

A CENTURY WITH LEVINAS NOTES ON THE MARGINS OF HIS LEGACY

Levinas' philosophy: phenomenology, philosophy and religious hermeneutics of Judaism, ethics, metaphysics. A century with Levinas, the question still remains open as to what is truly at stake in his philosophy, beyond the syncretism at work in the reception of his writings, and beyond the too generously used label of "ethics as first philosophy". Was Levinas strictly speaking a rigorous phenomenologist, or rather a philosopher of Judaism? A thinker of an intense account of the relationship with the Other? Or an amalgamation of all these and even more? Having been in the company of his saying for so long, one might say that it is now time to discard the totality of all marginal and exclusive interpretations, and to look at a multi-facetious way of approaching his work, which would allow for all the dimensions of his writings to be exposed.

Whether Levinas' philosophy is authentically phenomenological or displays a fundamental incompatibility with this method of investigation is still up for debate among his scholars. Levinas himself bears responsibility for the way in which this question is still asked, as he was less than decisive on this matter, oscillating between an undoubted loyalty to phenomenology and a constant effort to overcome its limitations. His rapport to phenomenology has been interpreted at times as the sign of a positive originality. At the same time, it has also been highlighted as a proof of duplicity or of a "double game": Levinas distances himself from the phenomenological tradition, which conceals or is opaque to true alterity, but uses it as a source of inspiration to justify theological or metaphysical claims.

Despite this ambiguity and the constant struggle between a pseudo-phenomenological legacy and a phenomenological approach, Levinas' work carries great significance for phenomenology. To start with, Levinas was the first to introduce this method in France. His own writings are deeply connected to phenomenological themes and the main figures of this movement. In this respect, Levinas deploys his great insight by turning Heidegger and Husserl against each other and sometimes

even against themselves. In addition, Levinas expanded the field of phenomenological investigations: the importance of alterity in contemporary phenomenology speaks of his legacy. However, not loyal to an orthodox phenomenology, Levinas' saying unveils the complex contamination sometimes at work between a philosophical and a pre-philosophical inheritance. To clarify it would mean, at first, drawing a line between theological motifs and veritable phenomenological descriptions. Subsequently, one would have to look beyond the exclusive opposition between phenomenology and theological or metaphysical themes, to allow for other elements which influenced Levinas to reveal themselves. Furthermore, one would have to look at the part that all these elements have played after Levinas, as his thought was not only nourished by a vast array of influences, but has enriched the way we think today (phenomenological anthropology, psychiatric phenomenology of the relation to Other, philosophy of the feminine, philosophy of literary theory etc). In taking this road, one might find the answer as to what is truly at stake in Levinas' philosophy.

This volume brings together scholars with various approaches and interests in Levinas' work. As a result, some contributions draw on specific themes, such as identity, affectivity, temporality and language. Other authors take a more historical perspective, reflecting on the way Levinas, Heidegger and Derrida define, in their writings, points of convergence or separation. The volume also includes references to the wider philosophical tradition (e.g. Descartes and Schelling), in a conceptual attempt to disentangle Levinas' use of pre-phenomenological themes. The final set of articles proves, once more, the richness of Levinas' thinking by turning to other areas, such as justice, normativity and applied philosophy (literary theory, feminism, politics).

To illustrate, the first part of the volume focuses on the relationship between Levinas and the wider phenomenological tradition. What is the nature of Levinas' phenomenological method? Yasuhiko Murakami's article, *Horizons de l'affectivité – l'hyperbole comme méthode phénoménologique de Lévinas*, presents an intriguing interpretation of Levinas' method, pointing to its fecundity for phenomenological psychopathology. According to Murakami, Levinas' method starts with the reduction of the Said (i.e. the cognitive and ontological dimension of the meaning put forward by Husserl and Heidegger) to the Saying (i.e. the dimension of inter-human affectivity, or ethics). In contrast to Husserl's eidetic description, the resulting phenomenology of affectivity accentuates the uniqueness and the facticity of both the self and the other. This aspect is a characteristic of psychotherapy. In contrast to Heidegger's analysis of the non-corporeal and solitary facticity of the Dasein, Levinas

describes an original inter-corporeal “inter-facticity”. In Murakami’s view, Levinas’ method is deepened by the second movement of the “hyperbole”, which, by describing the extreme situation of the substitution of the traumatised self to the suffering/dying other, delimits one of the horizons of inter-human affectivity and offers a rigorous transcendental phenomenological method for psychopathology.

Matthieu Dubost’s article, *Emmanuel Lévinas et la méthode de l’altérité. De la phénoménologie à la vigilance éthique*, is another attempt to elucidate Levinas’ methodology by opposing it to Husserl’s phenomenological method. Through a detailed comparative investigation, Dubost defines all the central methodological gestures of what he considers to be an “indicative” phenomenology of the limit and of the trace: the concrete as the site of the essential meaning of everyday situations, the reduction by the face and by the “il y a”, the ethical intentionality and evidence, the truth as testimony and, finally, the ethical vigilance as the core methodological gesture of Levinas’ phenomenology.

Another interesting area is the way in which Levinas constructs his account of identity. In his article, *Einzigkeit ohne Identität*, László Tengelyi highlights three stages in Levinas’ approach to identity: “Selbstheit” or hypostasis – the original separation –, “Ich-Identität” and “Einzigkeit” – which surpasses the issue of identity by relying on a model of excess, surplus and substitution. These three stages are closely analysed and defined by Tengelyi in order to suggest a thematic progress in Levinas’ work. Tengely also points out the nuances that are opened up by a deeper exploration of the issue of identity in relation to the other.

In *L’autre temps. Lévinas et les analyses husserliennes du temps*, Attila Szigeti writes about temporality. The author argues that, despite the recurring critique of Husserl’s description of time in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas’ phenomenology in this work is in fact deeply influenced by it. Through a detailed textual confrontation between both the static and the genetic dimensions of Husserl’s phenomenology of time, and Levinas’ analysis of temporality, Szigeti shows how the diachronic temporality introduced in *Otherwise than Being* (i.e. the originary delay of time and self-consciousness, the unpredictable present and the past which was never present) can be interpreted as corresponding to an original and radicalised re-reading of several genetic moments in Husserl’s account of time. Szigeti also illustrates how this genetic-diachronic temporality is at work not just in the phenomenology of the other in *Otherwise than being*, but also in the idea of an originary ethical subject, and in the phenomenology of language described in this work.

Fabio Ciaramelli continues the reflections on temporality. In *L’après-coup du désir*, he interprets Levinas’ philosophical discourse as a con-

stant distancing from the idea of an ontological coincidence between the nostalgia of the Origin and its supposed immediate accessibility in the presence of intuition – which we can find in both Husserl and Hegel. According to Ciaramelli’s interpretation, it is the delayed and non-linear temporality of Levinas’ notion of Desire, which ruins the immediacy of the intuition by showing the impossibility of the self-presence of origin. In the concluding section of his article, Ciaramelli applies this delayed temporality of Desire to the philosophical interrogation itself. Thus, he highlights the necessity and, at the same time, impossibility of the constituted language of philosophy to express the constitutive sense of an experience which precedes but can only be given through the delayed interrogation of the philosophical discourse.

Levinas’ writings have introduced significant terminological developments in philosophy. In *Some notes on the title of Levinas’ Totality and Infinity and its first sentence*, Richard Cohen offers an in-depth examination of alternative oppositions to the terms “totality” and “infinity”. Focusing on the transgression of meaning that terms such as “part”/ “individual” and “finite”/ “finitude” would produce, the article brings to light the subtle way in which Levinas departs from the project of an analytical and internal opposition by embarking on a more radical distinction. Cohen also makes references to the Kantian project and then draws on a complex interpretation of the first sentence of *Totality and Infinity*.

In his contribution, *Language et Langue chez Husserl et Lévinas*, Yves Mayzaud takes a different approach to the question of language. The author starts by comparing Husserl’s and Levinas’ views on the question of the “langue” and “language” in order to point out not just Husserl’s influence on the latter, but also Levinas’ reinterpretations of this topic. Mayzaud comments on the univocal language of the ideal and the non-linguistic meanings, or expressions, as described by Husserl in the first *Logical Investigation*. He then goes on to the original inter-subjective and inter-corporeal dimension of language described in *Ideas II*. In the second part of his article Mayzaud first argues that Levinas takes up Husserl’s conception of the non-linguistic and non-psychological essence of the inter-subjective language, but then shows how Levinas’ reinterpretation of Husserl’s notions of meaning, expression and liberty leads to a totally different account, captured through the ethical meaning expressed by the face of the other.

The next set of articles approaches Levinas’ work from a more historical rather than thematic perspective. Thus, in *Levinas’ Kritik an Heidegger*, Branko Klun draws our attention to Levinas’ relation to Heidegger’s phenomenology, which can best be described in terms of an incessant

provocation and a constant uneasiness. Starting with Levinas' early admiration of Heidegger's work, and going through a tentative separation in Levinas' early writings, Klun captures the main areas that define the relation to Heidegger's phenomenology: being, historicity, constitution, and death. Did Levinas misunderstand Heidegger? Was his criticism correct or unjustified? These are some of the questions that Klun endeavours to respond to in his contribution.

In *En découvrant l'existence avec Levinas*, Guillaume Fagniez offers not just a careful historical-philological reconstruction of Levinas' outstanding early reception of Heidegger, but also an interpretation of the beginnings of Levinas' polemics with Heidegger in his pre-war texts. Levinas' ambiguity in the conceptual analysis and translation of Heidegger's philosophy, together with some early themes, like the "il y a" of Being and the nausea (opposed to the Heideggerian anxiety), are used by Fagniez to prove that Levinas overstates the facticity of the Dasein in the detriment of the project (*Entwurf*). This leads to ultimately denying any transcendence to the latter, and to the necessity of an "escape" or an "ex-cendance" from being.

Alain Beaulieu's contribution, *La dette calculée de Derrida envers Lévinas*, explores the reciprocal influences, the convergences and divergences between the work of Derrida and Levinas, focusing on the later work of Derrida, namely on the investigation of some excessive and singular ethico-political phenomena, like hospitality, justice, the "don" and the "pardon", mourning, death, etc. Beaulieu shows, that despite Levinas' influence on Derrida, the latter radically breaks with all transcendental investigation of intelligibility, including the Levinasian search for the condition of possibility of the ethical, in favour of a radical experience and deconstructive thinking of the above mentioned impossible and unconditional events. According to Beaulieu's final suggestion, the central divergence between the two thinkers comes ultimately from their radically opposed conceptions of the origin of evil. Whereas Levinas thinks that the cause of evil is the destruction of the transcendence and the subordination to the impersonality of the Neutral, Derrida believes that we can avoid human misery only by being responsible toward the Neutral and by giving up all search for the conditions of possibility.

Levinas' way of employing themes from the non-phenomenological tradition to introduce his own thought has been of great interest for some of our contributors. This is certainly the case for John Drabinski's *The Enigma of the Cartesian Infinite*, which explores how the notion of Infinite is described in Levinas' work, by drawing on the challenge that Descartes' ideas bring to phenomenology. Looking at Husserl, Heidegger, Marion and Levinas, the article exposes the struggle that led phenome-

nology to rediscovering Descartes as a productive figure in the search for radical alterity. Both Levinas and Marion use Descartes' separation between the finite and the Infinite, and the distinction that he makes between the Infinite and the indefinite. The idea of a sense-bestowal from the outside and the way in which the Cartesian Infinite is found in the finite contribute to the model of an elliptical indicator. Through this model Drabinski unfolds the complexity of Levinas' phenomenology of the other.

The Pains of Contraction highlights the problem of creation in Levinas' and Schelling's works. Drew Dalton starts his account by pointing out that Levinas' reference to creation is one of the least understood areas of his philosophy. While certain changes can be noted between his earlier work and his later writings, Dalton suggests that Schelling's thought has significantly influenced Levinas' thinking on creation. The model that best illustrates Levinas' account is creation via "contractio dei", i.e. separation and withdrawal. Dalton further explores the impact that creation has on the ethical relation to the other.

The other contributions give attention to themes such as ethics and justice, or take a more applied stance on Levinas' influence on politics, feminism, etc. For example, Georg W. Bertram (*Die Idee der Philosophie von Emmanuel Levinas*) investigates the fascination that Levinas' ethical thinking exercises on us, by approaching it from the point of view of practical philosophy. From this perspective, the radical nature of Levinas' thinking lies in his approach to the normative conditions of the ethical relation via alterity. Levinas' criticism of Husserl's description of intentionality, leads to a reconsideration of this notion. But what are the normative structures that define Levinas' thought? Guiding the reader through an original reading of Levinas, Bertram attempts to demonstrate that Levinas has a contribution to make to normative thinking, one that cannot be reduced to Sellars', Brandom's and Kant's.

Francois-David Sebbah explains how the theme of filiation in Levinas' philosophy offers the main model for the relationship to the other and how, through filiation, the reader can experience the ethical saying of Levinas' writings. Sebbah also investigates whether the daughter/mother variation can fit in or alter the ethical relation that Levinas describes. Is Levinas' father/son relationship a phenomenological description? Or does it have a non-phenomenological import, pointing towards a Judaeo-Christian form of machismo? Sebbah's article *Levinas: Father/Son/Mother/Daughter* opens up new areas of discussion and suggests possible solutions.

In his article, *Levinas and the Phenomenology of Reading*, Colin Davis suggests that Levinas' reading of other writers (e.g. Proust) could

contradict the spirit of his ethical account. Taking us through various reader-response theories, Davis considers the act of reading to be an exemplary encounter of the other. Channelling his attention towards a phenomenological account of reading, Davis questions the ethical verticality of Levinas' approach, as the encounter between a reader and the text is mirrored in the relationship between the self and the other. The questions raised are very challenging: can a text/other be experienced as truly other? Or is the text/other just a screen onto which the reader (in this case Levinas)/the same projects his assumptions?

Finally, Nader El-Bizri (*Uneasy Interrogations Following Levinas*) writes on Levinas' meditation on death and otherness, and on the political and moral implications of the ethical responsibility towards the other. Taking us through an ample analysis of Heidegger and Sartre, El-Bizri attempts to unveil how the face-to-face relation to the other can be politically appropriated and misused. The uneasiness, which the entanglement of the ethical and the political can cause, raises questions about how to further develop Levinas' philosophy of the "face" and his account of the responsibility towards the other.

If the nature of Levinas' thought is complex and not inclined to simplistic categorisations, then this volume is as much the product of this disquieting effect that Levinas' thought has on the reader than it is the testimony of it still being alive and adapting continuously to new questionings. That is the reason why every contribution in this volume tells a story, a personal journey of hetero-affection and displacement. Its aim is not to exhaust but rather to point to new directions of exploration of Levinas' writings. Its ultimate purpose is though to celebrate, together with those who read Levinas and take his thought further in their own writings, a century with Levinas and to reflect on what this event means to us in this day and age.

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