



## Eternally Committed to the Other!

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**Levinas's Philosophy as the Basis for the Encounter of different Cultures**

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### **Ethics as the Beginning of any Philosophy**

The French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) has made his physical experience of a permanent sense of alienation, resulting from social exclusion, the motivation to fundamentally question the traditional theoretical foundation of Western philosophy that is based on the subject and developed as a philosophy which can show the way forward to a future coexistence of religions and civilizations. In his opinion, it did not prove conducive to a society's claim to be committed to humanity. The current and prevailing philosophical theories made the "I" (the self) the authoritative subject to adjudicate categories of morality and truth. For the faithful Jew, the sinful human being is basically incapable of making universally valid judgments about right and wrong (justness and unjustness), especially when those judgments concern other individuals. According to Levinas, only the almighty Creator-God is able to decide in how far a person has met his or her life-long responsibilities. This responsibility is fundamentally aimed at an opposite, a neighbor, another person, and constitutes the core of any ethics. With Levinas, his meeting an other is not driven by value maxims or criteria, such as wisdom and reason, but proves itself in the quest for dialogue sustained by the knowledge that oneself cannot set the standard for the conduct of the dialogue partner. In a way, this partner, as a subject, is permanently superior to me in value; that is why my commitment to him or her can never be seen as fulfilled; it continues to exist throughout life. Accordingly, Levinas concludes: "The strangeness of the other, the fact that he cannot be attributed to me, to my thoughts and my possession, takes on ethical significance only through the questioning of my own spontaneity." (Andreas Gelhard, Levinas: Grundwissen Philosophie [Basic Knowledge: Philosophy], Leipzig 2005, p.9)

In the conscious differentiating, and at the same time appreciating confrontation with the other lies the centerpiece of Levinas' "Philosophy of Freedom." Natural distances are preserved and the individual is then perceived in his/her uniqueness by his/her environment. This freedom binds the subject, the human being, to an object, another human being. Levinas decisively rejects a freedom that is self-sufficient and uncommitted. The final consequence of that type of freedom would imply the belittling of others, an experience he himself suffered as a victim of the "philosophy of Hitlerism." When an individual or a collective positions itself above other people, it puts itself on a quasi-divine level and declares itself the ruler of space and time. This hubris, which goes along with a withdrawal from any obligation for fellow human beings, is diametrically opposed to Levinas' liberation of the ego from its orientation to itself.

### **Judaism as an Altruistic Religion?**

In this context it is interesting that Levinas seems to draw his orientation toward the stranger, the unequal other, from the Jewish world view that especially in Muslim and Christian circles, is not uncommonly associated with an "election vanity" [a conceit based on being chosen (transl.)] which

in many respects comes very close to Hitler's idea of "providence." After all, for Christianity love of neighbor is the only so-called "Eleventh Commandment" of the New Testament, by which it sought to distance itself from the perfectionism of the Pharisees in the same way as Islam, which even made the Zakat, the giving of alms to others in need, into one of its Five Pillars. Jesus denies salvation to the rich young man who, according to his own conscience, which was shaped by the Old Testament, had committed himself to a righteous path, because he is not willing to separate from his wealth and share it with others who had less. The "unbelieving" Samaritan, who tried to alleviate the plight of the wounded lying in the street, is apostrophized as example for the upright believer. Islam also distinguished itself from the outset by the orientation towards the neighbor and aggressively opposed the practice of slavery, Quraish, that degraded others. It also engaged itself in the rehabilitation of the arbitrarily disenfranchised, motivated by the awareness that to God all people are equally valuable.

The immediate personal experience of the consequences of a collective self-centered ideology [during Nazism (transl.)] has lead Levinas to the conviction that a humane society can only be achieved through the conscious commitment to the other and he now interprets this as the "ethical obligation of Judaism." True to the motto of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), for Levinas, too, thinking cannot be based on unreflected transmission of religious dogmas or preconceived philosophical principles, but should always be oriented towards the physical experience. Only by building on this can a philosophy and insight be grown. This is the path he apparently followed and on it he discovered that already the Torah condemns egocentrism in the strongest possible terms (for Christians Torah is only the Old Testament, for Muslims a written form of general truths which compressed, immediate and comprehensible is only conveyed in the Koran). What Levinas defines here as the "specificity of Judaism," can thus equally be extracted from all three monotheistic religions, and serve as ethical basis for the dialogue between them. A "consciousness of being elected," understood as a kind of collective self-agrandizement, indeed shows itself as justification for religious and socio-cultural exclusion of others, as this is not only expressed in occasional instances of arrogance observed in right-wing Israelis against neighboring peoples like the Palestinians and their collective rights. This false pride is incompatible with Levinas' interpretation of Judaism and is characterized by him as a "heathen element:" "Judaism has demystified the world, has transcended the alleged development of religion from enthusiasm and the concept of the "holy." Judaism keeps away from any offensive return to these forms of human ennoblement. It sees in them the essence of idolatry." (Gelhard 2005, p. 20).

## **Ethics of Dialogue instead of an Eye for an Eye**

If Islam and Christianity stress the orientation towards the other even more than Judaism and attest to the "perfect prophet" and, respectively, the "Son of God" a conscious, in this case not even necessary withdrawal of their selves, how can attitudes of exclusivity – as they can be encountered in Christian Fundamentalists as well as in Islamists – ever legitimately find their origins in these religions? An exclusivism joined with enthusiastic elements proved to be characteristic of the pre-enlightenment era, in which violence was as often applied against another religion as the exclusion and discrimination of heterogeneous versions of one's own religion. Humanism had temporarily put an end to this era; however, a secularly justified culturalism, which also practiced exclusion and inhumanity, replaced it. Levinas had to experience this in its most extreme form which is why he apparently replaced an ethic defined by characteristics like reason with an "ethics of dialogue and encounter," even an ethics of moving towards each other. In his private life he knew the principle of an "eye for an eye" quite well, when, for example, after the Second World War, he never again entered the Germany of his former tormentors and when he steadfastly, until the death of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1898-1976), accused him of failing to resist the Nazi regime. At the same time, with his "Ethical Resistance" he suggests a nonviolent form of protest against the experience of injustice by the use of speech and dialogue as means to break an unnatural cycle of violence and counter violence as it continues for decades

repeatedly, not least between Israel and the Palestinians, but is also part of the sad agenda in other regions of the globe.

With Levinas' concept of ethics a path of peace could be found, that is not limited to the rational management of violent conflicts between religions and peoples, but rather includes a deliberate interest in the fate of the other in which his or her otherness is not only respected, but moreover, his or her specific human needs are fully and unreservedly recognized. Levinas continued the private and scientific dialogue with Heidegger, despite his disappointment over Heidegger's attitude during the Third Reich. He consciously but also critically dealt with his theories but only to arrive at the realization that in the relationship of humans to each other morality has to rank above reason. In the same way collectives as well, and with them their religions and cultures can and should together find a way to engage in conversation with each other, rather than to stiffen in thoughts of revenge and self-pity. In this concept of ethics and freedom nationalism and culturalism certainly have no room anymore. The commitment to all fellow human beings – even to those who have not behaved humanely toward oneself or others -- that can be learned from Judaism as well as from Islam and Christianity, includes an incessant advocacy for their fundamental human rights. Only then the door is open for a truly humane, multicultural society based on mutual respect.

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Translated from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll