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PHILOSOPHICAL PREMISES OF LEVINAS' CONCEPTION OF JUDAISM

One can speak of at least two dimensions of Levinas' thought concerning European culture and philosophy. The first, a critical one, is constituted by reflection on the consequences for this culture of the domination of homogenizing reason. The second presents philosophical means whereby to abolish this domination, and signifies radical disagreement with a vision of culture to which it is linked. It is an attempt at reexamining this culture and revealing that which Western thought has failed to discern in it. What I mean here is the philosophical significance of that area of social and personal reality which has been evolved by European monotheistic religions: Judaism and Christianity. According to Levinas, the relations shaped by these religions offer a chance for the restoration of such concepts as peace, universalism, freedom, and justice. The meaning of these concepts has been distorted by both thinking and by history which actualizes the idea of totality.

Therefore, Levinas' reflection on Judaism constitutes validation of the intention to break with a certain tradition in European philosophy. By claiming that culture has worked out "in itself" relations which may provide a premise for a new type of thinking, Levinas doubtless goes beyond the purely critical dimension of his reflection and attempts to protect its postulative dimension against the accusation of utopianism.

What purposes does Levinas' vision of Judaism serve in his philosophy? This question has inspired me to offer these remarks.

Among Levinas' many books devoted to Judaism or directly referring to Judaistic tradition,¹ *Difficile liberté*, published in 1963, is especially interesting. The book appeared two years after *Totalité et Infini*, in which the French thinker has formulated his philosophical credo. *Totalité et Infini* is regarded by researchers as the crowning of the period in Levinas' work, in which he dealt mainly with problems determined by Husserlian-Heideggerian thought. In a discussion with these philosophers, Levinas worked out his own, critical point of view.

¹ In addition to *Difficile liberté* (1961), one should mention, *inter alia*, *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (1968), *Du sacré au saint; cinq nouvelles lectures* (1977), and *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (1982).

Difficile liberté on the one hand provides answers to questions nagging the philosopher, beginning from his 1930 book on intuition in Husserl and ending with *Totalité et Infini*; on the other hand, it is an expression of the realization of other, extra-philosophical sources and inspirations. A reference to Judaism as a source situates the philosopher within the realm of culture reinterpreted through the prism of Judaism and constitutes an attempt at constructing such a vision of culture which, being alternative to the generally accepted paradigm of West European culture, would offer a chance for endowing the ideas of humanism and universalism with new contents.

This is a difficult and ambitious task, a provocative one, we could say, in the light of philosophical contentions about the collapse of great universalist social utopias, in a situation when the most difficult question is the question of how to live after Auschwitz. The actualization of this task obviously requires total reassessments. In its critical aspect, Levinas' diagnosis of West European culture seems to belong in the trend which, having been inspired by Nietzsche, Spengler, Berdayev, and Marx, included among its main representatives Husserl, Heidegger, or scholars from the Frankfurt School.

Levinas' affiliation becomes evident when he rejects Logos' claims to unify and totalize, to create a homogeneous vision of man and the world, the struggle against Order and Its impersonal neutrality, liberation from totalizing thought originated by homogenizing Reason.

Reconstructing Levinas' answer to the question about the significance of Judaism for philosophy, one should first reconstruct the whole of his views. Due to the limited scope of this paper, however, I shall confine myself to several selected threads, with emphasis on *Difficile liberté* and with only few references to other philosophical texts by this thinker. It will also be necessary to outline Levinas' metaphysical programme which, evolved at the stage of *Totalité et Infini*, did not lose its validity in the later phases of the philosopher's work.

It is a programme for restitution of metaphysics, for enhancing its significance following destructive anti-metaphysical attacks by contemporary philosophy. His metaphysics, however, distances itself from solutions of an ontological nature. At the same time, it does not disregard Husserl's and Heidegger's teachings on the intentionality and existential enrooting of all subjective experience of the world.

According to Levinas, Husserl, in his conception of intentionality, attempted to express the superiority, externality of being in relation to thinking. In this sense, he influenced the direction of the French thinker's researches, but at the same time became the target of his criticism. The author of *Totalité et Infini* accused him of solipsism, within which it became impossible to perceive the dissimilarity of being and thinking. According to this interpretation, Husserl's solution belongs within the tautology of consciousness.

Heidegger's fundamental ontology also played an inspiring role in Levinas' thought. His conception of *Dasein*, his programme for investigation of concrete forms of articulation of being enables the French thinker to overcome the Husserlian solipsism of being. The main fault of Heideggerian fundamental ontology, Levinas says, is the fact that it is ontology at all. Any ontology which strives to define what being is, is of the character of tautology. Only in Heidegger, it is tautology in a different sense than in Husserl. This ontology is unable to go beyond the Parmenidean idea: "being is what it is", beyond the statement of the self-identity of being.

Metaphysics means distancing oneself from the problem of being if it takes into account the fact that it is not unity and self-identity, but non-identity with oneself, dissimilarity, multitude that are the basic structure wherein being manifests itself. It is only from this perspective that such words as beginning, end, dissimilarity, and multitude assume their proper meaning. It is from this metaphysical distance that the problem of death (the end of the existing) becomes a real problem, that is to say, it is on this plane that the problem of being without a being can be appropriately formulated.

In order to show conditions for the transcendence of being as an ontological construct, Levinas refers to the realm of existential experience. He points to the constituting of subjectivity in this realm. Subjectivity performs an act of reaffirmation of its "I" by turning toward itself in cognition, action, in being in the world. A certain danger is involved in this self-confirmation of subjectivity: the danger of appropriation of the world, of overpowering its dissimilarity. Levinas calls it hypostasis. At the same time, however, the isolation of subjectivity becomes a condition of any relationship with the dissimilar. This subjective being, monadically closed in itself, is capable of entering into a relation with the Other, an ethical relation which consists, not in the uniting of I and the Other, but in freeing them from egoism.

It is in this subjective experience — from material ties with the world to interpersonal contacts — that the subject transcends its self-identity, heading toward that which is different. It is in this experience that the Different finds its concrete expression: it speaks through the Face of the Other.

To Levinas the ethical relationship is a model expression of the plurality of being, which belies all ontological contentions in the Parmenidean spirit. In the ethical relation, the attitude toward the Other is an attitude of appropriation, domination, but one of respect for its existential dissimilarity. This respect for the existential dissimilarity of the Other, however, can occur only when monadically isolated I experiences the direct presence of the Other, enters into a relation with its dissimilarity. This is possible in the face of Transcendence.

Levinas' conception of existence expresses protest against all immanentism in the interpretation of existence. The concept of transcendence bursts the conception of self-sufficient, self-oriented existence. To exist means to experience

the presence of the Other. It is possible to experience the presence of the Other only in openness to Transcendence. To exist also means not to content oneself with the meaning that we ourselves assign to the world, but to receive meanings coming from outside (to cross over the threshold of solipsism, which has arrested the right tendency of Husserlian intentionality). Thus "to be" means — as it does in monotheistic religions — to listen to the voice of God. Listening to the voice of Transcendence, which in monotheistic religions has a personal dimension, is a condition of conversation — conversation as dialogue, and not a simulated monologue of I, who is listening to his own contents. It is dialogue of being with the Other.

The essential cultural and philosophical importance of monotheistic religions consists in that they have laid objective foundations for the actualization of such relations which no longer will be violence done to all dissimilarity, but full respect for this dissimilarity. In other words, monotheistic religions have worked out a certain type of social relations which can be regarded as actualization of Levinas' metaphysical idea.

The above outline reconstruction of Levinas' philosophical undertaking is a proposal for interpretation of his early conceptions after *Totalité et Infini*. In my opinion, however, from the point of view of the French philosopher's programme, formulated as early as the late 1940s, the division of his work into two phases is of secondary importance. Levinas' late works can be regarded as concretization of the same philosophical experience (namely, in the domain of cultural-civilizational objectivization of subjective existential experience, e.g. in Judaism). I refrain here from considering the shift of emphasis from the domain of — to use the Hegelian language — the subjective spirit to the realm of objective spirit. This problem does not substantially change the thesis about the validity of Levinas' early philosophical solutions. Especially considering the fact that from his point of view it is the philosophy of subjectivity that provides the key to the analysis of social and cultural phenomena, and not *vice versa*. It therefore appears that the above remarks can justifiably precede the presentation of what in my opinion are the most important threads in Levinas' reflection on Judaism.

I. JUDAISM AS THE EXTREME OF CONSCIOUSNESS

When he writes that Judaism is the extreme of consciousness, Levinas means not only its cultural maturity. Judaism as culture (as "a sort of Jewish solidarity", as it is defined in *Difficile liberté*) is but one of the possible meanings of this term. In the book, however, it rather functions in the meaning of religion, a system of beliefs, rituals, and moral regulations founded on the Bible, the Talmud, and rabbinical literature, frequently combined with mysticism or the theosophy of the cabbala. The forms of this religion are the forms of spirit fully conscious of itself, mature for millennia.

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This self-consciousness of Judaism, interpreted as the religion of spirit,² was articulated by the 19th-century moralism. Levinas emphasizes Kierkegaard's special contribution in this respect. What is involved here is what Western idealism strove for through blind alleys: the re-establishing of the links of *sacrum* to reason and language, separated in European tradition by the dividing line between irrationality and rationality. Religion's escape into irrationality was a protest of spirit against being engaged in the service of broadly conceived violence — not only as an accident, use of force, constraint.

In *Difficile liberté*, we read: "Violence is any action in which one acts as if one was the only acting person, as if the role of the rest of the universe consisted only in being the object of this action."³ By violence Levinas means here the satisfaction of a need, the desire for an object, and its cognition. Violence is any theoretical cognition which strives to have its object and which thereby negates its independence. At the same time, however, this negation of the independence of the object of cognition leads to the isolation of the subject: "To cognize means to perceive, conceive of an object, conceive of a thing. The world's whole experience is at the same time self-experience, self-satisfaction; it moulds me, it feeds me. Cognition, which tells us to go beyond ourselves, is the slow absorption, as it were, the digestion of reality by us. The creation of reality in our acts turns it toward the experience of this creation; reality as such has already been absorbed by this cognition and leaves us with ourselves."⁴ This isolation is a feature of Western philosophy, dominated by the Odyssey of consciousness which returns to itself.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of violence and isolation, which characterize Western philosophical thought, with its primacy of theoretical reason and the Fichtean ups and downs of I, which views itself in its products, it is necessary to go beyond the impersonal, theoretical, homogenizing conception of being. It is necessary to discover one's identity with the spiritual order, which is of a pre-theoretical character, in which reason, language, and morality are integrally linked to each other. These links are something real, are social relations which have their materialistic interpretation, are in fact ethical relations.

Therefore, Levinas asserts that Judaism, which actualizes relations of this kind, is the extreme of consciousness. According to the philosopher, it is the

² Levinas seems to refer here to the Hegelian conception of spirit in the sense of the totality of human socio-cultural praxis. In his *En découvrant l'existence...*, he describes himself — indirectly after Husserl — as the inheritor of Western idealism, in the sense that he regards the deepening of our cognition of being as a way of man's existence, who fulfills the destiny of spirit. Although Levinas has adopted a philosophical standpoint diametrically different from Hegel's, the universal tendency arising from this standpoint is an inseparable feature of Levinas' philosophy.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté, essais sur le judaïsme*, Albin Michel (ed.), Paris 1963 and 1976, p. 18.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

model of consciousness, which is realized in primary, personal, religious, and at the same time social relations.

2. JUDAISM IS MATERIALISM

This ethical relationship has a materialistic interpretation. This means that it is not a union with the Other, but isolation. According to Levinas, isolation constitutes an ontological characteristic of man. It is conditioned by his immersion in being; to use the Heideggerian language, it is his "in the world". But this being in the world is not only — as it is in Heidegger — a relation of the world's "usefulness" for us. The world is, above all, the food that satisfies our hunger and thirst. A being which is concerned with itself through the world is a being responsible for itself in the most elementary, primary sense. As we read in *Le temps et l'autre*, "I do not exist as a smile, as spirit or wind, I do not exist without responsibility."⁵ In this sense, materiality is not the escape of reason, or the prison of spirit. It inevitably accompanies the subject's immersion in freedom.

In Levinas, materiality is the subject's reference to itself; in this sense, it is an inalienable condition of the subject's ecstasy, a condition for overcoming its tautological nature: here the subject is separated from itself ("The morality of earthly food is primary morality. Primary abnegation. Not the last one but it is necessary to pass through it."⁶)

In this sense, the Marxian rather than Sartrean conception of freedom is closer to Levinas. In this sense, too, he does not situate the religious ethical relationship in the sphere of spirit detached from the prose of the materiality of everyday life. Levinas' conception of spirit, desacralized in the meaning of *sacrum* linked to the concept of violence, clearly has a materialistic interpretation. Therefore, the French philosopher asserts that it is precisely "economic life that is the ontological place where creativity transforms into spirit."⁷

3. JUDAISM AS UNIVERSALISM

In Judaism, self-consciousness inevitably presupposes moral consciousness; it is its elementary manifestation. Being for oneself means an awareness of one's

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, Paris 1983, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, op. cit., p. 179.

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own errors with respect to the Other. The Other is not a repetition of I. He is situated in the higher sphere of the ideal, miracle. Through my relations with the Other, I enter into a relation with God. Thus in Levinas' interpretation of Judaism, the moral relationship unites self-consciousness with the consciousness of God. Ethics is therefore a certain point of view: all that I know about God and that I can expect from his words, all that I could wisely reply, should find an ethical expression.

This dialogue with God through the ethical relation takes place on a plane invalidating the traditional conception of the sphere of *sacrum*. Levinas quotes here the Talmud: "God had never descended from Sinai, Moses had never been raised to heaven. But God had folded heaven like a cover, discovered Sinai in it, that is to say, found himself on earth without leaving heaven."⁸ Thus Judaism is not a religion detached from the sphere of earthly existence. It is a religion in the most elementary sense of this word: it means a certain type of tie linking people in their earthly, everyday existence. Paradoxically, Levinas calls this desacralized religion atheism.

The religious-ethical relation is a relation of responsibility. According to Jewish wisdom, a crime committed by man against another man cannot be forgiven. No one, not even God, can do this on behalf of the victim. Wherever it is possible to forgive everything, the world is inhuman. However, this does not yet mean lack of hope. Judaism believes in man's regeneration without the intervention of non-human factors, factors other than an awareness of good and the law. Man's responsibility lies in his future deeds. And among the people, everyone is responsible for the errors of others. This extremely understood idea of solidarity in responsibility is decisive of the social dimension of the existence of the religious-ethical relation. The social tendency is contained in this type of religious references, fundamental for Judaism.

In the light of our tendency to link the ideas of egalitarianism and justice, the basic intuition of morality deriving from Judaism may seem paradoxical. It consists in the observation that I am not equal to the Other: I am obliged by the others and, therefore, require from the others infinitely more than from myself. The basic structure of this initial inequality is a contradiction. In order to achieve equality, it is necessary to require from oneself more than from the others, it is necessary to feel responsible.

Only such a particularism furnishes premises for universalism: for a universal religion which is open to all, which is beyond all theology. In this sense, Levinas writes that such a universal religion is atheism. It is also extreme humanism, the humanism of God, who demands much from man. He calls *Torah*, urging man to listen to all that which comes from outside.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 34.

This atheistic model of religion, actualized in materialistically conceived social relations, a model which realizes the ideal of humanism, regarding man as the person who listens to and complies with demands rather than projects and demands (as is the case in the Western model of humanism), universalism which is inalienable responsibility for the others and, at the same time, man's particular loneliness in relation to God, is a revelation of ambivalence and, in this sense, the opposite of the West European *Logos*. Therefore, Levinas' vision of religious-ethical universalism founded on Judaism is not to be the actualization of the idea of the universal order of the world and thinking. This universalism is not utopia which realizes some pre-determined order. It is rather to be a return to the sources, retrieval of the lost civilizational kinship. This search for kinship does not mean a striving for some syncretism or common abstraction. It is to be a new feeling of brotherhood between religions. In this sense, Levinas attaches great significance to the idea of Christian ecumenism.

Monotheistic religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, have created premises for a union in the course of civilizational development. Namely, they have shaped a certain type of social relations making possible the realization of the idea of solidarity. Monotheism "...obliges the Other to enter into discourse which aims at a union with me."⁹ What is more, according to Levinas, it turns out that this uniting force of monotheism was and is much stronger in the process of uniting mankind "through the planet of races and states", and has even played a stimulating role in the process of constituting mankind as a whole also in the economic sphere.

4. JUDAISM IS PHILOSOPHY AFTER PHILOSOPHY

In a sense, Levinas accepts Hegel's thesis that it was the end of philosophy. In his opinion, the end of philosophy is the deepest meaning of our epoch. Namely, it is symptomatic of deep transformations in the sphere of spirit. It signalizes "movement to free man enslaved by man in a system which he himself has created. In state nationalism, in socialist etatism which makes use of philosophy, the individual regards the pressure of philosophical totality as totalitarian tyranny."¹⁰ According to Levinas, Rosenzweig is right when he says that *anthropos theoreticos* has definitely ended his domination.

At the same time, however, individual consciousness simply cannot escape from philosophy. The ordinary spontaneity of the escape is no longer possible after acts of anarchy and individual protest by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Liberation from this philosophy without philosophy requires philosophy,

⁹ Ibidem, p. 249.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 260.

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Levinas repeats after Rosenzweig. He immediately repeats after Aristotle: "It is necessary to philosophize in order not to philosophize", assigning to this formula the importance of the extreme possibility of the 20th century philosophy.

This sentence seems to be the quintessence of the French thinker's philosophical self-consciousness, justifying the status of his discourse, which is designed to demonstrate, using philosophical means, that philosophy has given way to religion. It is to herald the beginning of an era in which "everything is philosophy, since philosophy no longer speaks through philosophers."¹¹ In this respect, too, Levinas fully agrees with Rosenzweig: "The order which makes it possible to avoid both the totalitarianism of philosophy, which disregards the anxieties of the individual, as well as the anarchy of individual desires, life, which is outside the book, philosophy, which replaces political accomplishments by life, is religion."¹²

Religion is the pulsation of life, where God establishes contact with man, and man with the world. The relation between God and the world is not of the character of conjunction, but of creativity. The relation between man and God is revelation, while the relation between man and the world is a relation of redemption.

I mean here religion as such, the religious community without distinction as to the type of religion: Judaism or Christianity. Religion, which is the essence of being, inevitably expresses itself through both Christianity and Judaism. The human truth (both Christian and Jewish) is verifiable through human life. It consists in risking life in response to revelation.

Western consciousness is entering the phase of ageing. Its doubts as to the realness of the presentations with which it contents itself does not give it the necessary strength to go beyond fiction. Demystification is always carried out through a new mystification. Negation of negation of negation is not yet positiveness. Lie is infinite, and there is no intrinsic possibility to interrupt it. There seems to be no way out of this situation: "Political totalitarianism is founded on ontological totalitarianism: Being would be everything. Being, in which nothing ends and nothing begins. Nothing opposes it and nothing judges it. Neutral anonymity, impersonal universe without a language. One cannot even speak, for the only way to ensure the value of a statement is through another statement which nobody can guarantee."¹³

The phenomenon of the anonymity of being is accompanied by the discrediting of the language. From Socrates to Hegel, the West strove for such an ideal of the language in which the word was limited to consciousness, in which the meaning of the language did not depend on intention, but on the conditions of

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 259.

¹² Ibidem, p. 260.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 289-290.

the coherence of discourse. Psychoanalysis and sociology show disrespect for the interlocutor. Words become symptoms or superstructures. For psychoanalysis or Marxism, it is unimportant what words mean. It is only important what words conceal. Words become signs of anonymous infrastructures, utensils of dead civilizations.

Contrary to tradition, discourse in which the ethical religious relation is expressed, discovers — according to Levinas — credible word: "The only credible word is one which detaches itself from its eternal context to return to the human mouth which pronounces it, to move from man to man, to judge history (...). The language of discourse, which begins in an absolute manner in the fact of who speaks it and which is aimed at the other, absolutely different..."¹⁴ According to the author of *Difficile liberté*, it is the prophetic language of Judaism.

Levinas' conception of Judaism realizes the general philosophical conception of that thinker. He wants to indicate the area which makes it possible to leave the structures of pure thinking, to go beyond totalizing thinking. Using philosophical means, Levinas proclaims the necessity of going beyond philosophy. However, this proposition, founded on metaphysical premises, a proposition which is usually attributed to the wave of "new French romanticism",¹⁵ an interesting and philosophically inspiring proposition, escapes the criteria of the traditional philosophical evaluation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In order to show why it is impossible to apply theoretical criteria to the appraisal of Levinas' conception of Judaism, let us revert to his metaphysical programme outlined at the outset of this paper.

This programme reflects an important philosophical problem which accompanies all philosophizing and which was especially strongly emphasized by classical German philosophy. It was precisely in this philosophy, expressing a yearning for absolute cognition, that the problem of the finiteness of thinking in relation to the infiniteness of being manifested its paradoxical character. It revealed the paradoxical nature of thinking, which aspires to grasp infiniteness and, being aware of its limitations, makes no use of its own finiteness. It makes existence an attribute of being. Schelling's differences are beyond the absolute. The Hegelian other-being is dialectically overcome by thinking, which is the thinking of absolute reason.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 290.

¹⁵ Antoni Juszkiewicz, *Emmanuela Levinasa filozofia spotkania*, in: *Twarc Innego, Teksty Filozoficzne*, April 1985, p. 165.

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At the same time, it is in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* that we find the idea of the dual enrooting of thought: in finiteness and in infiniteness (in thought, both infiniteness and transitoriness participate). In Hegel, however, thought, which is struggling with other-being and carrying out an odyssey of spirit, has a predetermined task: to hoist the banners of sovereignty in captured territories. That is finite which has been dialectically overcome and, in effect having travelled Odysseus' whole road to the motherland of reason, has been dissolved in conception, in absolute cognition.

In this sense, Hegel can be regarded as the extreme model of the post-Socratean European philosophy which discovered in thinking only that which had been put there before, at the same time aspiring for absolute cognition.

To Hegel reason is a way of manifestation of the absolute. It is — using the Heideggerian language — "the being of being", and in this sense thought, which is working in the world of other-being, as Hegel deludes himself, finds in reason its "existential soundness". Contrary to Hegel's illusions, after Marx, Husserl, and Heidegger, the task of endowing thinking with "existential soundness" can be made a feasible task. This, however, requires reversing the perspective: it is necessary to conceive of the transcendence of comprehension as a phenomenon of existence rather than conceiving of existence — as Hegel does — as a phenomenon of the transcendence of comprehension. Existence (no longer an attribute of Being-Reason), which is always concrete, historical, conditioned, and emplaced in the world, finds the source of transcendence in its own finiteness, which delimits the horizon of comprehension.

The above inversion has become a fact in philosophy. What contributed to it was both Marxian-Feuerbachian materialism and the Husserlian conception of intentionality and Heideggerian fundamental ontology. Levinas emphasizes the special significance of the phenomenological trend (he apparently does not appreciate Marx' contribution in this respect) in working out a new plane of philosophy, a plane which will make it possible to break the magic circle of self-confirming reason and indicate that it is in the finite horizon of comprehension of limited, conditioned existence that are to be found the possibilities for transcendence becoming the source of the meaning of this finite existence. Therefore, Levinas' philosophical conception, which had arisen from his early fascination with Husserl and Heidegger, developed in the course of discussions on their philosophies. Also, despite going beyond these inspirations, toward metaphysics, Levinas' main task remained defining the conditions for experiencing infiniteness through the subjective existential situation.

According to Levinas, the meaning of the relation of the existing to existence is something which precedes self-consciousness. It can be expressed, not in consciousness which views itself in its own acts, but in the relations: I — the others (the other). These relations cannot be of conscious (cognitive, theoretical) character, for, according to the French philosopher, every consciousness, being

a form of hypostasis, means the dissolution of the otherness of the other in I. Philosophy as theory is unable to conceive of these relations. They are articulated on the ethical and religious plane. For on this plane, the relation: I — the other, is possible as a response to what is different. The relation to God is actualized as an ethical (responsible) relation to your neighbour. The different expresses itself, not as a negative form of self-consciousness — as it does in traditional European philosophies — but as a concealed point of reference constituting the relation: I — the other.

This is why Levinas' conception is metaphysics. Metaphysics which makes possible any cognitive operations of I, conscious in relation to its own existence; it makes possible theory. This metaphysics shows that the cognitive operations of I, which has been constituted as a result of the meaning-creating relations of the existing to existence, are but a fragment of these relations, a fragment doomed to the sin of hypostasis, of appropriation by the I of that which is different. Such metaphysics still is philosophy because it indicates philosophy's position in what Levinas calls "the economy of being". Also, it offers the possibility for solutions different from the traditional Western philosophical solutions. This possibility is the ethical-religious sphere. According to Levinas, the culturally shaped form of this sphere is Judaism. This religion assumes that the relation to God is nothing else but an ethical relation to your neighbour. It also presupposes universalist openness to other religious conceptions. Besides, it is not a religion which repudiates material ties with the world, but one which treats them as the most elementary plane for the actualization of primary ethical relations.

It is not our task to evaluate the conformity of such an interpretation of Judaism with the letter of this religion. We leave this task to the students of religions. What particularly interests us in Levinas' conception of Judaism is its philosophical dimension, the reasons for which it is to be — in the philosopher's intention — an alternative proposition with respect to West European philosophical solutions.

We shall exemplify the opposition of Levinas' interpretation of Judaism to Western tradition by Rembrandt's famous painting showing Abraham's offering. The central figure in the painting is Abraham, his arms spread, one hand holding Isaac, the other hand raised above the offering in a stopped gesture of killing. The hand which a moment ago dropped the knife is delicately held by an angel painted in the upper part of the picture. Abraham conceals Isaac's face. The body of the offering is exposed, both corporeal and sensual, but through this sensuality and the concealment of the face, it is deanthropomorphized, objective, we could say. It is not the dehumanized Isaac or the angel idealized in its beauty that are the heroes of the painting. It is Abraham, who in his face and gesture shows a tremendous force of psychic expression, who is in the centre of the drama. One could say that the drama is Abraham's personal matter, since he is torn between the "heaven" of transcendent injunctions of faith and the "earth"

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of human devotion to the son. Abraham's personal drama illustrates profound discord between the sphere of *sacrum* and that of *profanum*.

However, the divine decision announced by the angel removes this contradiction: it has turned out to be only a test of faith. The angel's gesture stopping the act of offering deprives Abraham of his subjectivity. He no longer must feel responsible. Faith, which justifies Abraham's choice, invalidates the drama: it is a uniting with God, in the light of which all human dilemmas show their seemingness. They serve, not to make a choice, but to strengthen faith.

I had a purpose in presenting the above analysis. It can be a good illustration of Levinas' critical reflection on Western culture, for it is from the spirit of this culture that Rembrandt's vision arises. After all, according to the French philosopher, the dominant tendency in this culture is a tendency toward unification, union, reconciliation. The drama of human existence proper to this culture arises from the fundamental character of subjective-objective antinomies which give rise to the relation of violence: violence with respect to the different. Reconciliation of these antinomies occurs when the different, reduced to the category of objectivity and opposed to the subject, has been dissolved within a higher, uniting perspective. Abraham is in a relation with God. He has made Isaac the object of offering. A uniting with God in an act of faith concerns the subject, who has used violence toward the other, made him his object and, in a sense, made him his property. Thus Abraham's offering was not the offering of his son, but the offering of his love for his son. Isaac is not interpreted by Rembrandt as a psychic subject. What counts is only Abraham's feelings.

Western culture is in its essence egological, since its conception of transcendence (the absolute) leads to the uniting of I and the other in "I". According to Levinas, Judaism makes it possible to avoid this egological pitfall. In a Judaistic interpretation, Abraham's drama would be the drama of a father who is looking in his son's face and who sees in this face — the face of the Other — a moral injunction originating from God. Within this perspective, the division into *sacrum* and *profanum* does not exist. God is shown in real, earthly relations between persons, relations of the one-sided responsibility of I for the other.

Being an articulation of Judaistic consciousness, Levinas' conception is situated outside the sphere of the traditionally conceived European philosophy. In this paper, I have asked what philosophical assumptions underlie this proposition for understanding Judaism. As we have seen, these assumptions are of a metaphysical nature. They are by no means an element of some speculative construction; their proper meaning can be seen only in the light of Levinas' most general intention: to show the ethical-religious sphere as a sphere of the possible realization of philosophy. Philosophy as the wisdom of life, and not as a petrified articulation of the conscious manifestations of life.

Levinas attempts to formulate the basic problems of metaphysics in a manner that their Judaistic interpretation be obvious. This philosophy does not belong to

the sphere of consciousness, but becomes a conscious element of the ethical-religious sphere conceived of as Judaism, and only as Judaism. Therefore, the task of distinguishing the purely theoretical plane in Levinas' conception and removing from this conception Judaistic "additions", the task of "continuing the analyses outlined by Levinas and conducting them outside the inspiration of the *normae negativae* of Judaistic theology"¹⁶, as some authors postulate, seems to have been formulated incorrectly.

Contrary to numerous assurances of the universalist interpretation of Judaism (an interpretation applicable to all European monotheisms), it is, paradoxically, a one-sided universalism. This universalism characterizes, in particular, Jewish religion. It is especially the Jew (not the Christian or Muslim) that confesses his religion through active, concrete ethical relations with his Neighbour. Living ethically, he responds to the call of God (transcendence). The source of universality which is revealed in this ethical life is transcendent. Therefore, the universal dimension is possible in religion (it is the question of revelation and faith upon which ethical relations are founded), while it escapes theoretical cognition, consciousness, which would like to identify that which is universal with that which is general, all-embracing, and homogeneous.

Translated by
Lech Petrowicz

Iwona Lorenc

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¹⁶ Ibidem.

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