

The Idea of God in Emmanuel Levinas' Thought

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Resumo

Este ensaio escrito durante minha permanência nos EUA aborda um aspecto da obra de Emmanuel Levinas: sua reflexão sobre Deus. O divino para Levinas não deveria ser pensado a partir da ontologia que, segundo o filósofo está na raiz de toda teologia ocidental, mas da ética - a verdadeira fonte para a transcendência. Outro aspecto abordado é a conexão entre a reflexão de Levinas sobre Deus e o pensamento judaico tradicional e moderno.

Abstract

This essay deals with one aspect of Emmanuel Levinas' oeuvre: his ideas on God. For Levinas the divine should not be thought from the point of view of ontology. According to him, this way of thinking is the root of all Western Theology. Ethics is the true source of transcendence. Another aspect of Levinas' oeuvre approached by this essay is the connection between Levinas' thought and traditional and modern Jewish thought.

"This is a long way from a warm and tangible communion with the Divine and from the desperate pride of the atheist. It is a complete and austere humanism, linked to a difficult adoration!"

Emanuel Levinas

Metaphysics and the Other

The thought of Emanuel Levinas is one of the most suggestive and complex of contemporary philosophy. From an ethical point of view, Levinas thought is a radical humanist response to the process of dehumanization that took place in the 20th century. The complexity of his thought comes from the fact that the philosopher has a bold agenda that in order to be carried on it needs to overturn the

core of all Western philosophy since its Greek origins. This is indeed a very hard endeavor and it makes his philosophy so difficult for anyone that like me is a beginner in his ideas. The present paper will deal with one aspect of Levinas philosophy: the idea of God in Levinas' philosophy.

When we turn to the problem of religion and God and their relation to philosophy in Levinas' reflection it is possible to perceive certain extreme reluctance from Levinas to address this problem. Levinas attempt is to refer to God from a point of view that goes beyond the shell of being. Paradoxically, it is possible to define Levinas position on this theme as a theological atheism, without any reference to the so called theology the death of God.

If would be possible to describe on one foot the direction of Levinas philosophical research, it would be necessary to say that he tried to separate metaphysics from ontology as the first philosophy. Referring to this subject, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1979, p. 43) writes:

This would lead to an infinite regression if this return itself remained an ontological movement, an exercise of freedom, a theory. Its critical intention then leads it beyond theory and ontology: critique does not reduce the other to the same as does ontology, but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same-which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same-is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology.

From this passage is possible to see that Levinas effort is not dismiss metaphysics and its endeavor as a central philosophical concern but to change the core of what is the focus of metaphysical concern. Instead of ontology, as far as metaphysics is interested in transcendence, the focus of the metaphysical endeavor should be, for Levinas, the relationship with the Other, that is. Ethics. Therefore, the metaphysical quest receives a completely different connotation.

The realm of being or ontology is not completely dismissed but it loses its royalty as first philosophy. In the realm of being the Other is reduced as a same. It means that concretely it is an attempt to leave the realm of being in order to recognize the different. Levinas major concern was to keep multiplicity and, therefore, separation and differentiation. It means also an attempt to find another way to refer to transcendence and to subjectivity. Nevertheless, the relation with the Other is a "relation without relation" (Levinas, 1979, p. 79). The Other is never reduced to the Same, consequently it remaining unknowable, outside of the totality of the Same,

that is the realm of being. The epiphany of the Other calls egology (Levinas, 1979, p.44-6) into question. The “I” can no longer live in the fantasy of a sole possession of the world. The freedom and power of the Same are questioned. This is because the Other cannot be hold, resists be possessed in the moment when the I encounters the Other. The Other is otherwise than being.

For Levinas, the Other is found also in the other person whose existence seats a demand upon me, an ethical command that I read in the relation with the Other. This Other is in the path or trace of transcendence which, for Levinas, is construed in terms of a God who cannot be made present. Ethics is first philosophy but is not a representation of God, hence Ethics is also not a replacement to Ontology. Nevertheless it has primacy over Ontology. God’s infinite distance is the ground for the realization of human possibility. Levinas has opened the necessity for philosophy through the paradox of the Other as being in the path of transcendence, but of transcendence also being in the path or trace of the Other. The idea of God in Levinas is built from this framework of critique towards ontology and from the assumption that the core of the metaphysical quest, that is the desire for transcendence, can only be achieved through ethical praxis and awareness.

Idolatry and Atheism

In *God, Death, and Time* a book which consists of transcripts of lecture courses that Levinas delivered in 1975 – 1976, his last year the Sorbonne the philosopher makes a sharp critique of what he called onto-theo-logy, which is the characterization of God as belonging to the realm of being. “Western thought consists in understanding being only as the foundation of beings” (Levinas, 1993, p.122). According to this scheme the comprehension of being and its truth has been understood as relate to an universal foundation of beings, by a supreme being that is for Western thought God. Therefore the way to think being becomes a attempt to comprehend God. Levinas (1993, p.123) writes: “The European philosophy of being becomes theology”. In those pages, Levinas argues that Heidegger demonstrates that since Aristotle onto-theo-logy has been the focus of philosophy, although in Totality and Infinite he agues that Socrates already brings this some hints of the metaphysical quest as grounded in the realm of being (Levinas, 1979, p.43). This is, according to Levinas, the way that Heidegger understands how God came into philosophy. “Heidegger’s thesis consists in posing that being is at the origin of all meaning. This immediately implies that one cannot think beyond being.” (Levinas, 2002, p.126) Nevertheless, Levinas challenges this view by writing that the onto-theo-logical is the wrong way to think about God. Even in West, according to Levinas, some philosophers such as Plato and Plotinus argued that it is possible to think of a God beyond the realm of being.

What is so wrong in thinking God in the realm of being? In the essay “A Religion for Adults” Dealing with a comparison between monotheism and myth Levinas (1990, p.14) writes:

The God of the Jews is not the survivor of mythical gods. Abraham, the father of the believers, was the son of a seller of idols, according to one apologist. Profiting from the absence of Tereh, he apparently broke them all, saving the largest in order that it could assume, in the eyes of his father responsibility for the massacre. But when Tereh came back he could not accept this incredible version, knowing that there is no idol in the world which can destroy the other idols. Monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred.

The God of ontology, the Supreme Being among beings, is regarded by Levinas as an idol. Monotheism cannot be just a reduction in the number of deities, but a complete other take on the Divine. Regarding a God which incarnates in the realm of being, Levinas argues, Judaism is atheism. Judaism is for Levinas an *a-theological* religion. An idol is an empty entity that appears to be alive but it is not. In the same way onto-theo-logy appears to be the essence of philosophy by arguing that God cannot be thought beyond being. It is referring to this Supreme Being that reins beyond the human realm and beyond all ethics that Jewish monotheism for Levinas is surpassing and incorporating atheism. It is not atheism in a mechanical way, in other words, for Levinas atheism on the one hand is just a negative step like an antithesis of which monotheism is the synthesis.

On the other hand Levinas will define atheism in a complete different way. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas (1979, p.58) writes: "By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I." Atheism means in his philosophical language the separation that a being maintains in itself without participating in the being from which it was separated. God is not a immanent totality in which all beings participate but a transcendent other that the I encounters. Levinas atheism cannot be misunderstood as the denying God. It is a philosophical new definition of atheism that is used to set a boundary between God beyond being and the mythological Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is still in the ontological realm of Same. The metaphysical other is not a formal other that can be reduced to be the Same, but it is the absolute other. God for Levinas is beyond theology. The relationship with a non theological God presupposes language. Levinas (1979, p.40) proposes "to call 'religion' the bond that is established between the sane and the other without constituting a totality".

Transcendence and Infinity

The idea of infinite in Levinas is related to what is beyond the possibility of being known. The unknown and the known are always poles apart. Nevertheless, the unknown also refers to that which can by no means be known, that is the unknowable. The unknowable will never be part of that which can be known. That which can never be known must be and has always been unknowable. Its unconditional alterity is always beyond the self's possibility of grasping. Indeed, it is absolutely

Other. The unknown is infinite, that is to say infinitely able of stepping away from the advance of the self. What is unknowable and what is potentially knowable are both integrated within the infinity of the unknown. In its infinity, God is the unknowable. God can never become known. God is always beyond what can be known. Since what can be known is part of Being and God is completely other to being, God, is absolutely other to the known. If God were the yet unknown God would have the potential of being known. God would be in the realm of Being. The unknowable is unknown because it is beyond Being. Levinas more lengthily scrutinizes the infinite, unknowable in *Totality and Infinity*.

In his book *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas (1979, p.45) states that Infinite is the best term for the absolute other, for God. Infinity refers to a concept that is beyond human comprehension. The human mind is incapable of grasping infinity. The term infinity is a finite signification of a concept that goes beyond the boundaries of signification and knowledge. The expression absolute other points to that which is beyond the realm of being. The absolute other is absolutely alterity in relation to all of being (Cf. Levinas, 1979, p.74-5). The absolute other is concept that exceeds the bounds of its signification. The absolute other is beyond totality. The levinasian absolute other is not a non-being and cannot be consequential of negating the idea of being. Thus one cannot say that for Levinas God is nothing. According to Levinas, Non-Being is related to the idea of Being and depends on the idea of Being for its source. Consequently, Non-Being is not absolutely other to Being. Non-Being is resultant of Being and is an element of what can be known.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas (1998, p.3-5) maintain that the otherwise than being is otherwise to all that is being and all that is not being. It is not the same as the negation of being into non-being. Plato's idea of a not being is derived from the idea of being and needs the idea of being for its apprehension. The philosophical quest for being and not being cannot show the way to the otherwise than being. The concept of otherwise than being is not negation of being. The otherwise than being is otherwise to everything that can be derived from the realm of being.

The idea of infinity or an infinity that neither plays a role in the finite realm seems to be a constant tendency in Levinas. The infinite that Levinas refers to is beyond everything that humankind is able of knowing. Levinas (1979, p. 37, 42-9) argues that the idea of infinity is an "ideatum" to refer to that which cannot be included by any signification. In levinasian language it is a saying without a said that comes from the philosophical interest from being to what is otherwise than being (Levinas, 1998, p.5-9). No one will ever know whatsoever infinity may be. God for Levinas does seem to be similar to the concept of personal God of Western religions.

According to Levinas (1979, p.53-60), God is better worshipped in silenced without any sense of pioussness. Since his God does not relate with the world it does not need to be worshipped with prayers. For Levinas terms like infinity are less problem-

atic when used to illustrate the beyond being than the term God. Infinity does not have any suggestion of the common religious images credited to God.

Elohim and Ein Sof

Dealing with the concepts of Divine in “In the Image of God, According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner” (Levinas, 1994, p.151-67), an essay dedicate to the teachings of the Lithuanian Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhim (1749 – 1821), Levinas seems to clarify some of the possible Jewish roots of his own idea of God. For those one that re used to think the Jewish God in Christian or Aristotelic terms of a Divinity that is found in the realm of being, Levinas ideas may sound as a major depart from Jewish tradition. Perhaps their surprise is to see in traditional texts positions that are similar to Levinas. Of course one may argue that Levinas commentary is already biased by his own ideas. Nevertheless the point here is to show that Levinas does not see his own ideas about God as a radical departure from tradition or as a major *hidush*. It is for him the necessary consequence of presenting the Jewish God in Modern terminology.

Levinas starts his commentary on Rabbi Volozhin’s *Nefesh ha’Hayyim (The Soul of Life)* by showing the little direct influence of Western philosophy in the book. Perhaps the only distant Western influences are of Neo-Platonism, Aristotelic and Gnostic origin. In other words, philosophically the work is closer to medieval philosophy than to modern Western thought. Nevertheless, *Nefesh ha’Hayyim* deals with the Divine in term of its significance to man, what is remarkably close to modern perspective. “The humanity of man in *Nefesh ha’Hayyim* is understood not in the light of the rational animality of the Greeks but in the light of the biblical notion of man created in the image of God.” (Levinas, 1994, p.156). The term used in the biblical passage is Elohim. The name Elohim is associated, according to Levinas, with creation *ex-nihilo*. It means the being of man associated with what is beyond being. Elohim that is according to rabbinic tradition a name that denotes God as impersonal and boundless is associated by Levinas with the soul of the universe. The very idea of soul of the universe is a concept of Neo-Platonic origin. Plotinus is the first philosopher, that in his attempt to solve some of Plato’s contradiction, comes to the idea of a God beyond the realm of Being. The Volozhiner was not aware of this Neo-Platonic influence, that permeates Jewish mysticism, but Levinas (1994, p.154) was indeed very aware. In other levinasian texts the philosopher explains his own idea of an infinite beyond being as based on Plato. A very interesting question for further research would be the influence of Neo-Platonism in Levinas’ idea of God. Another example of this influence is the idea of *hipostasys* that is appropriated by Levinas in his writings. This is also an idea of Neo-Platonic origing. In this sense Levinas (2002, p.51-4) thought represents not only a translation of Jewish tradition to Western philosophical language but also a modern coming back of Neo-platonic thought in philosophy.

Another remarkable example of Neo-Platonic influence in Rabbi Volozhim, and through Volozhim in Levinas, is the Talmudic expression quote by Levinas (1994, p.162) from Nefesh ha'Hayyim that says that "God has no place in the world, it is the world that has a place in God". Levinas (1994, p.162) explains that this expression should be read in a radical way meaning that God is beyond the realm of being but He is "the condition of all being and is not, moreover, in his geometrical essence, affected by that which fills him." In other words, God is infinitely beyond all being. In this way He is called by Jewish mystic tradition by a name which is not a name: Ein Sof, the In-finite. In the same way that Levinas' God is 'described' as the Infinite Unknowable Otherwise than Being who is beyond names the Ein-Sof is described. This is the God beyond onto-theo-logy.

Levinas, Volozhim, Kabbalah and Neo-Platonism have a lot in common in terms of their notion of divine. This divine cannot be mechanically mistaken as a fabrication of human mind that only resides in the inter-human relationship. If God can only be encountered in the I – Thou dialogue is because the Divine is metaphysically transcendental, not because God is immanent to the inter-human. Differently from Buber's conception, it is not a symmetric dialogue. The Other metaphysically commands us. Because is dialogical, the core of this metaphysical relation is ethics.

Levinas, Heschel and Ethics

It is remarkable that two of the most important Jewish philosophers of the second half of the 20th century, Heschel and Levinas, whose lives were marked by the Holocaust became deeply aware of the necessity of a radical humanistic response against the modern dehumanizing tendencies. It is also interesting that their source of inspiration is deeply religious and by different ways based on Jewish mysticism. The central teaching of Jewish mysticism is not perceived in theological magical terms but in its ethical dimension. Both built their philosophies as critiques towards post war modern Western civilization

Heschel's ethics is radical for being based on religious principles that require the whole man. The searching for God in Heschel's teaching is connected with the study and the practice of *mitzvot*, and also with the commitment for the sanctification of the human being. Religion to be real must turn toward both sides: the divine and the human. In this ethics the religious man, the *mensch*, that in the mature writings Heschel also he calls pious men finishes for mixing the way of study and mitzvot with the way of sanctification of the divine image in the other. The humanized action occupies all the dimensions of men's deeds. The humanized action, praised by Heschel, aims the redemption of men from their current historical situation.

Heschel (1996, p.231) criticizes modern man for his incapacity to feel the urgency in reencounter the dignity of human being that was constantly offended in the XX

century: “We are a generation that has lost the capacity for outrage. We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society all are involved in what some are doing. *Some are guilty, all are responsible*”.

But modern man is alienated, according to Heschel, of his capacity to feel and to search transcendence. He, the modern man doubts the possibility of being the agent of his own humanization. This humanization proposed by Heschel does not aim a pre-established model of man. It aims the continuity of the construction of human being, whom modern societies had neglected. The accomplishment of the humanity, however, is not something seen or proven. Heschel’s proposal for contemporary man is that he shall make a leap of action. Instead of believing and trying to fit himself in a pre-manufactured model of man, he should search the ineffable beyond any model. It is by acting humanly that man finds the divine way to his own redemption.

Levinas ethical calling is also based on awareness to God. In “A Religion for Adults” the philosopher relates, like Heschel, the notion of ethical behavior to the way of experiencing God in Judaism. “By experiencing the presence of God through one’s relation to man. The ethical will appear in Judaism as an exceptional relation: in it, contact with an external being, instead of compromising human sovereignty, institutes and invests it.”(Levinas, 1990, p.16). This religious way of experiencing transcendence in relation o God becomes a way for the ego to go beyond itself not only in relation to the Other but in the same way towards man’s other.

The mitzvah, especially the ethical one is the core of what means the knowledge of God. “God is merciful, which means: Be merciful like Him. The attributes of God are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative.” (Levinas, 1990, p.17). The attributes of God are not theological claims about the nature of God, what would be if they were indicative of some kind Super Being. Levinas claims that facing the Other is to hear an imperative commandment. There is no reward for doing the mitzvah. “To know God is to know what must be done.” (Levinas, 1990, p.17). The bond between the self consciousness of the individual and the awareness towards God is translated as full and austere responsibility “Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God. Ethics is an optic, such that everything I know of God and everything I can hear of His word and reasonably say to him must find and ethical expression.” (Levinas, 1990, p.17). Like Heschel, for Levinas responsibility is the teaching of deep religious experience. This is an agadah not only for one branch of Judaism; this is the only way for Judaism and religion as a whole to still relevant during the present crisis of modernity.

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