

*Phenomenological and/or
ethical approach in Emmanuel Lévinas's
philosophy of language*

– Doctoral Thesis –

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BACKGROUND

The views of the commentators concerning the relations of Lévinas to phenomenology are all but unison. Depending on whether reading him from the vantage point of the Greek or from the Jewish tradition, more or less significance may be attributed to the phenomenological method in the evolving of this individual system of thinking. Relating to both traditions, and/or questioning one from the direction of the other is a constitutive element of Lévinas's philosophy that also defines its methodological basis. Interpreting it therefore can not merely consist of its evaluation from the direction of one of the above traditions or from the other. What is possible and indeed necessary is the demonstration – not overlooking the fusion and separation of the above, i.e. their chiasm – of the amorphous, incessantly changing field that is being constantly re-made on the course of the mutual overprojection of the Greek and Jewish traditions.

Approaches that – diverting from earlier interpretations emphasizing the metaphysical-ethical sides of Lévinas's philosophy – were examining the role of the phenomenological method in the formation of that philosophy and so offered a new point of departure for the interpretation of this unique mental accomplishment had become ever more frequent by the

end of the 1990's. It is beyond doubt that the moving of the Lévinas interpretations to this direction were influenced significantly by phenomenological researches of the 90's. By the results of researching passive synthesis, intersubjectivity, time, body and senses, language etc, the propositions defining Lévinas's philosophy were put into a new light which included the constant problematizing the methods of phenomenology.

One of the first – in my view most consistent and at the same time most creative – follower of the phenomenology of Lévinas was Yasuhiko Murakami. He, departing from the investigation of the problem of sensuality in the early writings of Lévinas, demonstrated the phenomenological aspects of that system in his doctoral thesis titled *Lévinas phénoménologue*. The problematic of passive synthesis, including its advancement by Marc Richir, had a defining role in his approach. It was this that enabled Murakami to interpret phenomenologically the ontological event of formation – or to use Lévinas's term hypostasis; the becoming a name.

Resulting from re-projecting the phenomenological way of questioning rejuvenated by Richir to the system of thought of Lévinas – the area that with all the undeniable novelty of the so-called metaphysical-ethical proposition was fading to the background – that may also be described as the problematic of

experience, i.e. of the problematic characterizable as of the thriving of the purely sensual, is being focused on in its entire depth.

Besides Murakami there were others whose interpretations should not be overlooked. Rudolf Bernet, Bernhard Waldenfels, László Tengelyi, Francis Guibal, Étienne Feron, Félix Duportail, Michel Dupuis, Rudolf Calin, Elena Bovo and yet others also contributed significantly to the exposition of the basic issues of Lévinas's phenomenology. I attribute nevertheless to works of Murakami an emphatic importance. This is due to the great help that the model he supplied signifies in the overcoming the various levels of problem, serving therefore constantly as something like an ever available crutch to lean on. Murakami in my view attempted not simply the thematic expounding and phenomenological interpretation of one problem or another but relying on works of Marc Richir he also worked out these tasks' methodology, pointing thereby to interpretative possibilities that reorder the positing of problems that are definitive from the standpoint of the system of Lévinas.

AIM, METHODS

The present dissertation attempts to reconstruct Lévinas's phenomenology of language. I was relying in this task on methodology worked out by Murakami, not overlooking while so doing the methodological aspects of Richir's linguistic phenomenology. It departs from the hypothesis that for Lévinas language represents not only the condition of possibility for the working of ethics, a language without a language as it were, but that based on his work, the process of linguistic phenomenalisation can also be described. The question of language represents not only an aspect of the relationship between Self and Other, or a problem subsumed to ethics, but deserves a separate discussion.

The phenomenological discussion of the question of the possessing significance is inseparable in the approach I accomplished from the classic themes of phenomenology, i.e. from the questions of intentionality, experience and sensibility in particular. My investigation refers back besides concurrently to the field of epoché which – as it will be seen – means at Lévinas the bracketing phenomenology in a way that is risen above the Husserlian sense. Or to put it differently, the reconstruction of Lévinas's linguistic phenomenology offers an opportunity to an expounding on the possibility of questioning

phenomenology from within. This way the limits of phenomenology can be thematized along the path defined by Lévinas.

THESIS

1.1. The point of departure was Lévinas's relation to the phenomenology of Husserl, more exactly his criticism that the latter remained a philosophy of the subject. Although the discussion of intentionality attempted to reflect on relationship with the individual, the metaphysical presuppositions could not be surpassed.

1.2. The problem of phenomenology can be reconstructed based on Lévinas's discussion of impersonal being and on the phenomenological description of the sensual in his early studies. These amount to an interpretation of intentionality that addresses the questions raised by objectifying intentionality, especially the problem of the sensual becoming the victim of the subject's constitutive activities, and phenomenology thus becoming trapped in idealism.

1.3. The concept of intentionality can be further explicated in two ways. The first possibility is to connect the problem of subjectivity with that of passivity; relating these to each other also widens the possibilities for experiencing the self.

1.4. The other possibility is to focus on the concept of the horizon, which allows us to surpass the objectifying conception of intentionality, and opens the further possibility of redefining the relationship between ethics and the phenomenology of language. Language is no longer simply the medium in which the ethical relationship is realised, but, reconnected with the dimension of anonymity, the process of the creation of meaning can also be described.

2.1. The relationship between Self and Other, which can also be described as a reversal of the intentional relation, constitutes a condition of possibility for constructing meaning, and deconstructing fixed meanings trapped in totality. We must also bear in mind the fact that the intersubjective relationship surpasses linguistic phenomenalisation, and thus also determines it. Hence the possibility to interpret Lévinas's understanding of language as an ethical linguistic philosophy.

2.2. The creation of meaning is facilitated by its ambivalence originating in the tension between the undefined defining role of the passive dimension and the constitutive activity of the subject, insofar as the possibility of questioning from outside also means that the world constituted by the subject cannot be frozen into a timeless outlook detached from reality. The relationship with the outside represents the

functioning of symbolic institutionalization, as well as the possibility to question the process of codification, and to reveal the passive dimension of the creation of meaning.

2.3. In the first major work, the reception of the Other is in fact the reception of the meaning coming from the Other, that is a speech situation. The meaning of the thematized world and the meaning of the Other, of presence is simultaneously created in speech. The latter is important primarily because when questioning the constitutive activity of the mind, it dislodges the world “possessed” by the self from its fixed position, calling attention upon the possibility and responsibility of to re-thematizing the world. These two meanings can only be separated based on the performativity of speech.

3.1. With the emergence of closeness as a central topic, it becomes possible to interpret the problem of sensuality, discussed in the earlier studies, in the context of the relationship with the Other. This implies a reinterpretation of the approach to infinity as well, defined no longer by the infinite distance of transcendence only, but also by the face of the Other reflecting the tension between impassable distance and the directness and closeness of encounter.

3.2. From the point of view of the phenomenology of language, the ambivalence of closeness is manifested in the

reflections on the trace. The trace withdrawn in the trace is inscribed by the act of withdrawal into the very context it was aiming at invalidating as context. It is inscribed into the web of signs the possibilities of interpretation of which it apparently eliminated, but paradoxically by this very gesture also secured.

3.3. Diachronic analyses unequivocally reveal the coincidence of the linguistic and ethical relationships, as well as the fact that attempts at distinguishing the two are doomed to fail as long as we disregard the fact that their relationship is not part of a horizontal order. With diachrony undoing the temporal horizon of processes or of totality, the ethical relationship between Self and Other oversteps the bounds of the absolute present, and becomes the incident of the verbalisation of utterance.

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