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## Does the Other Exist?

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The conception of ethics as the 'ethics of the other' or the 'ethics of difference' has its origin in the theses of Emmanuel Lévinas rather than in those of Kant.

Lévinas has devoted his work, after a brush with phenomenology (an exemplary confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger), to the deposing [*destitution*] of philosophy in favour of ethics. It is to him that we owe, long before the current fashion, a kind of ethical radicalism.<sup>1</sup>

### I Ethics according to Lévinas

Roughly speaking: Lévinas maintains that metaphysics, imprisoned by its Greek origins, has subordinated thought to the logic of the Same, to the primacy of substance and identity. But, according to Lévinas, it is impossible to arrive at an authentic thought of the Other (and thus an ethics of the relation to the Other) from the despotism of the Same, which is incapable of recognizing this Other. The dialectic of the Same and the Other, conceived 'ontologically' under the dominance of self-identity [*identité-à-soi*], ensures the absence of the Other in effective thought, sup-

presses all genuine experience of the Other, and bars the way to an ethical opening to alterity. So we must push thought over to a different origin, a non-Greek origin, one that proposes a radical, primary opening to the Other conceived as ontologically anterior to the construction of identity. It is in the Jewish tradition that Lévinas finds the basis for this pushing over. What the Law (understood according to Jewish tradition as both immemorial and currently in effect) names is precisely the anteriority, founded in being-before-the-Same, and with respect to theoretical thought, of the ethics of the relation to the Other, itself conceived merely as the 'objective' identification of regularities and identities. The Law, indeed, does not tell me what is, but what is imposed by the existence of others. This Law (of the Other) might be opposed to the laws (of the real).

According to Greek thought, adequate action presumes an initial theoretical mastery of experience, which ensures that the action is in conformity with the rationality of being. From this point of departure are deduced laws (in the plural) of the City and of action. According to Jewish ethics, in Lévinas's sense, everything is grounded in the immediacy of an opening to the Other which disarms the reflexive subject. The 'thou [*tu*]' prevails over the 'I'. Such is the whole meaning of *the Law*.

Lévinas proposes a whole series of phenomenological themes for testing and exploring the originality of the Other, at the centre of which lies the theme of the face, of the singular giving [*donation*] of the Other 'in person', through his fleshly epiphany, which does not test mimetic recognition (the Other as 'similar', *identical* to me), but, on the contrary, is that from which I experience myself

ethically as 'pledged' to the appearing of the Other, and subordinated in my being to this pledge.

For Lévinas, ethics is *the new name of thought*, thought which has thrown off its 'logical' chains (the principle of identity) in favour of its prophetic submission to the Law of founding alterity.

## II The 'ethics of difference'

Whether they know it or not, it is in the name of this configuration that the proponents of ethics explain to us today that it amounts to 'recognition of the other' (against racism, which would deny this other), or to 'the ethics of differences' (against substantialist nationalism, which would exclude immigrants, or sexism, which would deny feminine-being), or to 'multiculturalism' (against the imposition of a unified model of behaviour and intellectual approach). Or, quite simply, to good old-fashioned 'tolerance', which consists of not being offended by the fact that others think and act differently from you.

This commonsensical discourse has neither force nor truth. It is defeated in advance in the competition it declares between 'tolerance' and 'fanaticism', between 'the ethics of difference' and 'racism', between 'recognition of the other' and 'identitarian' fixity.

For the honour of philosophy, it is first of all necessary to admit that this ideology of a 'right to difference', the contemporary catechism of goodwill with regard to 'other cultures', are strikingly distant from Lévinas's actual conception of things.

## III From the Other to the Altogether-Other

The principal – but also fairly superficial – objection that we might make to ethics in Lévinas's sense is: what is it that testifies to the originality of my de-votion [*dé-vouement*] to the Other? The phenomenological analyses of the face, of the caress, of love, cannot by themselves ground the anti-ontological (or anti-identitarian) thesis of the author of *Totality and Infinity*. A 'mimetic' conception that locates original access to the other in my own redoubled image also sheds light on that element of self-forgetting that characterizes the grasping of this other: what I cherish is that me-myself-at-a-distance which, precisely because it is 'objectified' for my consciousness, finds me as a stable construction, as an interiority accessible *in its exteriority*. Psychoanalysis explains brilliantly how this construction of the Ego in the identification with the other – this mirror-effect<sup>2</sup> – combines narcissism (I delight in the exteriority of the other in so far as he figures as myself made visible to myself) and aggressivity (I invest in the other my death drive, my own archaic desire for self-destruction).

Here, however, we are a very long way from what Lévinas wants to tell us. As always, the pure analysis of phenomenal appearing cannot decide between divergent orientations of thought.

We need, in addition, to make explicit the axioms of thought that *decide* an orientation.

The difficulty, which also defines the point of application for these axioms, can be explained as follows: the ethical primacy of the Other over the Same requires that the

experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or of an essential non-identity, the *traversal* of which is the ethical experience itself. But nothing in the simple phenomenon of the other contains such a guarantee. And this simply because the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus lead back to the logic of the Same. The other always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true.

The phenomenon of the other (his face) must then attest to a radical alterity which he nevertheless does not contain by himself. The Other, as he appears to me in the order of the finite, must be the epiphany of a properly infinite distance to the other, the traversal of which is the originary ethical experience.

This means that in order to be intelligible, ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Lévinas calls this principle the 'Altogether-Other', and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. There can be no Other if he is not the immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other. There can be no finite devotion to the non-identical if it is not sustained by the infinite devotion of the principle to that which subsists outside it. There can be no ethics without God the ineffable.

In Lévinas's enterprise, the ethical dominance of the Other over the theoretical ontology of the same is entirely bound up with a religious axiom; to believe that we can separate what Lévinas's thought unites is to betray the intimate movement of this thought, its subjective rigour. In truth, Lévinas has no philosophy – not even philosophy as

the 'servant' of theology. Rather, this is philosophy (in the Greek sense of the word) *annulled* by theology, itself no longer a theology (the terminology is still too Greek, and presumes proximity to the divine via the identity and predicates of God) but, precisely, an ethics.

To make of ethics the ultimate name of the religious as such (i.e. of that which relates [*re-lie*] to the Other under the ineffable authority of the Altogether-Other) is to distance it still more completely from all that can be gathered under the name of 'philosophy'.

To put it crudely: Lévinas's enterprise serves to remind us, with extraordinary insistence, that every effort to turn ethics into the principle of thought and action is essentially religious. We might say that Lévinas is the coherent and inventive thinker of an assumption that no academic exercise of veiling or abstraction can obscure: distanced from its Greek usage (according to which it is clearly subordinated to the theoretical), and taken in general, ethics is a category of pious discourse.

#### IV Ethics as decomposed [*décomposée*] religion

What then becomes of this category if we claim to suppress, or mask, its religious character, all the while preserving the abstract arrangement of its apparent constitution ('recognition of the other', etc.)? The answer is obvious: a dog's dinner [*de la bouillie pour les chats*]. We are left with a pious discourse without piety, a spiritual supplement for incompetent governments, and a cultural sociology preached, in line with the new-style sermons, in lieu of the late class struggle.

Our suspicions are first aroused when we see that the self-declared apostles of ethics and of the 'right to difference' are clearly *horrified by any vigorously sustained difference*. For them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on. As a matter of fact, this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other – which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*? Respect for differences, of course! But on condition that the different be parliamentary-democratic, pro free-market economics, in favour of freedom of opinion, feminism, the environment. . . . That is to say: I respect differences, but only, of course, in so far as that which differs also respects, just as I do, the said differences. Just as there can be 'no freedom for the enemies of freedom', so there can be no respect for those whose difference consists precisely in not respecting differences. To prove the point, just consider the obsessive resentment expressed by the partisans of ethics regarding anything that resembles an Islamic 'fundamentalist'.

The problem is that the 'respect for differences' and the ethics of human rights do seem to define an *identity*! And that as a result, the respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy – albeit visibly declining – 'West'). Even immigrants in this country [France], as seen by the partisans of ethics, are acceptably different only when they are 'integrated', only if they seek integration (which seems to mean, if you think about it: only if they want to *suppress* their difference). It might well be that ethical ideology, detached from the religious teachings which at least conferred upon it the fullness of a 'revealed' identity, is simply the final

imperative of a conquering civilization: 'Become like me and I will respect your difference.'

### V Return to the Same

The truth is that, in the context of a system of thought that is both a-religious and genuinely contemporary with the truths of our time, the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question – and it is an extraordinarily difficult one – is much more that of *recognizing the Same*.

Let us posit *our* axioms. There is no God. Which also means: the One is not. The multiple 'without-one' – every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples – is the law of being. The only stopping point is the void. The infinite, as Pascal had already realized, is the banal reality of every situation, not the predicate of a transcendence. For the infinite, as Cantor demonstrated with the creation of set theory, is actually only the most general form of multiple-being [*être-multiple*]. In fact, every situation, inasmuch as it is, is a multiple composed of an infinity of elements, each one of which is itself a multiple. Considered in their simple belonging to a situation (to an infinite multiple), the animals of the species *Homo sapiens* are ordinary multiplicities.

What, then, are we to make of the other, of differences, and of their ethical recognition?

Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. Even the apparently reflexive experience of myself is by no

means the intuition of a unity but a labyrinth of differentiations, and Rimbaud was certainly not wrong when he said: 'I am another.' There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself.

As many, but also, then, *neither more nor less*.

#### VI 'Cultural' differences and culturalism

Contemporary ethics kicks up a big fuss about 'cultural' differences. Its conception of the 'other' is informed mainly by this kind of differences. Its great ideal is the peaceful coexistence of cultural, religious, and national 'communities', the refusal of 'exclusion'.

But what we must recognize is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind, as obvious in the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shi'ite 'community' of Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas.

The objective (or historical) foundation of contemporary ethics is culturalism, in truth a tourist's fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs. And in particular, for the irreducible medley of imaginary formations (religions, sexual representations, incarnations of authority . . .). Yes, the essential 'objective' basis of ethics rests on a vulgar sociology, directly inherited from the astonishment of the colonial encounter with savages. And we must not forget that there are also savages among us (the drug addicts of the *banlieues*, religious sects – the whole journalistic paraphernalia of menacing internal alterity), confronted by an

ethics that offers, without changing its means of investigation, *its* 'recognition' and *its* social workers.

Against these trifling descriptions (of a reality that is both obvious and inconsistent in itself), genuine thought should affirm the following principle: since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant. No light is shed on any concrete situation by the notion of the 'recognition of the other'. Every modern collective configuration involves people from everywhere, who have their different ways of eating and speaking, who wear different sorts of headgear, follow different religions, have complex and varied relations to sexuality, prefer authority or disorder, and such is the way of the world.

#### VII From the Same to truths

Philosophically, if the other doesn't matter it is indeed because the difficulty lies on the side of the Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the infinite multiplicity of differences) but what *comes to be*. I have already named that in regard to which only the advent of the Same occurs: it is a *truth*. Only a truth is, as such, *indifferent to differences*. This is something we have always known, even if sophists of every age have always attempted to obscure its certainty: a truth is *the same for all*.

What is to be postulated for one and all, what I have called our 'being immortal', certainly is not covered by the logic of 'cultural' differences as insignificant as they are massive. It is our capacity for truth – our capacity to be that

'same' that a truth convokes to its own 'sameness'. Or in other words, depending on the circumstances, our capacity for science, love, politics or art, since all truths, in my view, fall under one or another of these universal names.

It is only through a genuine perversion, for which we will pay a terrible historical price, that we have sought to elaborate an 'ethics' on the basis of cultural relativism. For this is to pretend that a merely contingent state of things can found a Law.

The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural – or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings *some* truths into the world. Ethics must be taken in the sense presumed by Lacan when, against Kant and the notion of a general morality, he discusses the ethics of psychoanalysis. Ethics does not exist. There is only the *ethic-of* (of politics, of love, of science, of art).

There is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truths.

As for me, I identify four fundamental subjective 'types': political, scientific, artistic, and amorous [*amoureux*].

Every human animal, by participating in a given singular truth, is inscribed in one of these four types.

A philosophy sets out to construct a *space of thought* in which the different subjective types, expressed by the singular truths of its time, coexist. But this coexistence is not a unification – that is why it is impossible to speak of *one* Ethics.

## Notes

1. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1961 [1969]. This is his major work.
2. Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Phase', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, 1966 [1977].