

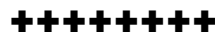
The Metaphysics of Emmanuel Levinas in the Postmodern Context

Epiphanii Hnativ

Abstract

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The author suggests that the depersonalization of man in the postmodern context together with the rise in violence is symptomatic of a philosophical struggle between the ontology of war and the eschatology of peace. The contributions of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger to this struggle are briefly reviewed before a suggestion is offered that the radical character of the ethical metaphysics of Levinas will provide a way forward.



Introduction

The task set for today's conference, "What is philosophy to be beyond the limits of the unknown?" conceals behind the scenes of uncertainties and anxieties its barrenness, giving away from a distance to the philosopher a "traumatism of the end," inherent in its nature, as a singular immanence of non-being. Philosophy experiences hunger, incompleteness, which in its turn tempts the philosopher to renounce the freedom of self-determination, thereby dooming his freedom not to self-expiation but to an unlucky choice.

In contemporary society, lack or deficiency is given a new meaning due to the awareness thereof: disappointment and tri-

viality of soul. Awareness of deficiency is transformed into awareness of a game which becomes “the most perversely subtle modality of *human fiasco*.”¹ The extreme event of the decline of the person is articulated by the transfer from the crisis of meaning to the irresponsibility of human existence – and with no more wish to “provide from reality but to invent the allusions to be conceivable without being presented”² at that. The game swears an oath on the subject and the steadiness of its essence and thereafter intends to negate it.

In the “atmosphere of an irresponsible game,”³ the subject secretly grants violence the right to become the principle of regulation of human relations. Having changed its name to social inevitability, violence not only breaks any bonds with *the existing*, but also seeks to assimilate the true with the same. The subject experiences boredom, which not only locks it within the immanence of knowledge, but also denies any transcendence and diversity. The ennui becomes a fact that “absorbs, gets bogged down and bricks up itself in the Same.”⁴

This ontology of game and crisis of modern culture is disputed by Emmanuel Levinas, who crosses the border-line of philosophic paradigms which have existed so far. The ethics proposed by the French philosopher become the basis and sense of being,⁵ which basis can find the original source (*l'anarchique*) of existence and free itself from the post-modern ontology of the game of nihilism and antihumanism.

Towards Recognition of the Non-Being

The crisis of modern philosophy is a symptom of the constant struggle between the ontology of war and the eschatology of peace. Levinas calls Hegel and Heidegger fighters on behalf of the attempt of wholeness to subject existence to the sys-

¹ E. Lévinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1985), 85.

² J-F. Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Minuit, 1986), 34.

³ B. Furgalska, *Fedeltà all'Umano. Responsabilità-per-l'Altro nella Filosofia di Emmanuel Levinas* (Rome: Verso Umano, 1999), 52.

⁴ E. Lévinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 31.

⁵ J. Rolland, «L'humain dans l'homme», *Esprit* 7 (1997): 114.

tem of the human mind and then to confirm the ultimate intelligibility of existence in the context of ontological imperialism. The former considers the absolutely other in terms of negativity, the latter within the primeval understanding of being.

In his work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel views the same as a subject (*le Moi*), whose “existence of being consists in self-identification, in rediscovery of its identity by what is arriving. Being is by excellence identity, the original work of the identification. The I is identical within its alterations.”⁶

According to Hegel’s understanding, negativity allows the subject to identify itself in its otherness and confirm its resemblance to the other. However, in reality, the “I” is violently deformed not so much by the exclusion of otherness as by the use of the other at the point of formation of otherness as the same. Therefore, otherness depends on the structure of the same, which distorts otherness. Husserl repeated Hegel’s logic of relation of the “I” to the other. The phenomenology of Husserl started the search for the other with its lonely ego and asocial conscience.⁷

Heidegger was the second representative of “neutral philosophy.” According to his *Being and Time*, the comprehension of being is not an act of knowledge and is not considered at the level of concepts and thematizing, but is revealed as the constitution of human temporality. Levinas adds that:

Heidegger’s understanding of being characterizes the man. Comprehension as universality determines not the human essence but human existence. If a man exists [*un étant*] for someone, the understanding of being [*l’être*] constitutes the essence of this existing. The human person has no essence, inasmuch as *the essence of man is constituted by man’s existentia*. The humanity of man is found in the world and among things,

⁶ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité* (Nijhoff: Martinus, 1971), 25.

⁷ S. Strasser, “Antiphénoménologie et phénoménologie dans la philosophie d’Emmanuel Levinas,” *Revue philosophique de Louvain* (1977): 101–25.