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*Assuming the Capacity of Speaking.
Essay on Emmanuel Levinas*

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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Key words

Other, Illeity, face-to-face, Face, verse, one-for-the-Other, diachrony, diaconia, substitution, testimony, revelation, Torah, Name of the Father, phantasm, symbolic, imaginary, real, object a, original opening, call, ethic, superego, gaze, voice, stranger, neighbour, anxiety, il y a, responsibility, desire, Saying, Said, Septuagint, enigma, Infinity, passage.

Summary

In the context of 20th century phenomenology and considering the answer that the human being must offer to the interpellation made by the Other, Emmanuel Lévinas, influenced by his own background of phenomenology and Talmudic readings, proposes a horizontal, infinite responsibility of the human being, assigned and assumed upon entering subjective history, in response to a vertical call. Our interpretive perspective aims to fathom to what extent the lévinasian text delivers an assuming or resolution of the anxiety (*angoisse*), and to achieve this we propose the lacanian concept of Name of the Father, and we use a reading of the lévinasian corpus aided by the theoretical developments offered by mainly freudian and lacanian psychoanalysis. While Lévinas constructs an entire "*éthique comme philosophie première*", for Lacan the ethical problem is structured around the subject's orientation towards the real. Not limiting ourselves to highlighting a correspondence or simple conceptual analogies between the two, we analyzed the relation to the Face as a condition for the occurrence of the Other in his transcendence, from his height, as well as the interdiction against killing. The lévinasian Face is simultaneously a gaze and a voice. Therefore, our hypothesis is to interpret the lévinasian responsibility in relation to the Face as a resolution in the symbolic order of the radical anxiety in front of the Face of A Elohim, in a face-to-face relation which could be a face-to-face relation with the text of the Torah, that is, the written trace of the Infinity.

The present paper is structured in three chapters, *Phenomenology and Talmud, Phantasm and veil of the Temple and Time and Illeity*, in which we explicate, on one hand, the lévinasian concepts, while on the other hand we propose a reading of these concepts from the perspective of psychoanalytic discourse of Freudian and Lacanian origin, in order to extract, perhaps, from the writings of Lévinas what the text says beyond what is comprised in the linearity of its narrative.

By exploring the lévinasian corpus in order to elucidate the notion of *face*, within the conceptual delimitations of the Face in relation to the Illeity and the infinite responsibility of any human being that sets out on the Abrahamic quest of his own subjective history in answer to an original call, we see how the gaze and the voice, as conceptualized by Lacan, are in the order of the object, in the sense that the subject's enigmatic desire is correlative of a beyond in the symbolic order. There is a fundamental lack in the relation between desire and object, which is constitutive to the desire; in this sense, the face is gaze, but not just attached to the domain of the sight; likewise it is voice, or expression that speaks in silence, not being attached to any acoustical dimension. Thus, the lévinasian face becomes the conjunction of the gaze and the voice as an empty space, as a limit of what could be thought or expressed in speech.

The face of the other, of the neighbour, becomes in Lévinas's texts an objectal point that meets the subject and links it to its own desire, but at the same time the face is the impossible meeting with the gaze, it is the framed gaze, like in the window of the phantasm or the way a veil conceals the lack (that is: what is not there to be seen), it is the distance between the defenceless eyes of the other and his gaze that can become a point of anxiety. The subject's relation to the face of the Other as gaze is mediated by the veil concealing the real, as the field of vision is bound to three realms: the imaginary of the mirror, the symbolic of the perspective and the real of the topology. In this sense, the scopic field always has a cross-cap structure, a topological surface that shows the real of the subjective structure in which the subject finds itself in an internal exclusion with respect to its object.

Moreover, the face is the one that calls, but this interpellation, arising from an immemorial past that calls to responsibility, produces a type of experience in which we say that the subject itself, while not yet a subject, is called to answer, therefore to enter the human order. This call occurs in an original opening – *Bejahung*, that contains the *ja*, "yes, I assume!", yes to a condition of possibility that exceeds the subject; we note that the opening is a donation – an opening in which the subject is chosen (*élu*), but at the same time it has to make a choice regarding its subjective structure – because the psychic structure emerges in the posture which the subject assumes in relation to the origin, the place assumed by the subject. For Lévinas, the subject enters the no-return Abrahamic journey by answering in the affirmative to this call: "here I am!", in a primordial face-to-face relation to the Language, although by its answer and, therefore, in order to establish itself as an *I* after being interpellated as a *you*, it is necessary for the Other to retreat, to become a *he*, whence Lévinas's concept of Illeity, or trace of the Infinity who in its almighty height commands, while being simultaneously weak and helpless in the guise of the poor, of the widow or of the orphan.

The function of the face-to-face relation is to veil, to hide the gaze and to sustain a presumed existence and co-existence of the Other in order for it to remain a warrant of the subject. Because, says Lacan, there is a lack in the Other, there is a void made by its lack of guarantee, or the lack in the Other is a window to the unnamable real, the signifier of the lack of the Other, which we find in Lévinas's Talmudic lessons by the name of Yahweh, unpronounceable because its vowels are missing, having been repressed. But this name has a name, Adonai, just like a nomination is also made by the symbolic, and Lévinas offers, in the admirable pages of *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* or *Éthique et infini*, a resolution to the radical anxiety by responsibility as uniquely assumed culpability following an equally unique call.

The adventure of the subjectivity of the Same, of which Lévinas says that he sets out towards the Other on a no return journey – just like the adventure of the translation of the Torah from Hebrew to Greek – is similar to the testing of Abraham who also stands up and leaves "from his house" in response to a call. The test of the sacrifice of Isaac is also a response to a call, but in this test Abraham meets God in the real, and this God is signaled by the only non-deceptive affect which is anxiety. The voice of the Other demanding the sacrifice of Isaac resonates in the void of his lack of guarantee. However, for Abraham the symbolic wins over the real, entailing a rest that is nonassimilable, a trace of the Infinity as Lévinas calls it, but in this precise meaning of the radical anguish, this trace is the Face of the other. We can see here to what extent the early lévinasian concept of *il y a* pertains to the real and how it can be encountered, though always veiled, at the level of the face.

For Lévinas, the Face is the impossible conjunction between the subject and that something that is the cause of its desire, but which retreated because it pertains to a past that was never present. The face veils something that we wish to see, but is impossible to see. Just like the atonement cover or the veil of the temple. The presence of the Face is correlative to the Saying that arises before any Said because it is something that was not lived, the fundamental trauma – which is the entry of the subject in the language – is an experience without a subject, but which comes back as a *return*. Freud said that the trauma goes back to a prehistoric time, that it resides in the structure, and that what comes back as a return is the rest of the trauma, which was never apprehended in the discourse or the interpretation.

The division of the subject in its Pauline form bears on the "as if not", and the speaking subject has an indeterminate temporality underlying any determined temporality. The ultimate test of the alterity of the Other, as a pulsation of the Other in the Same, derives from the structure of this temporality as a gap in the continuity of the chronology and leads the subject to its unicity consisting of an infinite responsibility for his neighbour, as both starets Zosima and rabbi Amos

say. But also of a universal culpability, for all the others and for their mistakes, the source of this culpability laying at the level of the constitution of the phantasm and of the subject's relation to desire. This subjective responsibility occurs in a logical time that is subsequent to the constitution of the subjective structure in answer to the original call which the radical Other addresses to the subject and to which the latter answers "Here I am".

If the subject's event of accepting before knowing – or "we will do and will obey", an ethical act assumed following a donation – is intrinsic to the revelation as donation of the Torah, then for Lévinas this is the stake of the truth as cause, in the sense that God is set as cause of the subject's desire, but if the latter finds it impossible to refuse the donation, culpability may settle in this field of ethics preceding knowledge because the human being is, already, in a relation to its neighbour, this being the only way of knowing God, the revelation being illustrated by the practice of the commandments. Thus, the dimension of the revelation presupposes the truth-bearer word, it is already discourse, and accepting before knowing relates to the liturgical reading of the scroll of Esther. We will introduce at this point the dimension of the freudian super-ego. Freud's great invention from his second topic is the super-ego, in fact the manner in which he places the origin to the forefront in relation to the constitution of the subject. However, the imperative of the super-ego is a commandment impossible to fulfill if we are in the language, but it lies, as such, at the origin of everything we say by the notion of moral conscience.

The conceptualizing of the lévinasian Face as *das Ding*, in the context of the subjectivity of the Other in the Same is analogous to the moment of the paradoxal and archaic menace that Freud speaks about, a normative moment which for Freud is coherent with the oedipal relation. "That which in the real suffers from the signifier" suffers so from the original relation that inscribes the man on the ways of the signifiers, inscribes itself in the Face which appears as a *nihil*. Behind the phantasmatic veil lies the signifier of desire, something which must not be shown, because the unveiling of what is but nothing, that is the absence of what is veiled, is named by Freud Medusa's head, or "horror" answering to the revealed absence.

In conceptualizing the responsibility, Lévinas appeals to the words of the Torah in which a permanence of an unpayable debt corresponds to the superabundance of God's blessing, because the more one pays the debt, the more indebted one is. The closer the subject is to the other, the bigger his responsibility is for the other. The interiority particular to the lévinasian subject, in a responsibility for all the others in which he is unreplaceable, pertains to a lack of repose per se and, therefore, to a strangeness intrinsic to any place. A stranger to himself and to his place, no man is at home and in this *incondition* of stranger the man looks for the other, for the neighbour he is promised to, as each man is "his brother's keeper". For Lévinas, the paradigm of the subject

lies in the figure of Abraham starting out on a *no-return* adventure, the adventure of a people as well as that of a subjectivity. The people that was promised to Abraham received the Torah on Mount Sinai, and the subject knows that the Infinity reveals itself to those who keep themselves *behind (sur la trace)* the other, just like Ruth knows she will find the silent God if she walks behind Naomi. If the suffering of the neighbour is a call to responsibility, then Ruth is in each subject whose election took place in an immemorial past that was never present.

One of the hypotheses we are proposing is that the voice and the gaze meet in the Face, therefore we analyze the Hebrew ritual object called shofar that presents the voice in separate form. The commandment "you will not kill" as an expression of the other's face is only inscribed after the anguishing desire of the Other has been tamed, and the shofar may proclaim the culpability, which means that it can model the place of the anxiety. The shofar and the death of the father lie, in fact, at the beginning of the economy of desire. The culpability covers the anxiety stirred by the nonassimilable residue in which the voice appears in the opening of the subject and of the Other as an object fallen from the subject and the Other.

The voice resonates in the void of the Other, and the shofar's role is to model this void, to put a bar to the jouissance of the Other and, so, to model the place of the anxiety. The instauration of an Other complemented by the voice is precisely the project of the super-ego since, lying in the void of the Other, the voice is mute but, however, it is a voice of the ethical, of the culpability of the hostage and of the infinite responsibility, in order to remind us the image of an Other demanding the – impossible to satisfy – sacrifice of the jouissance. The voice remains a rest irreducible to a signifier, a rest supporting the passage, being, therefore, essential for the articulation of the signifier. The Tables of the Law are essential in the human structure, because otherwise the voice on Mount Sinai would not produce the divided subject.

In the Abrahamic test of Isaac's sacrifice, the face is gaze, gaze of Isaac face-to-face with Abraham, in Lévinas's interpretation, gaze that stops the hand which had already consented to the sacrifice, because the gaze and the divine voice unite in that eminent moment. But, if in Abraham's case the symbolic wins over the real and determines a nonassimilable rest, Isaac's gaze is, at the same time, face-to-face with the real of God's face. Both Isaac's sacrifice and the breaking of the bread refer to the creation of a space for the occurring of the symbolic order, in the empty place. The voice incorporates, instead of just being assimilated, which means that it can assume the function of modeling the void, while the language acquires, for Lévinas, an expressive function. The first saying is "God", and in the face-to-face structure of faith the subject, exposed to the Other, answers already with a "Here I am". The Name of the Father is God, and the Said is the mode in which the human being defends itself against that original

face-to-face in which the Name calls the human being to speak, to the Said in relation to the origin. The human is stateless, the departure of Abraham takes place in two orders, on the one hand it is a departure towards "the land I will show you", and while on the other it is "towards yourself".

The no-return way is related to the constitution of the being of phantasm that has in desire a function of meaning of truth. The permanence of the study of Torah is a blessing in which the depths are always given in abundance, like a "much in little" proper to the unpronounceable Name of God which leads the subject to open itself towards the unknowable transcendence that surpasses it infinitely. The Name of God allows the man to be in relation with his neighbours by following the trace of the Infinity, because the man can be a witness of the name, giving testimony about it and, by it, being a martyr in his infinite responsibility. This is the answer by excellence to the call of the Name. Any word becomes prophetic being correlative of the participation of the subject – the receiver of the revelation – to the work of the God without promise, the God who "becomes idea" and who, being a stranger, only occurs if he is received; this God reveals himself in the prophecy, and this is the exceptional relation linking Israel to the Torah. Herein lies the interest in the biblical ethics.

The experience of the other, as a stranger, is also an experience of the strange. The subject was never present, as a subject, to the act of its election, so that the transcendence of the infinity, as conceptualized by Lévinas, pertains to an irretrievable past that was never present. Therefore the election can only be understood in terms of trace. Just that the trace as strange perturbs the order of the world, the safety that was given to it by the window of the phantasm; it is an excess that shakes the veil hiding the unseen. The agalma of the signifier is counterbalanced by the signifier of a lack in the Other, and this happens because the agalma is always supported by a lack. The objects cause of desire always had an agalmatic brilliance, the horror of their real being covered by a veil.

The lack in the Other or the void, window of the real, hole of the scopic relation of the subject with the world, is covered by the veil of the phantasm hiding the hole in the Other and offering it a presumed consistency as a warrant of the subject. The void of guarantee of the Other pertains to the lack of memory of the God who could forget about the covenant, so that the reiteration of the sound of the shofar becomes necessary, as well as its possibility to carry out its function of modeling the place of the anxiety as culpability.

The first word is the Saying, but for Lévinas this word is „the Name by which God signifies himself”. But the Saying is the one that translates the Saying into Said, and that's how the untranslatable breaks right into the heart of the translation; the „still, small voice” which Elijah

hears on mount Horeb, the original word, remains unspeakable, and the translation must be uninterrupted, just like the study. The proto-translation of the silence is Face, as trace of the passing of God whose Face is not to be seen and whose Name is not to be pronounced. „I Am that I Am” from the burning bush can provide a hint in this direction.

For Lévinas face and verse are one and the same because the face-to-face of Moses with God doesn't mean anything except that the disciple and the Master are looking together into the same Talmudic lessons, which means that the proximity of the Creator requires an infinite study. The biblical verses must be looked in the face, and the space of the Talmudic discussions starts from the withdrawal of God, who leaves an empty place that becomes the place of origin of any interrogation. The veil supporting the abyss between holiness and alterity, separating the Holy of the Holies from the nave, is an analogon of the text that hides without hiding, because beneath the word lives the invisible. The true face-to-face with God inscribes itself in the uninterrupted study of the written and oral Torah.

The Other, in the election, is the Saying preceding and constitutive to the Said, and in the original addressing of the Other the meeting with the Other is not a fact of the subject, but it's elicited by the call. The Saying has already retreated, leaving only its trace in the Said, but this is already a betrayal, and the problem of „in other words” is located in the passage from Hebrew to Greek. While the Hebrew bears the indelible mark of a revelation, the Infinity revealing itself in the Face of the other resides exactly in this Hebrew, original word, which the Same will never be able to translate in his own terms. The Hebrew – the scroll of the Torah – is, in this sense, the proto-translation of silence. The translation is irreversible also because it brings with itself a rest which is precisely the unpronounceable Name.

The Face reveals itself at the same time as a *person* and as *nothing*. In the nothing of the speaking eyes of the face, the Nothing of the infinity shows through, the brilliance of the transcendence reveals itself in the dark abyss of the eyes, which is the deepest darkness that produces blindness because of the brilliance of the Face. To support our thesis, we will argue that by *nothing* the desire masks the anxiety of what lacks, essentially, in the desire. The image of the face converts to the nothingness which we see in its eyes, whence its characteristic of *passage*, for the brighter the face is, the greater is the depth.

For Lévinas, the face talks from the nothing of its eyes calling the subject to responsibility, on a no-return way. Also without return is the stopping of Abraham's hand above the altar of the sacrifice, a stop by the law of desire, which separates the desire from the jouissance and sets a covenant, reiterated by the shofar's sound. This covenant renews the original work, therefore the looking into the fragile verses, the meeting of the vulnerable face of the neighbour, the

practice of the commandments, the rite and the liturgy all conjugate for the assuming of the symbolic that wins and lays a veil – in the feminine gender – over the real.

If the name of the Tetragrammaton is Adonai, if the name has a name, as Lévinas says, and if the context in which we place the lévinasian ethical subject is that of the lacanian Borromean knot, then, furthermore, there is a Name of the Name's Name – vis-à-vis the three lacanian orders – as the Name of the Father takes over the function of naming *otherwise*.

The lévinasian election pertains to the Name of the Father, that is, to a God to whose glory the subject bears witness in the continuously renewed moment of the offering. The substitution of Isaac, in the sense of the metaphor of the Name of the Father, achieves the primordial metaphor separating the desire and the jouissance. Which assumes that in the case of Abraham and of the lévinasian subject the symbolic wins over the real, determining a nonassimilable rest. The Tetragrammaton is, in fact, the one in whose name Isaac is spared, the Tetragrammaton gives the blessing to Abraham for obeying his voice, the Tetragrammaton appears to Moses in the burning bush. „I Am that I Am” is a hole, a signifier of the lack of the Other that is, as such, unpronounceable. Moses puts the name of God in the place of this hole, that lies, in fact, in the place where the Other is called to guarantee the symbolic Other. The Name of God *is* the repression, and the consonants of the tetragrammaton make the border of the „true hole” of the structure. Where the subject waits for the divine guarantee for there being an Other of the Other of the symbolic – there is nothing but a hole.

But, as the thematising of the origin of the Saying is absent, the subject needs an analogon which we have named phantasm. The crossing of the veil of the phantasm is not anymore pertaining to the Name of the Father, but to the Father that names, which poses the problem of a different kind of experience, which is not an object of the present paper. Although we do not believe that the lévinasian ethics goes so far as to propose a type of subject whose desire could offer a real guarantee for the concept of anxiety, the inquiry remains open precisely because this direction concerns the phenomenology post-Emmanuel Lévinas and the psychoanalytic experience.

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