

Ethics as optics: Levinas' perspective in contemporary philosophy

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Contemporary researches in ethics propose a model of subjectivity as an indigenous process that functions outside of established ethical regulations and limitations. Nowadays ethics is faced by the question what codes and social norms should be demolished in order to transform the subject into the ethical subjectivity. Postmodernist investigations articulate moral behaviour as not corresponding to assigned norms but as a product of immanent personality and as a principle of stylized behaviour. In a certain sense, within this context of questions the strategy how relations between the subjectivity and the other are investigated is similar to that one of the subjectivity. The subjectivity is presented as individual hermeneutic experience directed towards the awareness and organization of the self. We might employ the term *aesthetics of existence* or *techniques of the self* to describe the dynamics of change within the so called ethical subject. Ethical concerns abound in contemporary philosophy: Deleuze's ethics of immanence, Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference and Foucault's ethical relationship of care-for-self. This new definition of subject is seen to fade the development of new modes of ethical behavior. Contemporary discourse about ethics and the ethical discusses desires and values but not morality.

The modern philosophy has made promising efforts to think subjectivity from a perspective of creation and freedom: the subjectivity have been thought of as practicing the self, constituting the self as a demiurge of its own life. But even the most innovative efforts to liberate subjectivity from dogmas of ethics has shown that postmodernism lost what holds together individual, social, and cultural life. It was more and more frequently said that postmodernism had forgotten everything that makes ethics and morality possible. In this context Levinas endeavours to explore the dimension of ethical inquiry.

In the preface of *totality and Infinity* we find a very striking statement: "ethics as optics"

"The eschatological vision breaks with the totality of wars and empires being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality. The first "vision" of eschatology (hereby distinguishes from the revealed opinions of positive religions) reveals the very possibility of eschatology, that is, the breach of the totality, the possibility of a *signification without a context*. The experience of morality does not proceed from this vision – it *consummates* this vision; ethics is an optics". (TI, 23)

It is a "vision" without image deprived of totalizing and objectifying capacity which indicates an image without derivation from "principles". It is a "vision" without image

which presupposes me, metaphorically speaking, “to keep my eyes closed”. "Optics" means a special kind of "refraction" where ethical perspective which does not come from the appearances of "things"; this “vision” indicates an image without derivation from.

Indeed, the attempt to bind the ethical to the visual is already a crucial project. It does point out a deconstruction of the language of the ethical inquiry as well as the whole philosophical discourse. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas does not give any further explanation of “ethics as optics”. The question is still open - how do the “vision”, the “ethical” and the philosophical language relate with each other?

I will attempt to answer this question by taking up Levinas’ discussion of the said and the said and the concept of authentic vision (*AugIenblick*).

Literature:

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