

Emmanuel Lévinas: Responsibility emerging from the interpersonal situation

“When the other person calls for freedom to accept its responsibility, he establishes freedom and justifies it.”

(Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalität und Unendlichkeit*, Freiburg 1961, p. 282)

“Emmanuel Lévinas personally experienced the barbarity of the 20th Century. Born in Lithuania in 1906, he obtained French citizenship in 1930. In 1940, he was captured by the Germans and sent to a special camp for Jewish prisoners of war. Although he survived the Holocaust with his wife, he learned after the War that his whole family had been murdered in Auschwitz. He resolved never again to set foot on German soil. In 1948, he became director of the private Jewish university in Paris, the École Normale Israélite Orientale; in 1962 he was named professor of philosophy at the Université Paris-Nanterre. Philosophically, Lévinas, like Sartre, followed the thinking of Edmund Husserl. He was also influenced by Jewish thinkers. He died on December 25, 1995, in Paris.

Because the practice of living together had been permanently disrupted not only by the genocide committed on the Jews but already by their foregoing discrimination and persecution, the question of how living together should be learned has become all the more urgent. In the wake of the subsequent outbreaks of genocide in the second half of the 20th Century and of the cultural and religious conflicts at beginning of the 21st Century, this impulse has become more, rather than less urgent. At the bottom line, the Global Ethic Project is a response to a challenge that has been posed in our time with extreme severity, namely the refusal to live together and the determination to annihilate the alien – one is reminded of Auschwitz and the World Trade Centre.”¹

“How then can we once again learn to live together in the face of such catastrophes? Levinas does not conceive being human as implying an abstract duty towards an equally abstract community. Nor does he see it as obedience to ideal principles and maxims, not even when human values are expressed in them. All too often – notably in the two basic ethical models of Aristotle and Kant – one looks for the ethical

¹ Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 103f.

essence of humanity in general principles and in the corresponding duties towards the community.

But, one must ask, does humanity have its seat in such general explanations and protestations? Admittedly such things can complement an ethic: one cannot dispense with them. Where, however, does an ethic become concrete? For Lévinas it is only in human relations, in dealing concretely with other human beings! The encounter between persons calls forth reflection; it establishes a relationship to the other person, and in doing so it lays the groundwork for community and its rules. Ethics arises from interpersonal encounter.

Nevertheless, such interpersonal humanity will not be satisfied simply with the observation of moral principles. Instead, what counts is effectively helping the other person, i.e. one's personal actions and their consequences. It is not enough, for instance, to disapprove of persecution: one must help the persecuted and stop the persecutor. Interpersonal relationship calls on persons to take responsibility for other persons.²

“With his notion of responsibility, Lévinas calls upon each person to fulfil his duties and thus puts him in a position of wide-ranging indebtedness. Indeed, according to Sartre and Lévinas, we are in fact responsible for all other persons, each one of us for himself with respect to each other person in the world. Therein lies the nucleus for the idea of a global ethic. We must learn to live with each other! Gadamer's words describe the task incumbent on each person, not only on the collectivity, the task that calls for social, international and intercultural cooperation and that sees the individual not merely as the victim, but also as the one responsible for the situation. What counts is to prevent war, violence and cruelty, in order to open up a perspective for peace [...].”³

² Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, p. 104.

³ *Ibid.*, 116f.