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**Hundred Years of Responsibility:
Life and Infinity of Emmanuel Lévinas (1906 – 1995)**

Emmanuel Lévinas, (January 12, 1906 – December 25, 1995), Russia-born French-speaking Jewish philosopher. He was born in Kovno (Lithuania, Russia Empire), where his father has a bookshop. Lévinas had received religious Jewish education. He kept an interest to Jewish philosophy all his life and after World War II he took the post of director of the Oriental Israelite Normal School, where he lectured (1946 – 1962) and published many books on investigation of Talmud.¹ But nevertheless he became famous as a phenomenologist and ethical thinker with his research in the University of Paris at Nanterres (1962 – 1973) and the University of Paris-Sorbonne (1973 – 1976).

In 1915 Russian government expelled the Jews of Lithuania and Lévinas's family was compelled to move to Kharkov (Ukraine, Russian Empire) and he entered high school, where he acquaint himself with ethical ideas of Russian writers Nikolay Gogol, Anton Chekhov, Lev Tolstoy, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. The last one has the most intensive influence on both Lévinas's ethical doctrine and metaphysics of Lev Shestov and Mikhail Bakhtin,² whose books he also read in original. Lévinas developed Dostoevsky's idea of responsibility for all; it is possible to apply following quotation from "The Brothers Karamazov" to describe Lévinas's ethical outlook: "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others". Also Bakhtin's famous idea that "To be human means to communicate dialogically... therefore, a dialogue with the other will never over"³; this sounds to be very closed to Lévinas's thought: to recognize the priority of the other is the sole way to become the human subject. So the dialogue with invisible other is the origin of subjectivity and a path to infinity of being. Lévinas's idea that one constitutes oneself as a human being only in an endless dialogue with invisible other seems to be common both for existentialism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis of XX Century.

Lévinas's family was forced to leave Russia because of anti-Semitism of Civil War 1918 – 1922 and in 1923 he settled in France, where he enrolled at the University of Strasbourg, where he firstly studied Latin, French and German, and lately turned to contemporary philosophy. At that time he interested in intuitive cognition and began research Henri Bergson and Edmund Husserl. Lévinas irrevocably became faithful disciple of phenomenology, when has spent 1928-29 academic years in Freiburg (Germany), where Husserl lectured. Since the defense of his Ph.D. thesis "Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology" (1930), which won the *Prix de l'Institute* from the University of Strasbourg, Lévinas has become the leader of French phenomenology. In his further researches on dialogical ethics he combined phenomenological method with religious intention to analyze infinity of human being.

At the same time in Freiburg he met one of the key philosophers Martin Heidegger, whose "Being and Time" has been published in 1927 and already has been recognized as one of the main book in

western metaphysics. Meanwhile Lévinas did not share his conclusion and kept his own outlook. Against Heidegger, Lévinas believed that there is a subject, whose identity reduced neither to his being in the world and his environment nor historical objectivity nor to clear thought without ethical position and ability of sensation. Because only sensible person could make ethical valuation, choice and response. To exist in a dialogue with the other one should have a responsibility, i.e. ability to response. Lévinas considered subject to have a unique experience of responsibility to the other one; and this is the sole true human condition. Lévinas moves the Freudian question into ethical field: who is speaking? Or what does it mean to be oneself, when one's desire is alienated to the other? Lévinas describes the relation to the Other as a responsibility, therefore he is also interested in, who has ability to response? Or who is responding? Or in other words, who is the addressee of subject's speech?

On the one hand, Lévinas turned from Heidegger's fundamental ontology to ethics of real relation to the other person and transcendent Other that is God; he interested in how to be a subject rather than what being is. If the philosophers before Lévinas looks for the truth, he called up for the "searching after truth", searching for ethical position in the being. Therefore Lévinas argued "ethics as first philosophy" and considered that only in the ethical relation subject encounters with a radical difference of the other; he interested in practical question, how to live with the other and how to live in good. It is possible to describe Lévinasian contribution to phenomenology as a turn from Heidegger's being-in-the-world to ethical being with the other.

On the other hand, Lévinas considered other to be not only other person, but as a source of spiritual relation that beyond imaginary identification just with the psychological features of any other person or one's own image. Subject could find an alterity of his own self in an act of reflection and it could become the other in self-consciousness. Contrary to Buber, Lévinas insists on asymmetry of intersubjective relations: dialogue is not a harmonic interaction, but ethical activity in other's service. The other also is not only an object of the self or opponent in a conversation, but the infinite source of constitution the subject's identity and ability to be a human. The other's priority over the self also is not tyrannical dominance, but the donation of spiritual law of human soul.

Like Lacan, Lévinas make the question of human identity to be rather ethical, than ontological one. Although Lévinas's teacher of psychology Charles Blondel was radical anti-Freudist and Lévinas himself quoted Freud too seldom, his turn from ontology to ethics astonishingly coincided with psychoanalytic effort of the same time. Well-known Lacan's thesis "The I is the Other" sounds to be consonant with Lévinas's conclusions from "Otherwise Than Being" (1974): "I am you, if I am I".⁴ The other person comes first in the being of the subject and subjectivity was formed in and through one's subjectedness to the other. Therefore human self is the gift of the other and measure of one's relation to the other.

Lévinas also did not derive moral norms from a consciousness, and allocates ethics out of common sense and one's personal mind. Source of ethical discourse is the relation to the other, whom one's own the desire is alienated to. In Lévinas for the first time we meet de-centred subject of ethical valuation and

social action, that looks to be very similar to Lacan's one. Lévinas was both questioning the development of ethical discourse from one's own mind and doubting that all the values are common for all the people. So many people so many ethical judgments. Lévinas was the first ethic, who both argues that consciousness as not a central part of human being (when following medieval Jewish mystics) and introduce a desire as a central term of ethical vocabulary just in first pages of his main work "Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority" ("Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité", 1961). Lévinas's idea of desire that is "out of alienative cognition" is sounds to be closed to psychoanalytic thesis that reason of desire is out of subject's mind and structures his life. In Spinoza's manner, Lévinas considers the law of desire that belong to the other to be the main force in human development.

Further reading on Lévinas biography:

[1] Lescourret M.-A., *Emmanuel Lévinas*. Paris: Flammarion, 1994;

[2] Malka S., *Emmanuel Lévinas: la vie et la trace*. Paris: J-C Lattès, 2002;

¹ [1] Lévinas E. *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1968; [2] Lévinas E. *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1977; [3] Lévinas E. *L'au-delà du Verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1982; [4] Lévinas E. *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Les Éditions du Minuit, 1996;

² On Lévinas's encounter with Bakhtin see: [1] Atterton P. "Every one of us is responsible and I most of all": *The Influence of Dostoyevsky on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas*.// *Emmanuel Lévinas and the 19th Century*. Ed. by Donald Wehrs and David Haney. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2005; [2] Eskin M. *Ethics and Dialogue: In the Works of Lévinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, Celan*, London: Open University Press, 2000;

³ Bakhtin M.M. *Problemi poetiki Dostoevskogo* [*The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*]. Moscow, 1929. – p. 294;

⁴ Lévinas E. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974. – p. 99;

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