

TABLE AND PREFACE

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Reasoning with

Emmanuel Levinas

New York Ottawa Toronto

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Preface

"Reasoning with Emmanuel Levinas" is intended in a double sense.

1) It means to entertain a dialogue with this extraordinary philosopher of our time that is Levinas, as the authors of this book interrogate problems that are at once philosophical, semiotical, and ethico-political — "eternal problems" concerning the human being, but "immer wieder", reposed in ever new forms.

2) It also means to discuss today's reality which like reality of all times is always the expression of dominant ideology. In our case this is a question of Western ideology in its capitalist phase with respect to which Hegelian philosophy represented its synthesis as well as its apex and conclusion, its sunset. Referring to Western reality and its ideology the three authors of this book discuss the problems inevitably imposed, whether directly or indirectly, by globalization today.

This extreme form of capitalism consists in total commodification, therefore commodification of all communicative relations, with its desperate task of reproducing this specific reproduction system.

According to this second sense, to reason with Levinas means to take his point of view. By contrast with Western reason, this means to evidence the impossibility of reproducing the Identical, as well as the connected impossibility of reducing our relation to others to reified relations of exchange, competition, and egoistic interests. In this sense, to reason with Emmanuel Levinas means to propose a hypothesis that must be verified and reason from his extraordinary perspective — extraordinary with respect to dominant ideology in Western thought.

Emmanuel Levinas (Haunas 1906-Paris 1995), one of the most significant thinkers of the twentieth century, has profoundly contributed to semiotico-linguistic issues through his dealings with the question of alterity. His work offers an original contribution to the analysis of discourse, communication, the face-to-face relation, dialogue, signification and sense. Levinas developed his thought in dialogue with Husserl and Heidegger (whose works he was the first to introduce into France after having followed their courses in Fribourg between 1928 and 1929).

Together with these authors as well as with Buber, Bakhtin, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas takes a great interest in the multifaceted question of the relationship between the I and the other. According to Levinas this relationship is founded on the I's responsibility for the other, presenting an original aspect of his approach to language and signs. Constant reference points throughout his writings include Husserl and Heidegger, the Sacred Scriptures, with special attention on the Talmud, and Russ-

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ian literature, all of which come together in his interrogation of the main categories subtending Western thought — thematizing consciousness, identity, subject.

The work of Levinas is an essential guide for semiotic researchers inquiring into the sense of life beyond its reduction to abstract categories such as World, History, Reality, Politics (which refers to Reality as a criterion for making choices, including the *extrema ratio* of war). As such his writings emerge ever more strongly as a point of confrontation that cannot be ignored by contemporary research in the humanities generally.

According to Levinas problems of language and communication are connected with problems of the moral order. Identity, both individual and collective, is faced with the other, and in this relation is divested of all alibis and put into the accusative – in spite of a "good conscience". "The accusative is somehow the first 'case' of the 'I'". The discourse of I and of all identity communities take the form of justification, defence from the condition of obsessive responsibility for the other. In the first place, says Levinas, conscious awareness requires recognition of one's own "bad conscience". "I is the crisis itself of being", in spite of a good conscience and its alibis; and the truly human is the place of renewal and regeneration of unintentional consciousness, of a "bad conscience", the possibility of fearing injustice more than death, or, as Socrates author of *Gorgia* says, of choosing to suffer injustice rather than committing injustice, inflicting it upon someone else.

This book is a small introduction to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and at once the expression of research that intends to be problematic as it works through a series of issues suggested by Levinas. The authors believe that the most significant aspect of Levinas's philosophical discourse is his shift in focus to the dimension of otherness: otherness as opposed to the ideology of identity and self-interest which includes the claim to difference, appeal to equality, equivalence between giving and receiving, faith in the panacea of equal exchange. The relation to the other is not exhausted in a relative relationship, that is to say, as established with reference to a second term, a role, a function, a gender, or as identified by opposition. Otherness is also absolute otherness. The metaphor or metonymy of absolute otherness is the face, self-significance, unrepeatability, nudity, total exposition. The face is expression, language, contact and presence; it is the relation of peace antecedent to war and pacification.

To complete the bibliography used by the three authors of the present volume, two recent publications are important to signal: on Levinas's biography a book by Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Lévinas, la vie et la trace*, Latrès, Paris, 2002; instead, on his thought system, *Cahiers d'Études Lévinassiennes*, éd. Verdier, Paris. These *Cahiers* were inaugurated-

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with the creation of the Institut d'Études Lévinassiennes, in 2002 (the founders are Benny Lévy, Bernard-Henri Lévy and Alain Finkielkraut). They appear annually and present, among other contributions, unpublished papers by Levinas as well as texts in Hebrew. Three volumes have appeared so far: the first is dedicated to the problem of time, the second to the question of monotheism, the third to thinking of return. Most unfortunately the recent disappearance of Jacques Derrida has interrupted an important continuation of Levinas's reflections

which cross all Derrida's works beginning from his long review article of Levinas's book of 1961, *Totalité et infini*, through to his most recent writings among which worth remembering is his enchanting book *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. However, there is no doubt that Levinas's thought will find development in the new generations, and it is our hope that it will deeply affect the cultural-ideological orientation of our time.

Bari-Tenerife-Las Vegas, 11.16.2004

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