

## IN-DEPTH STUDIES AND ORIGINAL INTERPRETATIONS OF LEVINAS' WRITINGS

*Emmanuel Levinas: A Radical Thinker in the Time of Crisis*,  
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*Emmanuel Levinas: A Radical Thinker in the Time of Crisis*, Edited by Rita Šerpytytė, contains a collection of 16 articles which are based on papers presented at an international conference with the same title, in Vilnius University, Lithuania, October, 2015. The goal of the book as is expressed in the preface (p. 7-8) is to present a wide range of different approaches addressing a variety of topics in Levinasian philosophy. The authors of the chapters come from different academic disciplines, different areas of philosophical interest and different levels of familiarity with Levinas' writings. The end result is a diverse collection of articles with content suitable for Levinas scholars looking for in-depth studies and original interpretations of Levinas' writings as well as more accessible content suited for interested readers with a less comprehensive exposure to Levinas' thought. Most of the authors in the book thoroughly examine in their articles the relationships between Levinas and other thinkers. The wide range of perspectives contained in the book is evident from a cursory look at the list of thinkers examined throughout the articles: Vasily Grossman, Hegel and Malabou, Heidegger, Bernhard Waldenfels, John Duns Scotus, Gadamer, Deleuze, Franz Rosenzweig and George Bataille. In this review I will present a selection of articles, which demonstrate

the diversity of perspectives and the original ideas contained in the book.

The first article in the collection is an article about ethics as an indispensable crisis for humane society by Roger Burggraeve. Burggraeve utilizes a wide spectrum of Levinasian texts while harmoniously transitioning between political, literary (Vasily Grossman) and spiritual approaches to the topic. At the core of the article is a bold and original interpretation of crisis which reveals the complexity of the intimate and paradoxical relationship between good and evil. Burggraeve identifies an inherent tragedy in the Levinasian "face to face" ethical relation. This asymmetrical relation is tragically incompatible with situations which have to deal with complex moral dilemmas involving multiple people. This inherent tragedy of the "face to face" ethical relation is poignantly described as "the evil as the shadow of the good" (p. 14). Evil as the "reverse side" of the good, appears also, and to greater extent, in socio-political institutions. The advantage of these institutions is that they are in a position to fulfill the ethical demand at the universal level. Yet justice requires the implementation of violent policies resulting in an even starker example of "the paradox of evil as the reverse side of good" (p. 15).

In a surprising turn of events, the tragic paradox of evil reveals itself to be in fact, a source of hope. The Levinasian principle of *Ilya*, the dark, nihilistic force within totality undermines the foundations of the socio-political order, exposing it to the senselessness and absurdity of existence. And here appears the reverse side of the paradox: The *Ilya* as crisis corresponds with the ethical demand of the “face-to-face” which also functions as a destabilizing force. The “dis-order” and nihilism of the *Ilya* breaks down the socio-political establishment and leads it back to its ethical source (p. 23). Good emerges from the depths of evil.

Burggraeve (backed with a single quote from Levinas) goes as far as defining the *Ilya*, the epitome of indifference and senselessness, as a modality of the ethical demand and responsibility, and even as a revelation of the Infinite itself! (p. 22-23). Burggraeve thereby brings Levinas’ optimism and radicalism to new heights: good is revealed in the depths of arbitrary evil. Although he does not mention it in the article, this idea is one of the distinctive characteristics of Lurianic Kabbalah; Burggraeve’s call for a new spirituality (p. 25) is connected, at least theoretically, to ancient mystical Jewish trends.

Marie-Anne Lescourret’s article deals with the question of whether or not moral philosophy can at all be relevant for life in the real world. What is extraordinary about the article—besides for the insightful and thorough analysis of the relation between Levinas’ thought and this question—is the unconventional examination of Levinas’ biography, shedding further light on this critical issue. Lescourret boldly asks if Levinas himself was able to apply his own moral philosophy in his own life and proceeds to examine his personal conduct (p. 32-33), his political opinions (p. 39-40) and his pre-

philosophical experiences (p. 32). Lescourret concludes that Levinas’ philosophy is different from classical moral philosophy in a way which enables it to be relevant in the real world. The question of moral philosophy’s relevance to action in the real world stems from its theoretical nature. But Levinas’ philosophy is anti-theoretical. The strength of Levinasian ethics is in its lack of clear guiding principles, which attempt to systematically categorize and theorize all interpersonal relations. In his philosophy, Levinas emphasizes the uniqueness and otherness of every different person; the interpersonal relation is exactly what exceeds theory. Levinas’ philosophy does not require forcing human actions into a theoretical framework, the actions are significant in and of themselves; therefore his thought can be relevant to real life. Lescourret claims that in Levinas’ own life is a demonstration of this anti-theoretical ethical philosophy. It is not possible to find any overarching principles that consistently apply to all of Levinas’ complex political stances. His views emerge from an ethical demand which demands “constant corrections of asymmetry” (p. 40) based on every unique situation. This examination of Levinas’ own life through the lense of his own ethics is itself a fulfillment of his philosophy which refrains from theoretical moral judgements and focuses on actions in the real world themselves.

Another exciting addition to the corpus of writings on Levinas’ philosophy is provided by Mintautas Gutauskas in his article which centers around an exposition of the phenomenology of Bernhard Waldenfels and it’s connection to Levinas’ thought. Waldenfels’ original and comprehensive system of thought which is still relatively unknown in the anglophone world (only three of his twenty-six books have been translated to

English), was deeply influenced by Levinas' but is less radical in nature. (p. 93) Gutasukas skillfully presents the main points of Waldenfels' "phenomenology of the alien" illustrating how it incorporates Levinas' basic criticism of phenomenology while not entirely adopting his solutions. Gutasukas highlights the problematic nature of the Levinasian idea of the encounter with the other as something "beyond experience" (p. 93) and dismisses Levinas' "easy" solution that simply transgresses the experiential "plane of graspability" and appropriation to discuss experience on the plane of the ethical relationship (p. 101). As an answer to these problems, he presents Waldenfels' methodical examination of the encounter with the other. He presents Waldenfels' compelling and comprehensive phenomenological system which uses terminology such as "territory," "threshold," "temporal lagging," to analyze the different phenomena occurring during the encounter with the "alien."

There are three reasons why Marija Oniščik's article provides a particularly unique study of Levinasian texts: (1) she discusses the connections between Levinas' thought and Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy; (2) she quotes almost exclusively from Levinas' early writings (*Totality and Infinity* and earlier texts); and (3) she develops a methodical analysis of terms and concepts used by Levinas. The combination of these three factors manifests itself in a fresh perspective, discussing some of the often overlooked aspects of Levinas' early works. While Levinas scholars often tend to ignore ideas that don't correspond well with Levinas' later phenomenology, Oniščik puts them at the center of her work. A prominent example is Oniščik's concern with Levinas' explanation of infinity as a "transcendent being" or "a being that maintains its total exteriority" (p. 113). The

vast majority of the secondary literature on Levinas, including the other articles in this book, read his philosophy through the lens of his later writings, associating the infinite with "beyond being" and ignoring earlier terminology appearing in *Totality and Infinity*. Oniščik focuses on the ontological aspect of Levinas' thought in *Totality and Infinity*, shedding light on terms such as "participation," "analogy" and "equivocity," tracing their historical development.

Irina Poleschuk's article deals with different aspects of affectivity. Affectivity is defined as a state in which the flow of consciousness intends something other than itself. Throughout the article Poleschuk delves deeply into Levinasian phenomenology, organizes its different aspects into a clear structure while providing her own original insights. The primary objective of the article is to elaborate on two different aspects of affectivity. The first aspect, which Levinas refers to as "bathing in the element" (p. 83) is the material expression of affectivity which is enjoyment associated with the grounding of a person in the world, the gripping of the present and temporal synchronization. The second aspect of affectivity is the subject's encounter with the other. This meeting is itself ethical. Affectivity here causes the subject to be undermined and to question its own being and disturbs the synchronization with temporal dephasing or diachrony.

Poleschuk examines the relationship between these two aspects of affectivity and deals with its expressions such as hunger, vision and light. In Poleschuk's original and interesting interpretation, she suggests that the different aspects are in effect part of a gradual transition of the subject into the ethical self (p. 88). The first stage is a corporeality, which is necessary for ethics, and followed by the second stage in which

the synchronization is disturbed by hunger, vision and light when the the subject comes into contact with otherness. What is remarkable is Poleschuk's emphasis on the gradual progression of the process or the formatting of the subject (p. 86). The undermining of the subject caused by the encounter with the other is not traumatic or shocking. The otherness caresses the subject (p. 86), and the subject welcomes it and shares with the other its enjoyment (p. 88). Despite the severity of the framework of phenomenological analysis, Poleschuk identifies optimism within Levinas' thought and presents a gentle and touching side of Levinasian ethics.

Besides the articles discussed above, the book contains a number of other excellent articles, which I did not include in my review due constraints of space. The articles in the collection add interesting and original ideas to the corpus of research on Levinas.

However, there are a small number of articles which err by doing what Claire Katz describes as "An equivocation of terms that either allowed Levinas's philosophy to be inaccurately applied or that opened him to a straw man criticism."<sup>1</sup>

The collection finishes with an article by Aušra Pažėraitė which presents documentation of Levinas' childhood in Lithuania and sheds light on details from his biography by situating him within a broader historical context and the specific political situation in Lithuania at the time.

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<sup>1</sup> Katz, Claire. Review of Denise Ege'a-Kuehne, Levinas and Education: at the intersection of faith and reason. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28 (4), 2009: 376.