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Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy



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## Levinas and the Project of Jewish Philosophy\*

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In "violence and metaphysics"<sup>1</sup>, Jacques Derrida undertakes to understand and to weigh the import of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas by resituating it within the perspective of Western philosophy as the latter defines itself in relation to its Greek origins. But, while the Jewish dimension of this thought is well underscored in Derrida's essay, the criterion for this Judaic element remains undetermined, despite the fact that Derrida delineates its boundaries: "It is neither a Jewish theology, nor a Jewish mysticism (it could even be understood as the challenge to theology and mysticism). Nor is it a dogmatism or a religion, or even a moral philosophy. In the last analysis, it never derives its authority from Hebraic theses or Hebraic texts"<sup>2</sup>. Derrida, in fact, comes to define Levinasian thought as "the explanation and reciprocal overflowing of two origins and of two historical speeches, Hebraism and Hellenism. Does not a new momentum, a certain strange communality, announce itself in Levinas' thought, which would not be the spiraled return of Alexandrian promiscuity?"<sup>3</sup>. Our query will continue that of Derrida but we will pursue our investigation not from the starting point of the Graeco-European philosophical heritage but, symmetrically, from the starting point of Hebraism and, more specifically from the starting point of that "Alexandrian promiscuity" to which Derrida refers and that we,

\* Translated by Prof. Annette Aronowicz (Franklin & Marshall College).

<sup>1</sup> In Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*. Le Seuil, Paris 1967. Abbreviations of Levinas' works cited here: EE: *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris, ed. de la revue Fontaine, 1947; EDE: *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris, Vrin, 1949, 2ème édition, 1967; TI: *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. La Haye M. Nijhoff, 1961; DL: *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme*. Paris. Albin Michel, 1963 et 1976; HAH: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Montpellier. Fata Morgana, 1972; AE Autrement qu'être ou au delà de l'essence. La Haye Martinus Nijhoff 1974; DSAS: *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris, Minuit 1977; ADV: *Au delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*. Paris, Minuit, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

along with many others scholars call "Jewish philosophy". What is the status of Hebraism in Levinas's thought and in what way does this thought go beyond it, perhaps inaugurating something other than "Jewish philosophy"?

Until now, the analysis of Levinas' connection to the universe of Jewish thought seems always to have started with the assumption – implicit and never unpacked – that there is a massive intellectual base, identified as "Judaism" (Derrida distinguishes "Hebraism" from "Judaism", because no doubt, he views the latter as a religion). Into this "Judaism", analysts have, without differentiating among them, mixed elements and sequences drawn from a Jewish tradition that nonetheless witnessed diverse periods and diverse intellectual enterprises (When speaking of Jewish tradition I am not only speaking of a Hebraic one. I am referring especially to the Talmud, written in Aramaic, and to rabbinic thought, often not expressed in Hebrew either). Indeed Talmudic thought is not Kabbalistic thought, which is not the thought of "Jewish philosophy", which is not the ethical thought of "Judaism", even if it is true that a structural matrix common to all these modes of Jewish thinking could be made to appear. It is within the framework of this temporal and literary succession of phenomena that we thus find "Alexandrian promiscuity", "Jewish philosophy". Before evoking Levinas' link to any of these intellectual corpuses, one must see him against the background of this "Jewish philosophy". This will help us understand both his "Hebraic debt" and how his work "goes beyond Hebraism", as Jacques Derrida proclaims.

It is, in fact, the link of Levinas' thought to Jewish philosophy that should be probed, more than its apparent kinship to Talmud. For the effort to "translate" Judaism<sup>4</sup> into a (Greek) philosophical language, or to think the message of Sinai in Greek categories, or to bring about a synthesis of Greece and Israel, or to philosophize within a Jewish inspiration and thus necessarily, in all these cases, to "go beyond" Hebraism<sup>5</sup> is twenty centuries old. "Jewish philosophy", in any case, is not necessarily far removed from the Talmud. Saadya Gaon, one of its main figures, was the chief of the Talmudic Academy in Babylon. This school (Jewish philosophy) of thought was born, in fact, at the same

<sup>4</sup> It is at that moment that "Judaism" begins to designate the entire (and plural) fabric of the civilisation of the Jews, still fundamentally marked by the religious. The term *ioudaïsmos* appears for the first time in Hellenistic Greek, as a concept opposed to that of *hellenismos*.

<sup>5</sup> We have here as many possible definitions of the specificity of "Jewish philosophy" relative to other Judaic corpuses.



time as the Phariseanism which would produce the Talmud and later rabbinic Judaism ... Its founder is Philo of Alexandria (–20/40) who, relying on the recent Greek translation of the Bible, the *Septuagint*, undertook to read the Bible in terms of philosophical language and thought, inaugurating a unique experience of communication between different intellectual and cultural universes. It could be said that it is from this communication that the West was born, through Christianity. But the communication continued beyond Christianity, giving rise, to cite only the greatest names, to Saadya Gaon (882–942), Maimonides (1135–1204), Mendelssohn (1729–1786), Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) or Rosenzweig (1886–1929) ...

### *The project of Jewish philosophy*

The project of this school of thought is astonishing: it purports to inscribe Jewishness (“*judeïté*”) right within the center of something else (Greece at its philosophical center). It purports to leave the bailiwick of its identity to make itself understood, in its very depths, in Greece. In this respect, one must beware of the first impression such an enterprise might make. Despite the stated intention of “Jewish philosophers” to defend and illustrate the ideas of Judaism, their intellectual experience was of a thought in exile, in exodus from itself, taking up residence in a mental universe foreign to it. This thought was foreign to others and became foreign to itself, since it approached itself in the language of others. It is an adventure with a double meaning which begins here, taking a direction different from that of the nascent Talmudic school which also reads and studies the (Hebraic) text in another language (Aramaic) but without resorting to the “concept”.

To ground this bold equivalence between the Torah and the *logos*, the Jewish-philosopher (I use the adjective not as an ethnic identity-marker<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> If we are to understand “Jewish” in “Jewish philosophy” as referring not to Jewish identity but to a universe of thought and culture, the equation of Jewish philosophy with a language is, on the other hand, more problematic. We cannot, in fact, speak of “Hebraic philosophy” since no text of “Jewish philosophy” was written in Hebrew (rather, in succession, in Greek, Arabic, German and in French). However we can conceive of the Hebrew language as the chief problem of “Jewish philosophy” since it was possible to think it through only with some distance: in a “foreign” language (but “foreign” in relation to what, if the eponymous founder of Judaism is Abraham, the Aramean, or Moses, the Egyptian?). Indeed, it is the centrality of the Mosaic book for the “Jewish philosopher” which puts Hebrew at the center of his investigation and inscribes it in the depth of all the languages of “Jewish philosophy”, hidden in these

but in order to designate a school of thought) is systematically confronted by a series of questions whose interweaving constitutes the "original stage set" of the Jewish philosopher. He is thus inevitably led to ask the question of origins (in theological terms, of "creation") in a way that contrasts sharply with the *initium* of the philosopher. In asking the question of being, the Greek philosopher is led to erase his sensual and intellectual experience (even if it is in order to go further in the discovery of transcendental frameworks). The Jewish philosopher on the other hand begins with the Torah, with a given creation, the law, the absent presence of the divine Creator. Because he undertakes to think this given together with the philosophical question, he is confronted by three fundamental questions which challenge the entire biblical text and, in fact, ask in more philosophical terms, the question of the infinite, the relation to an infinite and perfect being with a finite and imperfect world. In other words, from the very beginning, the Jewish-philosopher confronts the question of revelation, of the manifestation of the infinite in the world of finiteness (the world, in this specific case, of the biblical text):

*\*the question of language and of textuality:* why is the Torah a narrative and prescriptive text if it is meant to make understood the unfolding of the *logos*? How can the infinite speak in a specific language (in this case, Hebrew)? How can it speak in the first place? It is the question of anthropomorphisms.

*\*the question of God:* if God is the Supreme Being, the One, the Good, what need is there to call Him by proper names? What need is there to

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languages in order to be able to be thought. Recourse to the concept of "Jewish philosophy" would be possible only when the adjective "Jewish" refers to this cross-roads of (four) languages circling around the Hebraic text, too intense to be said in its language. The adjective "Jewish" in "Jewish philosophy" would refer, then, to all the Jewish experiences, thinking and thinking themselves in the language of others and in conceptual articulation with Greek philosophy. "Jewish", that is what could not be said in any language exclusive of the others (and which, through this, could really have a hold on the universal). Because of this, from now on, we will write Jewish-philosophy for "Jewish", here, is not a predicate delimiting philosophy but is one with philosophising. What philosophically, is at stake is the addition of the "Jewish" reference, the adding on of something other to the philosophical concept which wants to be a totality. Can anything be added to the concept? Can it come outside of totality? Can the other come to us not in retrenchment, as a lesser-being but in the abundance of what is added on, what is excess? We can well see that this is the chief problem of Levinas' philosophy, who in this respect, can be counted as a real Jewish-philosopher! On all these questions, Cf. S. Trigano, *La demeure oubliée, genèse religieuse du politique* (1984, second edition, Gallimard, "Tel", 1994), (from now on LDO), entirely devoted to the study of the project of Jewish philosophy as one at the major paths of modernity and *Philosophie de la loi, l'énigme de la politique dans la Tora* (Cerf-Passages, 1991), which takes the question up again philosophically).



express Him in the language of the senses? It is the great theological question of the "attributes of God" which we see here. How can the infinite have a relation with the finite?

\**the question of the political community*: if the Torah is the speech of the universal, why is it the story of the deeds of the Jewish people in particular, even if its story is always told as a responsibility to the other? How can the infinite have a single interlocutor, be it an individual (Moses, the prophet) or a collective (the people assembled at Sinai)? Here, the questions of the Law and the political community arise.

It is in asking these questions (the question of the universal and the particular, of absence and of presence, of what is given and of freedom) that the Jewish philosopher connects the thought deriving from the Sinaitic book with Greek philosophical discourse.

I perceive three great stages in the philosophical systems engendered by this questioning<sup>7</sup>:

### 1. *The "childhood of the art"*

The Philonic system that inaugurates Jewish philosophy brought the answer of the *logos*, of a mediation between infinite and finite, a *logos* which simultaneously separates and unifies. This *logos* preserves the integrity and unity of God, for every contact of God with the finite and all the anthropomorphisms of the biblical text concern only the *logos*. Despite its nature as mediator, however, Philo sometimes sees it as a real lieu-tenant (in place) of God, as a quasi divine being, to the point of defining him as a "second God" (*deuteros theos*), such that Christians will find here the foundation of their doctrine defining Jesus, "son of God", as God who has become man.

Taking over the same concerns, Saadya Gaon invents the doctrine of the "created Glory". It plays the same role as the *logos*, the only difference being that, here, contrary to Philo, the *logos* in question is "created" (and is thus artificial, instrumental) by God to communicate with human beings. The "Glory" (*kavod*), the divine agent in the world, is formed from a "created light" (*zohar nivra*). This is what appears of God. In this manifestation, the "speaking" of God (the *dibbur*, the Levinassian "saying") speaks. This *dibbur* is specially created and thus autonomous in relation to the visible manifestation. Moses, alone among the prophets, has heard the "saying" without the manifestation

<sup>7</sup> S. Trigano, LDO. § XIII, 1 "La dynamique de la modernité", p. 332.

