

THE IMPACT OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY ON THE PROBLEM OF DETERMINING OTHERS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY – IN RELATION TO ETHICS AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the impact and overlap of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in connection with the issue of determining others in contemporary modern society, especially in relation to ethical theoretical background and real political practice. This paper aims to relate Levinasian philosophy to the phenomena of contemporary modern society, specifically, its ethics and political practice. This paper intends to capture the relevance of Levinasian philosophy to our current political and religious conflicts, the issue of refugees, immigrants, and the phenomenon of mass migration. In a broader sense, it also reflects upon the issues of racism and globalization as pertinent issues in our current age.

Introduction

The main goal of this paper is to examine the possible impact and transcendence of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in connection with the identification of others in contemporary modern society. Within the chosen goal, there is no excessive emphasis on an innovative approach within the chosen issue, but rather on focusing on basic ideas and their possible overlaps.

This paper addresses the ethical background and compares it with current political practice; I compare the philosophy of Levinas' with different scales of

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various individual phenomena, by example, international, political and religious conflicts, the problems of refugees, immigrants, migrants, and the phenomena of racism and world globalization. The chosen topic confronts with a relatively large number of phenomena and topics, in addition, some of them are only outlined in the basics and are not explained in more detail. However, this is done intentionally. In connection with the already mentioned goal of the work, this text does not aim to examine the specific details of the examples I use to advance my thesis as this is not the main topic of the work. Although the mentioned phenomena and topics are relevant within the chosen issue, they serve as an aid in determining possible contexts and common ground with Levinasian philosophy rather than being the focus of my research. Thus, this paper does not focus on defending specific hypotheses or offer more detailed elaboration of these cases. This needs to be taken into account. The chosen methodological approach may not be suitable for everyone and in all circumstances, however, I am convinced that in this case, it is to the overall benefit of the work. The method used, within the chosen methodological approach, may seem slightly atypical at first glance, but it has its purpose, as already mentioned.

1. Elementary ethical basic of Emmanuel Levinas and current political practice

Levinas' philosophy is relevant to the world historical moment of today, and as such, should be taken into consideration. I dare to say that I am convinced that people do not, unfortunately, pay attention to his philosophy, in these days.¹ Levinas' various philosophical and ethical works from different periods of his rich publishing activities, can be applied to the problems and phenomena of today's era. One could include to this category also his earlier works from the period when he was still largely influenced by the ideas of Martin Heidegger or Edmund Husserl.

¹ Unfortunately, this fact can be related to philosophy in general. This sad fact does not only concern the person of Levinas and his thoughts. Philosophy is, at least in my opinion, rather overlooked by the majority society today, and its important role is gradually disappearing from society (not only from the academic one). Philosophy is gradually being modified according to the current needs of modern society and is losing its important foundations. To at least partially substantiate this statement, it is sufficient to look around. How philosophy is grasped, how it is worked with in connection with other social science disciplines, how to approach the teaching of philosophy at secondary schools, what kind of accreditations arise at universities and the like. This could, of course, be continued, but the examples are sufficient to illustrate.

The basic ethical starting point in Levinas' philosophy is the presence of the other. The otherness of the other person, so called *alterit as*, is based on the fact that the absolute knowledge of the other person cannot be based on what I know about myself, it is not possible to start *only* from our being. It is necessary not to disturb that otherness and not try to transform it into sameness. On the contrary, it is necessary to accept its heterogeneous nature. Already in ancient Greece, particularly in the work of Aristotle, one can come across the idea that the representative of the human community is called an animal² for which societal life is fundamental (the well-known term *z on politikon*). Since the human individual is not a God nor an animal, he (or she) cannot live alone by his essential nature. This idea can already be found in Aristotle's *Politics*. It is this idea that to some extent resonates in the philosophical approach of Levinas, although of course in a somewhat different form. According to certain ethical theories, human notions, principles and moral institutions are constructed in light of our societal human experience. For instance, this kind of ethical approach can be found in Scandinavian authors, where one can also find valuable ideas regarding this issue or, to be more precise, referring to the ideas of Levinas.³

In contrast to today's approach, when one compares the ethical starting points of Levinas and the political practice of today's world, an interesting result is to be noticed. The elementary starting points on which Levinas bases his philosophy is something which, in today's modern political practice, represents something which is at least very problematic in nature. The speed and necessity of today's political steps, the inability to get to the heart of the matter, the question of the interests of the majority, the renunciation of individual political responsibility, the supremacy of economic and power interests. This is something that, despite unifying efforts and tendencies, is present in public space and makes it difficult for us to coexist with each other. We live in a time that can hardly be defined as a postmodern as it has gradually reached its limits, even though it initially seemed as inconceivable.⁴ If one wanted to liken the postmodern period to the biblical times, one could use the instance of a figure of Abraham, who had to embark on his long journey

² A slightly more concise word can be found in German: *das Lebewesen*.

³ More on this topic can be found in the work of Jan-Olav Henriksen and Arne Johan Vetlesen. Despite the fact that these authors do not belong to the world-famous authors, the chosen issue can be suitably deepened using their ideas. In particular, their work *Near and Far* contains many valuable stimuli for the elementary ethical principles of human society, as well as for the chosen topic.

⁴ We can speak of the present more as a hypermodern or post-factual period. Surely other suitable characteristics could be found. It is so typical for the present that a certain form of *multiparadigmatisms* prevails and it can no longer be unambiguously characterized, as was the case in the past, for example.

without knowing where it would take him. If one wanted to liken the present day to what Czech philosopher Radim Palouš defined as *světověk* (*das Weltzeitalter*), one could find a certain form of similarity with phenomena such as *das Gestell* or *die Mächenschaft*, concepts elaborated in works of Professor Anna Hogenová.⁵ This universal order and methodological arrangement gradually became something that, in the spirit of *Cartesius'* followers or in connection with the work *der Wille zur Macht* by Friedrich Nietzsche and his concept of *die Übermächtigung*, creates today's reality and the regime of human society. Our society is gradually losing its ultimate meaning, we are losing the sacred *eschaton*.⁶ Support for this statement can be found, for example, in the current form of nihilism.

At the same time, suitable conditions are not being created for the so-called *realization of philosophy* found in the work of Levinas, which is, I argue, a very significant mistake and, at the same time, a huge waste. The subjectivism of the modern age has gradually transformed people into subjects that are very similar to each other, and together with this sameness is the typical loss of their human dignity.⁷ Just look around. Although there is no exaggeration of criticism, it is impossible to close one's eyes to certain facts. The present is relentless in this regard. It is becoming increasingly difficult for today's people to follow principles or rules that are not *appropriate* for the present. The present time prefers, and indeed works with a certain homogeneity. This homogeneity is perhaps more practical, but contrarily it is at least very treacherous in the long run. Unfortunately, this treachery of the same also applies to life beyond the political realm.

⁵ For a reader who is not familiar with Czech philosophical discourse, it is sufficient to note that both authors are among the leading Czech philosophers. Both Anna Hogenová and Radim Palouš have been among the leading Czech authors in the field of philosophy and ethics for a long time, and many valuable stimuli for the chosen issue can be found in their works.

⁶ This term is not intended here in the religious sense, but rather in the sense of something that transcends man and to which he can direct his life.

⁷ Following the above-mentioned notion of subjectivism, it is worth mentioning how Levinas views this issue. For example, the work of Levinas, *Emmanuel: Time and the Other: Le temps et l'autre*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1987. According to Levinas, today's society is made up of a mass of subjects which are connected by the element of equality. Anyone who differs in any significant way is a difficulty for progress. He claims that these totalitarian tendencies and their overall prevalence are typical of Western society. According to Levinas, totalitarianism is the inability to admit the uniqueness of the other in his uniqueness. Furthermore, he perceives the concept of totalitarianism as the ability to understand and accentuate only what is the same, at most very similar to what I think myself, i.e., the principles that can be found, for example, within logocentrism and Eurocentrism. It characterizes the so-called totalitarian society, as it also partially defines today's majority Western modern society. Thus, totalitarian society is not for him totalitarianism in the ordinary sense of the word, but rather a somewhat different characteristic of it.

2. *Legality and legitimacy* in Levinas' approach

Within his philosophy Levinas distinguishes between the basic duality of *legality* and *legitimacy* in connection with possible political practice. There is one very important difference between this duality, he mentions the concept of *diarchy*. An equivalent can be used for this term, for example in the form of the term tension. *Diarchy* can be understood as tension. Every person who holds a post of a certain political function (even if it is of the slightest significance) should strive to ensure that his actions can be characterized as moral. The effort to achieve a certain moral standard in one's behavior is self-evident even for apolitical members of human society, however, for people in public office, this effort is explicitly required. It goes without saying that there is no single definition of moral conduct. However, especially in light of one's political character, one can imagine the basic characteristics appropriate in moral conduct, according to which the person holding office should attempt to adhere to.

Thus, the *diarchy* is necessarily bound to morality in man. The basic duality I spoke of at the beginning of this paragraph is made up of two basic concepts to which Levinas attaches great importance, namely *legality* (a certain example can be related to law) and *legitimacy* (we can partially compare it with the notion of human conscience). *Legality* is something that is generally accepted as right, necessary, even essential for the functioning of human society. However, the question of *legitimacy* is far from clear, and not everyone can imagine the same thing under this concept. According to Levinas, it is necessary to maintain that *diarchy*, the tension between what is legal and legitimate for our society, because very often they are not identical concepts. This is one of the most important tasks for him in the field of political practice! *Appetitus* for power, arising from the exercise of public office, can very often be a nuisance to the desired tension.

Current law, valid normative legal acts on which the basic pillars of our modern society are based, may differ greatly in nature, in relation to the cultural-political or historical environment in which its origin and subsequent development can be traced, so its specific form can be significantly diversified, precisely on the basis of the above-mentioned factors. For example, the aspect of legality within Islamic law can very often differ diametrically from, for example, continental European law (see the three main types of legal cultures). Certainly, in terms of the aspect of legality and its differences, the aspect of legitimacy, the approach of individual people and entire cultures to what is in accordance with human conscience may also differ. For Levinas, however, the aspect of our conscience is one of the most important.

The theme of conscience is something we can often find in his philosophy and not only in the context of political activity. For example, conscience is found

in connection with his familiar notion of *epiphany*, when the question of human conscience is central to him. It is for him something that does not allow another to harm us, something that leads us to responsibility. The question of human conscience is important to him precisely because it is very closely linked to the area of that legitimate aspect of human behaviour. Thus, every individual human conscience is ultimately very important, it forms the overall picture and says a lot about us. It creates its main ethical starting points around our conscience and our responsibility. Subsequently, between the two components, which have been mentioned (*legality* and *legitimacy*), the *diarchy* already mentioned must function at all costs. Our conscience and responsibility for the whole human race must form the apodictic objective to which our human endeavor is directed. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that the main role of political activity for Levinas is not *only* in the boundless adoration of responsibility for the other. To conceive of his philosophy this way would be a pure simplification and misunderstanding of his ideas. Catherine Chalier says that the political role of Levinas is not to limit violence, but to limit the boundlessness of love. Political concern arises when a human subject, willing to take responsibility for the other, is fully aware of the presence of the third.⁸ However, the presence of the third, here is not meant in the sense of a specific number or quantity, there is more to it. Rather, it is a matter of others entering into the elementary relationship, which must necessarily be considered, without a significant deformation of the basic relationship. That is why it is such a difficult task to perform a political function responsibly and correctly. Thus, according to Levinas, the key question for political activity is to find balance in the approach to the other, based on the approach to the other others. Chalier further talks about the love for others, stating that one cannot then ignore the concern for justice. Justice means comparing the incomparable, comparing the second one with the third one. For Levinas, this moment marks the birth of a politician.⁹

According to theoretical philosophical starting points, which to some extent establish a kind of ethical system, within the philosophy of Levinas (although Levinas himself declares in his works that it is not worthwhile with his ideas to establish new separate ethical systems called *ad hoc*), that the legitimate component of our behavior should be of the utmost importance to us. Cases from political practice, which are evident in our society, not only in the last years of political development, very often prove to us that the *diarchy* between the various components is very

⁸ Viz. three lectures at the Faculty of Education, Charles University in Prague in February 1993. In Czech you can also read Chalier, Catherine: *O filosofii Emmanuela Lévinase (s úvodní studií Jeana Lacroix)*, Ježek, Praha 1993, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

often absent. The gradual profanation of public space and political mandates (for example, in terms of various corruption scandals) is sufficiently transparent proof of this. Unfortunately, these tendencies are evident not only in our relatively narrow European space, but also globally. These tendencies are still expanding, and it can be assumed that over time the degree of their side effects will grow exponentially.

3. *Asymmetric responsibility* in Levinas and its connection to political activity

The very elementary nature of today's modern political behavior is at a very important crossroads. According to Levinas, we should approach the other as an individual who has his own absolute value, which cannot in any way be questioned, simplified or made a mere object for his subjective actions, in connection with his political strategy, as is very often the case today and we can see it in political practice. For Levinas, this understanding is related to what he calls *asymmetric responsibility*. This, I argue, should be the main premise for the actions of each politician, political party, or legally elected government. Unfortunately, this is not very often the case, and the main impetus often lies outside this elementary concept. At least some form of approximation to *asymmetric responsibility* should be a matter of course for political activity, within the framework of preserving future development and the so-called irrevocability of the other. "The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future."¹⁰

In Levinas' work, of course, we do not find *asymmetric responsibility* only in connection with political activity or the person of a politician. This is one of the most important concepts within his philosophy, for it is a responsibility that transcends each of us and at the same time commits each of us to something. Responsibility that is not easy to grasp and at the same time understand correctly, something that is not even easy to live with. Liability that applies regardless of the circumstances. Responsibility where we are responsible for others, more than they are for themselves. Such is the true nature of this concept. For political activity, a relatively simple axiom follows from this basic relationship: we must not only consider ourselves, but the interests of others, we must emphasize and fight for them. This is often a huge problem for someone who comes to power. *Asymmetric responsibility* is thus something that should be, despite its apparent political impracticality, a necessity.

¹⁰ Levinas: *Time and the Other...*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

4. Contemporary phenomena of modern society and their overlap within the chosen topic

In the previous sections, a basic insight into the issues involving the relation of ethics, philosophy, and general political practice was conceived, within the thinking of Levinas, from my subjective point of view. In this part of the work, I would like to focus more on specific phenomena that are typical of our society that can be appropriately reflected on the chosen topic. As already mentioned, it will not be desirable to delve into unnecessary details and specifics, although we would certainly find a relatively large number of transparent examples, but this will not be the main purpose of this paper. I am more interested in outlining the basic insight and pointing out possible valuable connections. A large number of current political and religious conflicts (although I wanted to avoid concrete examples, just for instance; at the time of my work on this paper – end of 2020 –, for example, tensions in the South Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops) their origins are deeply rooted in history, and they are certainly not something that can be successfully *solved* in a few moments. Nevertheless, when we look at the thought of Levinas, we can find a large number of stimuli that would be only to the overall benefit of the current situation.

As I have already mentioned in previous parts of the work, in connection with a certain kind of modern subjectivism, within the framework of political and religious tolerance, the fundamental irreducibility of the human being as an individual to a mere object which falls within the scope of political activity, this is critical. Following this statement, Levinas puts it this way: “For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.”¹¹ Under no circumstances can the absolute value of every individual in society be translated into mere relative value. Responsibility for this irreducibility is fundamental and should occupy the highest ranks in the imaginary ranking of values.

When we look at some current problems of our society, where we can classify, for example, the whole issue of the refugee crisis, immigrants or the phenomenon of mass migration in its entirety, we have a very important connection found in the philosophy of Levinas. In his philosophic approach we can find certain starting points that should be apodictically given and in connection with the above. Levinas states that we must in a way overcome our fear of the unknown, of a stranger, of something that is completely unfamiliar to us. It is of crucial importance that

¹¹ Levinas: *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1985, p. 95.

we do this. We must not automatically regard the other's otherness as something that is bad or dangerous, which should be immediately transferred to the same. Of course, a certain degree is needed here as well, but at the same time respect and balance. The imaginary home (house) in which we live, in which we *bathe in the element* and from which we are determined, must be open to the other on the basis of a challenge, it is impossible to hide somewhere before this call. We cannot be rid of it, we simply cannot be released from this responsibility. The moment we strive for the imaginary release of this responsibility, we would no longer be ourselves. The concept of the home is strongly oriented around the private area of each person, around the space where the person is with himself and assigns him a very important role: "The privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement."¹²

In this context, Levinas also addresses the fundamental issue of the relationship between human responsibility and human freedom within the functioning of the state. This relationship examines in some detail and clarifies the individual dimensions and types of this important relationship. For us, a basic resolution will suffice. Levinas argues that human responsibility must unconditionally precede human freedom, so that the concept of human freedom is freedom in the true sense of the word. This understanding of freedom in some ways contracts the classical approach to the concept of freedom, as we can glean from today's order of things. According to Chalier, Levinas's thinking exceeds this order of priorities: the precedence of freedom over responsibility, the self over the other, the commitments freely accepted over the commitments imposed on without choice and will.¹³

One must hear the invocation that suddenly arises, one must hear that call. For example, the phenomenon of mass migration cannot be simplified to the mere acceptance of anyone, anything and in any quantity, headlong and at any cost, but our humanity in us should not allow us to remain indifferent. Levinas talks about the impossibility of interiority against these phenomena. None of us can hide from these phenomena inside, to encapsulate. In a broader sense, there is a need for an open structure of the soul (as can be found, for example, in works of Jan Amos Komenský or Jan Patočka). The state and laws should properly ensure that this awareness is not lost. Our approach to the issue of refugees, immigrants

¹² Levinas: *Totality and Infinity: (An Essay on Exteriority)*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 152.

¹³ Viz. Summer University held in Bechyně in Czech Republic, in 1991 (original title of the lecture: "Singularité juive et philosophie"). In Czech you can also read Chalier, Catherine: *Židovská jedinečnost a filozofie*, Filozofický ústav ČSAV, Praha 1993, p. 16.

and migration should be verified by political activity, which, however, will be based on the philosophical starting points of Levinas, which have been mentioned above.

In connection with the topic of determining others in contemporary modern society, I would like to briefly mention the connection between the issues of racism and globalization. Again, these are phenomena that are very visible in our society and overlap with current political practice, both within the European discourse and on a global scale. The issue of racism will be very significantly related to the previous paragraph, we will find a relatively large number of similarities and connections and it will certainly be related to the issue of xenophobia in modern society. According to Levinas, the elementary point of view in looking at the issue of racial intolerance is the following:

Perhaps we have succeeded in showing that racism is not just opposed to such and such a particular point in Christian and liberal culture. It is not a particular dogma concerning democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regime, or religious politics that is in question. It is the very humanity of man.¹⁴

Again, it will not be desirable to delve into concrete examples, it would unnecessarily divert our attention from the most important. I am more concerned with the transparency of the possible continuity. While the thoughts of Levinas have an admirable overlap and power, their value to human society seems to be permanent. Although he went through the horrors of the Holocaust and World War II and the *Shoah* phenomenon hit his family very hard, he was still able to adhere to his philosophical and ethical starting points and did not compromise on them.

In the face of the relentless and exponentially expanding globalization on which our society stands (and due to the current situation around the global coronavirus pandemic, the interconnectedness of different parts of our world is becoming increasingly clear and highlighting possible weaknesses in this *status quo*), one can again speak of the strong topicality and transcendence of Levinas' philosophy. I certainly take advantage of the benefits of a globalized world, but not at any cost, and certainly not at the cost of reduction or a distorted form of determining others. The imaginary encounter, which takes place, inter alia, as a result of individual globalization processes, to a much greater extent than in the past, needs to be approached with the appropriate knowledge and above all with the appropriate kind of responsibilities. In the end, that important meeting will happen anyway without

¹⁴ Levinas & Hand, Seán: "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism", in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, Nr. 1, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990, p. 71.

our intervention, but it will very much depend on how we approach that meeting (both on the level of the individual and on the level of the whole human society). It must be remembered that the other appears by himself, emerges from his veil, makes himself obvious, visible and audible, perceptible.¹⁵

Conclusion

These facts which have been mentioned, should be kept in mind not only by every political entity, no matter how ideologically oriented, but they should best serve as a kind of moral compass for the whole human community. We are never *only* solitary. We are also surrounded by things and people with whom we maintain relationships. The moment this fact is disregarded, there is pure descendence, and this has gradually devastating consequences for human society. At the same time, there is a very significant distortion of Levinas's ideas, which is a significant error, certainly not just within the political realm, but for the whole human community and its future.

This paper dealt with the basic ethical starting points within the philosophy of Levinas and their possible overlaps into political practice. Terms such as *legality* and *legitimacy*, *asymmetric responsibility* were mentioned, at the same time the possible determination of others in human society was examined, in relation to phenomena such as politics, migration, globalization, among others. Rather than a detailed description and elaboration of the mentioned phenomena, this paper should lead the reader to examine possible contexts and show the enormous overlap that the philosophy of Levinas has, for example in connection with the mentioned phenomena.

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¹⁵ As for example, first chapter in the work of Casper, Bernhard: *Geisel für Den Anderen – Vielleicht nur Ein Harter Name für Liebe (Emmanuel Levinas Und Seine Hermeneutik Diachronen Da-Seins)*, Verlag Karl Alber, München 2020.