Do We have to Let Ourselves to Be Doomed by Morality? In Response to Jerard Bensussan

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Some people, including well-educated philosophers, start making a grimace when they hear the name of Levinas, only because it is associated - and should be associated, and deserves to be associated - with morality. In our times of moral relativism, ethics is pushed aside in a corner, overshadowed by ontology. Ontology seems closer to science in its claim for neutrality. And ethics is seen either as unnecessary ballast or as falseness and hypocrisy, or even worse - as a system of repressive rules, required by the rulers to keep the masses in submission.

Ethics, as we know from Marx and Marxism for example, has been always engaged in maintaining the superiority, legitimating a moral of the dominant and/or comforting the oppressed. For Marx, morality is epiphenomenon, construed over the basis of economic relations and dependent on their change – this is how all Marxism joins the long tradition of moral relativism. Conversely, defenders of moral absolutism are bound around the idea that morality is a need of the highest spirit, the satisfaction of which enriches us spiritually (as some spiritual food). To bring this nonsense (usually supported by the utilitarians, hedonists, pragmatists, etc.) to the extreme, we must accept that we need morality for our good digestion. From the point of view of Levinasian philosophy, all of this seems ridiculous. Realizing the stupidity of such (at times even cynical) interpretations and "seeing every day and every hour the impotence of moral standards", today many people are asking why do we need morality at all and why have to speak for it. This is the topic of the first pages of "*Totality and Infinity*" - do we have to let ourselves be doomed to morality?

There is a persuasive urge to think of morality as some moral code, different for different groups and epochs. However, the Levinas' lesson is that morality should not be considered a form of legislation, encompassing the unwritten rules of one community or another, but instead, it must be un-

derstood "*au sense extra-moral*". Morality means recognizing the otherness of the Other, which is not respected enough by laws, standards and codes. The face of the Other, bared before me, stripped from definitions, notions, standards and models, does not allow me to hide behind the unifying and homogenizing rules and thus to transfer the responsibility to the institutions, the collective, destiny, God or some other authority, where the Other is subjected to the common principle. The Other as a face transcends the system with its principles and rules. Morality is inevitable - even when I ignore it and try to avoid the appeal of the Other, the very attempt to escape it is a form of answer – and what an answer by that! There is no escape from a personal responsibility. So, according to the Levinasian philosophy, the relationship between the Other and me, which has always a moral aspect, begins even when I try to play deaf and blind for the Other or treat him instrumentally, reducing him to an object or a means, subjected to my interests, identifying him with a function in a social system. The moral relationship is the "alpha and omega" of all other relationships, even those that seem most neutral. Similar to Descartes, who argues that thinking cannot be revoked, because even when we doubt or deny it, it's still a form of thought (doubt and denial are also mental operations), Levinas states that morality cannot be ignored or eliminated, because the very ignoring or elimination comes with a certain moral significance. Apropos, the same applies to everything else in human existence. Morality or sociality is not determined by our belonging to some group, community, entity, territory, but is derived from our responsibility for the others. It stems from the moral sensitivity of the individual.

The Levinas' philosophy is radical and its radicalism goes "all the way". Using our common habitual concepts, it is hard to determine where its genius lies. Still, if we have to underline the overwhelming reversal of thinking it evokes, then probably first comes the new understanding of sociality. Levinas refuses to induce or reduce the sociality of the individual to his belonging to the Whole – not only to the whole of the Greek cosmos, sustained by its laws, but also to the flexible, always open and indefinite historic totality of the monotheistic cultures. Defining humans through their belonging to some totality, area, territory with its own divisions – the way we classify objects through their belonging to the class and genus – is inade-

quate; it presupposes the point of view of a distant observer and omits the most important – the closeness between the Other and me, where sociality originate.

The relationship, in which "One is for the Other" is not territorial, but moral. Moreover, it does not constitute itself as a symmetrical and reciprocal intersubjectivity, but begins from the high-standing of the Other. The starting point is set by the appeal of the Face, which calls for an answer. The Other is neither below me, nor equal to me. Egalitarianism does not respect him enough. The Other is not sharing a territory with me, which we both habituate and try to parcel. The freedom of the Other is privileged to be high-ranking in comparison with my freedom and coincides with his dimension of Transcendence. Our modern culture does not allow superiority of the Other in relation to me, because instinctively, automatically renders it a relationship of dominance and obedience. While Levinas states that in the relationship between the Other and me, serving the Other is not slavery, but care for him. This care is a necessity, because the Other is a being, directed-towards-death. Only in the presence of a Third one, and therefore of "anyone else", and everyone is "another for the other", the basic social relationship can be generalized, totalized, and politicized.

The Levinas' philosophy sets a very, very high standard. It is as if Levinas has set a record in sport, unthinkable not only for the public, but also for the remaining competitors in that discipline. He sets such a high mark that all other philosophical attempts must be reviewed according to its perspective. But while sport involves only one part of human abilities, Levinas marks the end of a thousand year old way of thinking, which lasted for centuries and at the same time – hopefully – the beginning of another. After Kant, no philosopher would be taken seriously if he didn't take into account in his work the thesis of the categorical imperative; the same way, after Levinas, "*The Face, concerning me not in indicative, but in imperative*" is a thesis, which cannot be overlooked.

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In Levinas' philosophy we find a duplication of a number of categories we use in order to explain the human existence. As in the case of moral-

ity (as obeying of rules) and extra-morality (as caring for the Other), we can likewise talk of:

- transcendence (of the outer world) and extra-transcendence (of the Other);
- passiveness (in sensitivity) and extra-passiveness (in the closeness of the Other);
- desire (directed at the objects of the world) and the metaphysical extra-desire (towards the Other and the infinity, revealed by the encounter with him);
- sociality (as belonging to the whole of society) and extra-sociality (as responsibility for the others);
- justice (according to a legislation) and extra-justice (according to the moral saintliness);
- rationality (as providing the foundation of "I can") and extra-rationality (as questioning myself and seeking a better justice);
- and so on.

The list could go on. Exactly because of this duplication, which Levinas uses to revise the centuries-old understanding of philosophical categories, the reception of his works is so hard. All categories, describing human relationships, receive not only a literal meaning, understood through their place in the totality, i.e. in the system of worldly interests, but also one more – metaphorical – meaning, related to the Face of the Other. It seems as if the ethics is built upon ontology, just as metaphorical meanings are built upon literal, but to speak the truth, the situation is quite the opposite – metaphorical or ethical meanings gave birth to the ontological. We will even take a few steps further in this direction: even though it looks like ethical relationships are conceived through hyperbolizing of ontological ones, this is rather an optical illusion, because for human beings the authentic, fundamental ontology is morality itself. Levinas does not offer us a new morality, but a new interpretation of morality: "*a sense that is not measured by being and not being; but being on the contrary is determined on the basis of sense.*"[1]

[1] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence.* Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, Pennsylvania, 2000, p. 129.

For Levinas the true understanding of morality coincides with my presence in the world, and not with the way I declare what is moral for me or us – not only "I think", "I act", but even the simple "I am" is an answer to the appeal of the others. This is the reason Levinas has to justify himself for philosophizing about morality. He must speak, using the language of philosophy, whose roots are Greek and stem from dialectics. In the dialectical debate each of the arguing sides answers to its opponent with a counter-speech. But for Levinas, understanding of morality is not limited to forming or declaring of some moral maxims; the true understanding coincides with the everyday language, where deeds are the most important, not rhetoric. Besides, for Levinas the Other is not only an adversary, a competitor; neither is he simply a partner in some cooperation, or someone, with whom we try to reach a common perspective through conversation. *Autrui n'est donc que son visage.*

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But the Other's face is ambiguity itself. On the one hand, it fits its outlines, its shape, it is this nose, this mouth, this forehead, and on the other hand, it is "*the invisible in the visible*". These two meanings are not opposite – the otherness of the face is not logical, but meta-logical and meta-physical. The difference between the literal, objectified meaning and the metaphorical, ethical meaning suggests a transition from one level to another. Metaphysics suggests meaning "in excess". Or, otherwise said, the ethical suggests a dive in the depth, because the depth of my world coincides with the height, on which the Other is elevated.

Already Heidegger has announced inauthenticity of average everydayness and indifference. He has reconstructed a motive, which is not Greek, but stands at the foundation of monotheistic cultures: man is "a being, who heard the God's word". In the Biblical culture not only what one does, but even what one thoughts, is a reply to God's appeal. In Heidegger's philosophy, the place of the appealing agency is taken by Being, while in Levinas's – by the Other. Of course, this replacement suggests a different type of world-view and reordering of layers, as after a strong earthquake. Levinas does not reject the ontology, based on the distinction between beings and

Being, but instead asks is it fundamental. He strips ontology from its supremacy and hands it over to ethics. For him, ethics, and not ontology, is the first philosophy.

In ontology, both the Self and the Other receive their meaning within the horizon of being, comparable through the measure of the Third, that is, a mediating part – it could be the principle, the whole, the horizon, the institution, the Third person, etc. The ontological meanings are contextual and depend on their links in the system. But the Other has a meaning in itself and the absolute one. Of course, the Other is being. He is being-facing-death. Precisely this is why I should not leave him alone: I can reply to the appeal and to transform distance into proximity and knowledge into morality. But this does not mean that in proximity I have an ability to situate him within the horizons of (my) world – the Other constantly withdraws himself beyond. That is why, the Other has also a meaning of exteriority, of Transcendence. Levinas follows in the footsteps of his mentor Husserl, who expresses the idea that the Other is the condition of correctness of my world and that each transcendence, including the transcendence of the outer world, exists for me and is comprehensible to me only by virtue of the transcendence of the Other. But for Husserl both the Other and Transcendence are constituted in my immanence, while Levinas refuses to consider the Other as my Alter Ego. The Other is beyond, exteriority, the expression of his face shows a dimension of transcendence, which is not constituted by me. The Other is radically other. Meeting him I become aware of Infinity and in this way I am made to realize *my* own finitude. The difference, the most radical difference – the one which brings to life all other differences – is the difference between the infinite and finite. When facing the Other, who always exceeds the limits of my ideas and expectations, the world shrinks for me from its universal dimensions, common for everybody, to the dimensions of my own world. Then, I can no longer avoid the responsibility, which has fallen exclusively upon me and not upon somebody else.

Already Kant has warned us that when infinity enters the stage, we are facing antinomies. It seems Levinas agrees with him, but thinks that infinity is presented to us not through the effort to extend our conditional truth to the unconditional, but by virtue of our encounter with the Face of the Other. Let

us stress once again, the Face itself, however, is the basic ambiguity. „*The first word of the face is "Thou shalt not kill". It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.*"[2] The face of the Other causes all the controversy of experience. The contradiction, stemming from the Face, is created and described – if it can be spatialized at all – as the difference between the levels, at which I and the Other stand. *„The look with which the other faces the world, in its rectitude, means both its frankness and an authority not present in a simply logical alterity, which as a counterpart of the identity of facts and concepts, distinguishes one from another, or reciprocally opposes the notions of them, by contradiction or contrariety. The alterity of the other is the extreme point of the "thou shalt not kill" and, in me, the fear of all the violence and usurpation that my existing, despite the innocence of its intentions, risks committing. ... It is a responsibility that, without doubt, contains the secret of sociality"* [3]

My moral sensitivity coincides with the depth of my subjectivity – this is where the range of my actions is determined, the spectrum of my possibilities, the choice between them, the freedom to choose and act, the true scale of my projects and everything said and done by me in the life-world. In the face-to-face encounter, the Other questions my identity, the seizure of a certain territory by me, makes me doubt the right to habituate this place under the sun, shakes my confidence as an owner of property, be it some characteristics used for self-typology and integration into some kind or genus. Being for the Other, I am deprived of such an identity. But with the Saying (which is impossible without the said as well as without the speaker and the listener), I reaffirm myself as "me" and then can rediscover again my Self. From now on, the return to self, to self-consciousness and self- reflection, to objectification and identification, to seizure and claims for ownership and property, is inevitable. It is important to stress, however, that this rediscovering of one's self in the process of identification is not an end in it-

[2] Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 89.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. Diachrony and Representation. *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 169.

self, but rather a by-product of the reply to others. The approach towards other remains, but walking the way towards him/her the Self loses itself and finds itself again - already changed, already older. Despite itself. Having exhausted itself, serving the others.

Levinas suggests a reestablishment of the rights of heteronomy. Heterenomy had gone out of use, when Kant privileged autonomy. Someone might point out that namely Kant insisted that the maxim of my behavior should be coordinated with the others, in order to be laid down as a universal law. The difference between Kant and Levinas consists, first of all, in the fact that while Kant sets out from the Self, Levinas does so from the Other. If the maxim I follow as an expression of my will has the pretention of being an expression of the rationality of human nature at all, as it is according Kant's philosophy, this means, that it has to be imposed on others as valid in the same extent to them too. Such a pretention for establishing of a universal moral legislation, imposed on behalf of me onto the others, is rather dangerous. This is the way, in which, usually through laws, the others are subordinated and deprived of their independency. Law has been given the status of the ultimate and absolute value and goal. But, according to Levinas, it is not the law, but the defense of the right of the Other, which empowers me to act, questioning authority and supremacy, encouraging me to seek justice, calling for responsibility – for the Other. My behavior obtains meaning and direction not according to the law, which I have imposed on myself (and therefore on anybody else), but as an answer to the presence of the Other. Without consideration of and attention to the otherness of the Other, my freedom would be foolish spontaneity or would be characterized by instrumentalization of the others. Kant's imperative is not a remedy for these dangers, threatening to develop into malignant mutations. Of course, we cannot reject autonomy - the choice of one's acts on the level of life-world, consciousness, knowledge, determination. While autonomy is intrinsic to the Self, heteronomy stems from the Other. I do not have freedom to not hear the appeal, but I have freedom to say "yes" or "no", and to answer with "as far as I'm concerned…" Thus, autonomy itself has to be the answer to heteronomy and as such is nothing but taking in consideration the appeal of the Other – even before it is understood. The Other questions the spontane-

ity of my will, the caprices and changes of my mind, the egocentricity of my desires, the struggle for satisfaction, and all my ideas and truths. Precisely in this way the face invests reason, freedom and sociality in me. *„La presence d'Autrui – heteronomie priviligiee – ne heurte pas la liberte, mais l'investit"*[4]

Morality is not a response to violence, but to an appeal. In the presence of the Other there is an unarticulated and, we could say, an anonymous call in his encounter with me – apparently some inexplicable trust in me, that I will not leave him without reply, treating him like the objects around, that I will take into account his human presence – as if at this moment his destiny to be human or not depends on me. Subjectivity as moral sensitivity, being traumatic, is the suffering for the suffering of the Other and exactly this provokes my reply. But the true understanding, as we already mentioned, is not only in words, but in deeds. Namely because of this readiness to act the Self cannot stay without rest in an accusative "me', but receives the opportunity to be Self in a nominative, that is, to say "I". Autonomy does not imply that one should act as a sovereign, but rather that one should act in response of heteronomy which motivates him to decide more adequately and to choose his behavior in the urgency of the present, where the other is calling me. Shortly, the help – clothing, food, shelter, etc. – must be found in order to respond to "la sincerite de la fame et de la soif".

Levinas does not confine himself to the abstract humanism, where we state respect for the Other according to the universal law (Kant's imperative); the human community is not formed by multiplication of transcendental subjects, whose common feature is self-consciousness, constituted as "I think, accompanying all my ideas". For Levinas this type of humanism is not humane enough. The true humanism presupposes care for the other in all his particularity and even singularity. In the concreteness of the encounter with him as empirical and historically present being, the care goes along with respect for his otherness. This is a service to the Other, not subordination or slavery to him. It presupposes, however, the transformation of "Thou" into "He", "She", "It", "They" – the grammatical third persons, made topical by a certain categorization pattern. Then the Other is reduced

[4] Emmanuel Levinas. *Totalite et infini.* Kluwer Academic, 1992, p. 88.

to a being among other beings, to a being just like me. *"But the order of justice of individuals responsible for one another does not arise in order to restore that reciprocity between the I and its other; it arises from the fact of the third who, next to the one who is an other to me, is "another other" to me."*[5]

Reciprocity is a relation between the individuals, when they are compared through some common measure. The operation of comparison always suggests a Third party, playing the role of a standing-by observer of the moral relationship between the One and the Other. The unique and unequal, even the incomparable, individuals, are leveled and equalized thanks to the Third. From the position of the Third they are being judged, brought under certain rules, observed, controlled. Individuals become mutually exchangeable and replaceable only from the point of view of the one, who objectifies them. And only when they interiorize his perspective toward themselves and in this way got adhered to it, estranging themselves from one another, their relationships can be dubbed reciprocal – even to themselves. Thus, we all become audience in the spectacle, which is our life together. In multitude humans are deprived of their faces – they are present as anonymous, faceless, without possibility of say. In the totality of society power is always an asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship. It is brutal, despotic, when it deprives the "subordinates" of their independence, of their right to speak and consequently of any rights, reducing them to objects. And, quite the opposite, power is just, when it creates and maintains the political framework, facilitating moral relationships. But in this second case we use another word, that is, government. Political and ethical order are not independent and this is exactly why we speak that there is good or bad politics. The criterion is proximity or remoteness of social justice to morality.

It looks I have to stop here. It seems to me that the issue of justice is the hardest nut to crack. Teeth have been broken on it not only by politicians and revolutionists, but also by philosophers.

[5] Emmanuel Levinas. The Other, Utopia, and *Justice.Entre-Nous: Thinking of the Other*. Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 229.