with Nazism and all other forms of violence. Nazism is the celebration of the blood, people and race, of the earth and country. If Levinas were to celebrate in his philosophy his belonging to his people, to his history, he would fall under the very criticism he leveled against this form of violence. But he, like Rosenzweig before him, maintains that Judaism or Israel has a particular *ethical* meaning: “the strong idea of Judaism consists in transfiguring the individual or national egocentrism or the egoism, in the calling of the moral conscience”.¹³ Jewish particularism has, in the light of the ethics of the other, no meaning, if it is not derived from the appeal to respond to the other whoever they might be. The eschatology of the other calls a people together from all nations to testify to or to prophesy about (terminology of Levinas) the ethical imperative of the other. There might be something like an anonymous Judaism (not Levinas’s terminology), including also Christians, Buddhists, atheist, etc. Judaism is here not a religion, Israel is not a people; it is the condition of “humanity at the edge of morality without institutions”.¹⁴

Thus Levinas presents us not with a rejection of Greek thought. Greek and Hebrew are in interaction, neither making the other redundant, neither reducible to the other. Europe is the Greeks and the Bible, Levinas repeatedly said (for

¹³ “l’idée forte du judaïsme consiste à transfigurer l’égocentrisme ou l’égoïsme individuel ou national, en vocation de la conscience morale” (Levinas 1994a:161).

¹⁴ “Le judaïsme, c’est l’humanité au bord de la morale sans institutions.” (Levinas 1994b:311). On the same page, Levinas uses the expression “la condition juive” (the Jewish condition), that could apply to people from any national, religious or cultural group; that which applies to Jewish history is applicable to the history of any group: the essence is the reference to “people and groups that don’t follow the logics of States. It is the history of stubborn people who don’t submit themselves to the fate of what history has passed on to us” // “Cette histoire est celle des hommes et des peuples qui ne suivent pas la logique des Etats. C’est l’histoire des gens têtus qui ne se soumettent pas au fait accompli [...]” (freely translated) from Hayat 1997:57. It is this tension in Levinas’s handling of identity in his two corpuses – historic Israel or universal Israel – that is responsible for the controversy and politics surrounding the appropriation of his work. One could for instance refer to the clash between Lévy (2003) and Deguy (2004).

example Levinas [1987]1996:134, 140, Levinas 1991:241, Levinas 1994a:181). The Europe that he refers to is the Europe of “liberalism”,¹⁵ i.e. the Europe that institutes, but also improves its legislation, its state of justice. Consequently, he insists on “the simultaneous necessity of both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the *abstract* and somewhat anarchical ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem [...] each of these principles, left on its own, only accelerates the contrary of what it wants to guarantee.”¹⁶

That seems to me why Levinas explicitly did not want to mix the two parts of his oeuvre – philosophy and Talmudic commentaries. When he wrote as Jew, it was for Jews, to teach and to console – in this, the particularity of his membership of a faith community would be an aid and the authority of the scriptures used would be accepted in advance by his readers. But when those same scriptures are used in philosophy, they only have authority – but that is their universal authority – in so far as they testify to the original imperative of the other. And the value of Levinas’s texts, be they philosophical or confessional, is decisively determined by their obedience to that original imperative, by the fidelity with which they are means by which he gives himself

¹⁵ Cf. Levinas 1988:62 where Levinas defines liberalism with reference to improved justice: “by law, justice always seeks and endeavours to become better. The liberal State is not a purely empirical notion – it is a category of ethics according to which the people, placed under the generality of laws, retain the meaning of their responsibility, i.e. their uniqueness as elected to respond.” // “de droit, la justice se veut toujours et s’efforce d’être toujours meilleure. L’Etat libéral n’est pas une notion purement empirique – il est une catégorie de l’éthique où, placés sous la généralité des lois, les hommes conservent le sens de leur responsabilité, c’est-à-dire leur unicité d’élus à répondre.”

¹⁶ “la nécessité simultanée et de la hiérarchie enseignée par Athènes et de l’individualisme éthique *abstrait* et quelque peu anarchique, enseigné par Jérusalem pour supprimer la violence [...] chacun de ces principes, laissé à lui-même, n’accélère que le contraire de ce qu’il veut garantir.” (Levinas [1952]1994:99).

to those from whom proceed the infinite appeal. Any text or any action that gives itself to the other in obedience is a “Holy Scripture”.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

I said in the introduction that Levinas was a Jew and a philosopher. He was not a Jewish philosopher. This title would border on a contradiction for him. Evidently, his place in the history of the world and of Jewish thought could be described by the usual descriptive and comparative methods, as I have used them here. But ultimately, if the philosopher Levinas was member of Israel, in the meaning that he accorded to this term in his philosophy, then this was only by developing a philosophy that would be a response to the infinite appeal made on him by the others to which every action is a response, a giving of himself to the other. When we try to indicate his importance or position in history, ultimately we should remark as he did himself when asked in an interview about

¹⁷ This holds also for the “national literatures” that participate in Holy Scriptures (cf. Levinas 1982b:115-116), but also even for proverbs and oral fables (cf. Levinas 1991:119). Let me add, for the sake of clarity, that the two kinds of discourse practices by Levinas both answer to the appeal of the other, but in different ways. It is this response and the continual criticism of the response that is responsible for the parallel character that philosophy and Judaic literature (ideally) share, namely that of an incessant commentary: Judaism is essentially Rabbinic (Levinas 1976:28) – commentary belongs to reading and in turn demands further reading and commentary (see Levinas 1982a:108, 126) – but philosophy is also nothing else than the history of thinkers commenting on one another, i.e. re-duc-ing one another as it were to the originary meaning of the other (cf. Levinas [1982]1992:34-61, and Levinas 1991:86-99). But it would be misleading to claim as Davis does (cf. 1996:94) that the two forms of discourse share references to the Bible, similar terminology and the same concerns, without pointing out that the way in which these commonalities function in the two kinds of text respectively, greatly differs. And this difference is essential to understanding what Levinas attempts to achieve in the two kinds of text and ultimately essential to our understanding not only of Levinas’s philosophy to his religious writings, but also of his religious writings to the broader tradition of Judaic literature.

the place of the work of the poet Edmond Jabès in contemporary literature¹⁸ – he answered: “Is it sure that a true poet occupies a place? Is he not in the eminent sense of the word, the one that *looses his place*?” Being, but being for the other, having a place in history by giving it up – thus is the eschatological significance of Emmanuel Levinas.

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¹⁸ “Est-il sûr qu’un vrai poète occupe une place? N’est-il pas ce qui, au sens éminent du terme, *perd sa place*” (Levinas 1975:93-95).

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