

SIGNS OF THE OTHER. READING EMMANUEL LEVINAS¹

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Abstract

Today more than ever before we must answer to the other not only for the self, but also for the very other. The problem of otherness and identity are pivotal categories in Western Reason and central issues in all of Emmanuel Levinas's works. On rereading writings by Levinas starting from *Totalité et infini* (1961), this paper focusses on an issue central to life and culture in today's world: the self's need for justification in front of the other.

1. Critique of the reason of identity

The problem of otherness and the critique of identity are central to Western Reason, as well as in the writings by Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995). As a development on my monographs, *Subjectivité et alterité dans la philosophie de Emmanuel Lévinas* (1996) and *Emmanuel Levinas, Globalisation, and Preventive Peace* (2009), this paper investigates the problem of self justification in the face of the other. The possibility of justification subtends the constitution of identity in terms of the individual, class, nation, and community. All Western culture is a justification of identity, of the self in the face of the other. The reason of identity is the reason of self and not of the other. But at a certain point the self must answer to the other not only for the self's sake, but also for the other's.

Totality and Infinity (1961) offers an excellent perspective on Levinas's research, its sense and purpose, as much as on his method of investigation and writing style. As observed by Jacques Derrida (1967, Eng. trans. 1978: 312), Levinas's discourse forbids prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks, being the first violence of all commentary, and as such deserves a study in itself. Derrida's comments on *Totality and Infinity* may well be extended to all Levinas's works:

¹ English translation from Italian by Susan Petrilli.

Further *Totality and Infinity* the thematic development is neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself (Derrida 1967, Eng. trans. 1978: 312).

The predictive nature of Levinas's book considered in relation to today's reality derives from his profound understanding of the essential features of western reason and the logic of identity subtending it, which global communication today evidences ever more.

Levinas opens his Preface to *Totality and Infinity* ([1961] 1991: 21-30) with reflections on what he considers as the face of the real, namely the question of war:

The state of war rescinds ad interim, the moral imperatives, even better, renders them derisory. On the contrary, war extols politics, the art of foreseeing and winning it by every means, as the very exercise of reason. The trial by force is the test of the real (1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 21).

The face of being that shows in war is the face of Western reason. War evidences the connection between politics and ontology and together the subordination of individuals and identities to totality, that is, to an ontological order from which there is no escape. The concept of totality dominates Western philosophy and is confirmed by war which reduces individuals to bearing forces that command them unbeknown to themselves. Their sense is derived only from totality; their uniqueness is sacrificed to objective sense, which exists only in this totality.

But war also reveals the connection between ontology and history. The totality of being is revealed in objective history, for only the future may show objective sense. In such an order there is no sense beyond the totality and beyond history. Individual and collective identities depend on the judgement of history. In the logic of war, the realistic logic of being, ontology, politics and history, peace is only the peace of war, the end of war, a truce in preparation for war.

2. The I-other relation, a movement without return

The Preface to *Totality and Infinity* starts with the question of whether rational knowledge is aware of the possibility of permanent war. Given the irrefutable evidence of the totality and the opposition of peace to war, "evidence of war has been maintained in an essentially hypocritical civilisation, that is, attached both to the True and to the Good, henceforth antagonistic" (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 24). The only pathway to morality that is not naïve or hypocritical and to peace that is not based on war is to refer to a situation that can no longer be stated in terms of the "totality":

[...] We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other [*visage d'autrui*]. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 24-25).

Totality and Infinity presents itself as a defence of subjectivity, but not in terms of a purely egoistic protestation against totality, nor of anguish in the face of death, of isolated "being-for-death" (Heidegger 1962). Instead, the defence of subjectivity is founded in the relation to the other.

The relation of the individual, of the "same" (*Même*) to the other (*Autrui*) reveals the possibility of breaching the totality, in Levinas's words, the "possibility of infinity" in a relation where the absolute other transcends the totality. The absolute other is "*autrui*" (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans.:

39). “*Autruï*” in French is a personal pronoun for the other, the other person, the other man. The other always overflows with respect to the totality, reason, identity, consciousness, thought. A real and proper “*infinition*” is produced in this overflow of objectifying thought. The other is that which the totality of being and of thought can neither embrace nor encompass. Infinity, that is, the breach of the totality, identity, of the order of discourse, which is produced in the relationship of the same with the other, “delivers subjectivity from the judgement of history to declare it ready for judgement at every moment and [...] called to participate in this judgement, impossible without it” (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 25).

The relation with infinity, which is experience of irreducibility of the other to the same, to the totality — therefore, experience in the fullest sense of the word, if experience means precisely a relation with the absolutely other — is also the breach of the harsh law of war (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 25-26).

The relationship with the absolutely other, that is, with what is irreducible to the Same, to Reason, to Identity, — the relation of the same to the other, in which is produced the experience of infinity — is not only beyond the totality, but is also the very basis of the totality.

Subjectivity contains the experience of infinity. It results essentially as welcoming the other, as hospitality. Identity is fundamentally a relation of otherness. All knowing presupposes the experience of infinity, which is experience of *non-adequation* in the fullest sense of the word. The relation with the relative *other* is based on the relation with an *absolute other*.

Identity contains more than it is possible to contain, because it is founded on otherness: there is in the finite the idea of the infinite, as Descartes calls it. According to Levinas who refers to Descartes, “infinite” means both *non-finite*, beyond the finite, and *in-finite*, inside the finite.

According to Levinas the relation of otherness is neither reducible to *being-with*, Heidegger’s *Mitsein*, nor to Sartre’s *being-for*. Otherness is located inside the subject, identity, the I, which is itself a dialogue, a relation between the same and the other.

The other cannot be separated from the I, the same, the *Même*. As *étranger*, as the absolute other, the other cannot be included within the totality, the same. The other is necessary to the constitution of the I and its world, to the constitution of identity, but at the same time it is transcendent. Otherness is not outside the sphere of the I, however it is not assimilated by the I. quite on the contrary, it gives rise to a constitutive impediment to the integrity and closure of the I as identity, as totality, as the same. The relation with the other is intended as a relation of excess, surplus, as the overcoming of objectifying thought, as release from the relation between subject and object. The same other relation transcends the realm of knowledge, the concept, abstract thought; but knowledge and concept are possible thanks to the same other relation. Instead, the I/other relation, as proposed by Levinas, has an ethical foundation. The “ethical” relationship between terms is neither a synthesis of the understanding, nor a relationship between subject and object (“Langage et proximité”, in Levinas 1967, Eng. trans. In Levinas 1987: 109-125, specific reference here is to page 116, note), but a relation of exposition to the other, a relation of non-indifference to the other.

A movement toward the other without return to the self, to identity, connotes the *specifically human* present in any human enterprise, in “all human work [*œuvre*], commercial and diplomatic” (Levinas 1948, Eng. trans. 1987: 2) what ever this may be. As Levinas says, beyond perfect adaptation to its own goal, human enterprise “bears witness to an accord with some destiny extrinsic to the course of things, which situates it outside the world, like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic” (Levinas 1948, Eng. trans. 1987: 2).

In “La Signification et le sens”, a chapter in *L’humanisme de l’autre homme* (Levinas 1972, Eng. trans. in Levinas 1987: 75-107), the expression *œuvre* designates a movement toward the other which excludes the possibility of return to self. As designating the specifically human, the concept of *œuvre* indicates a type of humanism that inverts the traditional itinerary of dominant philosophy, that of Ulysses who ventures into the world only to return to his native island.

Identity and *étrangeté*, otherness: these are the two faces of the real which realism does not take into consideration. In “La réalité et son ombre” (1948, Eng. trans. in Levinas 1987: 1-13), Levinas says:

Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature. Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the “old garments” of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a “still life” (1948, Eng. trans. 1987: 6).

3. Origin of human signification and a “bad consciousness”

Taking his distance from the traditional concept of dialogue as exchange of rejoinders among predefined subjects, Levinas thematizes dialogism as a fundamental condition of human consciousness, a sort of a priori. This is what Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) calls *substantial dialogue* distinct from *formal dialogue*, substantial dialogue is the structure of the I (see Bakhtin e il suo circolo 2014: 24, 1087, 1355-1387, 1417, 1699).

Language as contact, proximity, being one-for-the-other, witness, involvement, intercorporeity, exposition to the other, intersubjectivity, complicity antecedent to accord and to disaccord is already dialogue. The dialogic relation is connected with responsibility:

Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. [...] The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone. [...] Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain. [Responsibility for another] is a responsibility of the ego for what the ego has not wished, that is, for others (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 114; see also Levinas 1993, Eng. trans. 2000: 183).

Responsibility is involvement, exposition, proximity of one-for-the-other. Unlimited responsibility testifies to our obligation to the otherness relationship, to dialogism. The I in itself is already dialogue, an I/other relationship. Otherness is present at the very heart of identity, structural to identity, a basic condition for the realisation of identity.

To speak not only means to speak with the words of others, but to keep account of the other in a relation of inevitable involvement and implication, such that to speak is always to answer, also in the sense of to answer for, in the first place, to answer for oneself, to justify oneself. The I speaks and in so doing answers to the other. As Levinas says in “Nonintentional Consciousness” (“La conscience non intentionnelle”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 122-132), the first case in which I is declined is not the nominative but the *accusative* (Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 129). The other interrogates the I. The question of being is inseparable from the question of the I which must first answer for itself, for the place it occupies in the world, and for the relation to others.

This means that *first philosophy* is *ethics*. The main question is not *why being instead of not being*, as in Heidegger; but rather *why my being here in this place, in this situation, while another is excluded?* The origin of human signification is not “intentional consciousness” as in Edmund Husserl; but *consciousness that is not intentional*, as Levinas says — that is to say consciousness understood in an ethical sense and not in a cognitive sense. More exactly, it is “bad consciousness”, a “dirty conscience”, which attempts to justify itself, appease itself, reconciling itself in an illusory “good consciousness”, a “clean conscience”.

The real problem for Westerners is not so much the rejection of violence as the struggle against violence through violence (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 177). “Preventive war” is not a struggle against the institution of violence but is itself violence. On the contrary, what is required is *preventive peace*. War against war, war against terrorism, perpetuates violence. Elaborating on Levinas’s reflections “just” and “necessary” wars, “humanitarian” and “preventive” wars are waged with a clean conscience, a hypocritical conscience, opening the way to “infinite war” (see Ponzio 2009).

The way to preventive peace is bad consciousness, a dirty conscience, patience that does not ask patience from others and is based on a difference between oneself and others, on an *inequality* opposed to oppression. Preventive peace is in *non-indifference*, non-indifference to the other, non-indifference as responsibility for the other, “the very difference between me and the other” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 178). I am answerable to the other, responsible for all others, for the guilt of another. The condition of hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility for the other.

Peace otherwise than the peace of war is otherwise than being, peace beyond essence. There is no peace without the beyond of being at home, “the being at home with oneself, of which European history itself has been the conquest and jealous defence” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 178).

Non-indifference toward the other, responsibility without alibis in the face of the other, is openness toward the other than being. This openness is not the initiative of an intentional subject, an effect of one’s will: openness is outside subject, outside theme, unabsorbed in the “object”, without seeing, knowing, understanding, grasping, operating and possessing. Openness is “disinterestedness” (*disinterestedness*), outside the *essence* (*essence*) — the process or event of being — outside *conatus essendi* (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 178).

Openness signifies the outside without cover, without shelter, non-protection, homelessness, non-world, non-inhabitation, without security (see Ponzio 2013: 11-13). But the significations of openness are not only privative: openness signifies the other side of identity, of inwardness, the demythization of the I, the situation before its closure in the abstract notions of freedom and non freedom, where one is not nailed to the I. There is in openness “a complex of significations deeper and broader than freedom”, where “inwardness frees itself from itself, and is exposed to all the winds” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 180). There is exposure without deliberation, which would already be closure in identity, in its illusory barricades.

Non-indifference is a passivity which penetrates identity even in the retreats of its inwardness and obsesses it before all thematization, before gaining a foothold in being. The restlessness of passivity — a passivity more passive than the passivity of matter — in the exposure to the other, is responsibility for that other, restlessness in exposure to another exposure, a face, the face of the other, the openness of its nudity.

Exposure to the other is the asymmetric face-to-face relation (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 189-193), exposition of one’s own nudity, out of role, without a position, function, power, defence. Otherness in the face-to-face exposition is not the relative otherness of roles, positions, functions, power, but absolute otherness. Exposure of the other to another in the face-to-face relation occurs before identity, subjectivity, freedom, language, being, as their condition.

Preventive peace, liberation from the world of war, this opening, this *beyond*, is in proximity to the other. Proximity is responsibility for the other. Proximity means my absolute non delegable responsibility for the other, responsibility for the other without alibis.

Non-indifference to the other — and ever more in the globalized world to my neighbour — is opening of self without a world, without a place, not walled in being, not nailed to being, “*u-topia*” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 182). U-topia is beyond being, otherwise than being, disinterestedness (*dis-inter-essement*), the excluded middle besides being and not being. Exposed to the proximity of the other, the I of each individual is virtually a chosen one, called to leave the identity of the ego and its extensions into the unity of community, people, agglomerations of peoples, to respond with responsibility: *me, here I am*, that is, *here I am for others*. Responsibility for the other cannot begin in one’s commitment, in one’s decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence.

4. The third, the comparison between incomparables, and the problem of justice

Responsibility for the other is the original relation with the other. It is unlimited responsibility. This responsibility, according to Levinas, is the “secret of sociality” (“Diachrony and representation”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 169). From the start, encounter with the other is responsibility for him, for one’s “neighbour”, which is the name for the man, whomever he is, for whom one is responsible. Love, as non-indifference, charity, is original, and it is original peace (see “Philosophy, Justice, and Love”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 103-121).

Peace is not identified with the end of struggles that cease for lack of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of others, with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism (Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 306).

Original peace is what Levinas calls an “asymmetry of intersubjectivity”, an exceptional, extraordinary situation of the I. Levinas recalls Dostoevsky on this subject. In *Brothers Karamazov* one of the characters says: “we are all guilty for everything and everybody, and me more than anybody else”.

Original peace is the absolute anteriority of the face of the other. The face of the other, encounter with the other, requires the I as the one responsible for the other. This responsibility is inalienable. It is responsibility of the I as a singularity, different from the responsibility of the individual belonging to a group, a class, an identity of some sort. Unlimited and inalienable responsibility for others is the very possibility of the uniqueness, singularity, of the one and only, beyond the particularity of the individual in some sort of identity group. In the relation to the face, to what is exposed, bare and destitute, responsibility is an election, an individuation without the group, a principle of individuation. As Levinas says: “on the famous problem: ‘Is man individuated by matter, or individuated by form?’ I support individuation by responsibility for the other” (“Philosophy, Justice, and Love”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 108). I am responsible for every man, my neighbour, and nobody can substitute me. In this sense I am chosen. I am responsible for the other, although the other is not responsible for me. As says Dostoevsky, I am responsible for the other more than anybody else. The relationship with the other is not symmetrical (Levinas 1976, Eng. trans. 1996: 17-39).

According to Levinas’s analysis, “at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for” (Levinas 1976, Eng. trans. 1996: 105). The other, my neighbour, is the first comer. From the outset, encounter with the face of the other is my responsibility for him. The other, my neighbour, is also a foreigner. I am responsible for the other even when he commits a crime, even when

he bothers me, even when he persecutes me. But I do not live in a world in which there is but one single “first comer”; there is always another other, a third, who is also my other, my neighbour.

The third is also a neighbour and falls within the sphere of the I’s responsibility. Otherness, starting from this third, is a multiplicity. Proximity is a human multiplicity. The I must know which one of the two others comes first. The I, responsible for the other and for the third, is responsible for their interactions. The I is responsible for the other even when one commits crimes, even when others commit crimes. The I is responsible for the persecution of one’s neighbours. They have a right to defence. If self-defence is a problem for the I, this is because one threatens one’s neighbour. For the I the question of the other is a demand for justice. There is a need for justice (see Levinas, “Diachrony and Representation”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 166-167). There is the obligation to compare unique and incomparable others. This is the moment of knowledge. Justice emerges from responsibility for the other. Responsibility for the other precedes justice. Justice is born from non-indifference, love, charity. Justice calls for judgement and requires a comparison between what in principle is incomparable, unique. Comparison, equity, objectivity appear with justice. Justice requires perception of the individual as a member of some group identity.

The I, insofar as one is responsible for the other and the third, cannot remain indifferent to their interactions, and in charity for one, cannot withdraw its love from the other. The self, the I, cannot limit itself to the incomparable uniqueness of each one, expressed in the face of each. Behind unique singularities, one must perceive the individuals of an identity group, one must compare them, judge them, and condemn them. There is a subtle ambiguity of the individual and the unique, the personal and the absolute, the mask and the face. This is the hour of inevitable justice — demanded by charity itself.

The hour of justice, of comparison between incomparables classified into groups is the hour of institutions empowered to judge, of states within which institutions which are consolidated, of Universal Law which is always *dura lex*, and of citizens who are always equal before the law (Levinas, “The Other, Utopia, and Justice”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 229). Justice requires judges, institutions, laws and, consequently, the state. A world of citizens, identities, individuals, persons, masks calls for belonging to an identity group, to a community and not only for the face-to-face relationship, the unique-to-unique relationship. “If there were no order of justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility” (Levinas, “Philosophy, Justice, and Love”, in Levinas 1991, Eng. trans. 1998: 105). However, the state emerges from the limitation of non-indifference and charity and not, as in Hobbes’s vision, from the limitation of violence and fear of others (*homo homini lupus*).

According to Levinas, the problem of justice presents itself in terms of justice and defence of the other, my neighbour, and not in terms of the threat that concerns me (see Poirié 1987: 104-105, 115-119). Justice and the state are not based on fear of the other, the other that bothers and persecutes me, but rather on fear for the other, fear that my neighbours should be persecuted, because I am responsible for the other more than anybody else, even when that other commits crimes, or suffers crimes and persecutions.

On the basis of justice, the asymmetry of intersubjectivity tends to become symmetry, equality, exchange, equal rights. Consequently, to treat all mankind justly also means to retreat from justice. Certainly my unlimited responsibility, my responsibility for all, can and must also manifest itself by limiting itself. The I is also a third in the relation of the other to another and calls for justice. In the name of unlimited responsibility, the I is called to look after oneself, to care for oneself. But unlimited and asymmetric responsibility which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself can be forgotten. In this forgetting, says Levinas, consciousness is pure egoism (see Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 128). Egoistic interests “take

dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 4).

War is the “deed or the drama” of egoistic interest. Nobody has patience, is patient with the other, there is no time for the other. Nobody can wait for one’s hour. The extreme synchronism, without time for the other, without patience, without otherness is War. In the “inevitable” determination of war there is “extreme contemporaneousness or immanence” (Levinas 1974, Eng. trans. 2000: 4).

To the extent that the face of the other relates the I to the third party, the irreducible relation of the face-to-face relation assumes the form of the We and moves into a state, into institutions, laws which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself deforms the I and the other, because it judges the latter according to universal rules. Politics bears a tyranny (see Levinas 1961, Eng. trans. 1991: 300). Justice founded on non-indifference, charity and love for the other becomes indifference and cruelty. Only the responsibility of I as uniqueness, singularity, the face-to-face relation constitute the reference to which justice, politics and the work of the state must be reconducted, where they find their originary sense.

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