

## **Self and Others**

### **Home as cradle of a non-violent relationship**

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The French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (Kaunas/Lithuania, 1906 – Paris/France, 1995) builds his philosophical work on a distressing thesis, which main lesson we did not yet fully learned: the other comes before the self. Indeed, this is empirical evidence which, until now, we did not intellectually assimilate and/or replicate into our daily practice.

Lévinas's thesis is quite clear. Every self, every subjectivity or individual comes always after the other, after the alterity (*alter*). The other comes first, and it is the other who claims the presence of the self and waits for him/her even before the self comes to existence. Indeed, it is the other who makes the self to be.

This thesis represents a major shift in the centuries old history of Western philosophy traditionally centered in the being (it has been an ontology), frequently focused on Man (recurrently translated into an anthropology), often committed to the self (developing an individualism). This self-centered philosophy has been – according to Lévinas – leading to violence, to the violence of the self-proclaimed sovereignty of the individual; and it is this same philosophy that impels the author to propose a new approach to the self, to the other, and to human relationships – which we consider to take place at home (the primary setting for the establishment and development of human relationships, the ones that tend to prevail along life). The “home”, for Lévinas, plays “the privileged role” of being the condition, and therefore, the commencement of human activity<sup>2</sup>.

This shift is also the drive for other crucial and equally surprising changes which widely characterize Lévinas's thought. Indeed, it is the Levinasian criticism of ontology that inaugurates the philosopher's refusal of the traditional Western philosophy<sup>3</sup> and paves the way to a distinctive and unique (though radical) way of thinking: ethics precedes ontology (and anthropology), responsibility (duties) comes before liberty (rights), and individuality is subsumed in relationships. For the philosopher, only the acknowledgment of his proposed inversion of these well-known realities can put an end

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1979: 152.

<sup>3</sup> E. Lévinas, in *Totality and Infinity* (1979), says that “metaphysics precedes ontology”, criticizing Western philosophy, and mainly Martin Heidegger (1979: 42-48).

to the history of violence of man over humanity throughout the centuries, can stop the aggressiveness of the self over the other. Lévinas considers that the traditional primacy of ontology in the history of Western philosophy expresses itself as a violent statement of the being, of Man, of the self. Only going back to a time, to a stage prior to ontology, and to the power of reason and knowledge that builds it, only moving away from ontology, beyond the Being, to an “otherwise than Being” (the title of his 1979 book), can lead us to refuse the logic of violence, to find a new logic, a logic of sensibility and affectivity, of generosity within relationships; can lead us to the primordial place of ethics, which is prior to ontology, just like (rejoining the Platonic philosophy) the Good is prior to the being. To Lévinas it is the Good that “elects” the being<sup>4</sup>.

Let us not forget that Emmanuel Lévinas is a Jewish philosopher, educated in the holy Talmudic readings and following the Torah, and who, although naturalized French and imprisoned in a labor camp for officers in 1940, lived the Second World War as a Jew: his Lithuanian family was murdered, his wife and daughter were hidden in France, and he was a witness of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Therefore, for Lévinas, violence among people was not just another theoretical issue of interest, and the recent Nazi erasure of God could not prevail. The establishment of conditions for the elimination of violence is crucial. From a Levinasian philosophy this requires Ethics to be the “First Philosophy” (*prima philosophia*), that is, the foundation or principle of all philosophical thought, and also the ground of the human condition. Briefly, ethics is presented as the origin of signification and understood as the first signification. Lévinas defines “ethics” as a “non-violent relationship”.

His work is indeed highly influenced by his life, although bringing a universalizable and timeless perspective to the self and to the other, to their relation, and to the needed conditions for a non-violent or ethical relationship. We could and should benefit from it, prolonging his thoughts in its implications and applying them to our present concerns, to our current restlessness. Although many critiques could be addressed to Lévinas from different philosophical points of view, we adopt his thought as a privileged perspective for our topic due to his original reflection on the self and the other, and to the advocacy of an ethical nature of human relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Lévinas, in *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, argues, on his own terms, the priority of the Good over the being (1974: 194-196).

Therefore, inspired by Lévinas, I will structure my reflection into three main points: the primacy of the other over the self (following this inversion of the most traditional and common perspective) which calls for a reflection upon the evolution of the philosophical perspective on the self and the other; one's identity as relation (pursuing and extending the shift on the dominant trend); and the *ethos* of the relation (recovering the most original meaning of ethics), which we can justifiably place in the home and thus restoring its specificity and uniqueness. Home is not primarily a physical, a material place but the origin of human relationships. It is the primacy of the other over the self – Lévinas's original main thesis – that moves the focus from individuality (or the individuals) to the relation (or the relationships between individuals), required for the elimination of violence, and which – we will stress – originally takes place at home. The home would, then, be the birth place and the crib of “non-violent relationships”, of ethics.