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## INTRODUCTION

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I am charged with giving some introduction to this commemoration of the life and thought of Emmanuel Levinas, a task that I am bound to regard as a risky business, daunting first of all for being undertaken in a room full of experts, in whose number I myself should not be counted. Perhaps there is some use, however, in trying to sketch some main features of Levinas' approach for those in the audience, as I am sure there are some, for whom his thought is mostly or perhaps even entirely unfamiliar.

Yet even this modest goal is not without dangers of its own, for it is surely impossible to do justice to Levinas in any brief or simple summary. Indeed, no one can enter upon the adventure of reading Levinas without immediately feeling oneself in the presence of a thinker of extraordinary subtlety and originality. Over and over again, the pages of his books pull off that magic trick that makes us appreciate a great philosopher: that of opening up something immensely mysterious in the heart of what we have heretofore taken to be safely established, even obvious, and allowing us to glimpse a completely contrary assessment, an inverted world. The result shimmers not just with novelty but also great complexity. Even a long and careful account runs the danger of flattening to some extent an immensely intricate terrain.

In the face of these challenges it is tempting to fall back on some standard conventions of introduction, supplying some notes, say, about Levinas' personal history.

I could tell you, for example, that he was born of Jewish parents in Lithuania in 1906, and that he was a child of the twentieth century in some particularly poignant ways. His family was uprooted by the paroxysm of the First World War and by the Soviet revolution of 1917. He left home at age seventeen to study in Strasbourg and assumed French citizenship a decade or so later. In World War II, he served for a time as an interpreter, only to be seized as a prisoner of war, managing to complete some writing between periods of forced labor.

Alternatively, I could review some snippets of Levinas' intellectual biography. I could evoke his wide-eyed childhood in his father's bookshop and recount his life-long passion for the Hebrew Bible, his immersion in the great Russian writers Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev, and his reverence for Shakespeare. I could relate his deep and enduring involvement with Jewish intellectual life, rabbinic, literary, philosophical, and survey his periods of tutelage with Husserl and Heidegger.

Maybe the easiest of all would be to give that sort of "Encyclopedia of Philosophy" Spiel in which Levinas would appear as a figure in the phenomenological and existential tradition, one who extended the phenomenological method inaugurated by Husserl and transformed by Heidegger in order to repose the most elemental questions about being and existence, time and death, subjectivity and freedom. I could salt in a little glossary of some key Levinasian terms and concepts – hypostasis, illeity, substitution – and canvas some of his deeply insightful reconceptions of common experiences like insomnia, voluptuousness, and enjoyment.

Yet I suspect that Levinas himself would be the first to urge me to abandon such predictable approaches in favor of trying to cut closer to the essentials of his sensibility, however risky that tactic might be. "A fine risk," he was fond of saying, "is always something to be taken in philosophy."

The keynote of that sensibility, the one most indispensable word of Levinas, is that of the Other. Levinas continually rededicates himself to evoking the inexhaustibility of my engagement with the other, which he conceives as the immediacy of a face in which something forever unencompassable shatters my certainties and renders moot my excuses. Levinas forces upon us the living excess of the other human being, in whose face I am, very literally, charged with something infinite. Confronted by the other, I find myself undercut by an infinite vulnerability, an infinite passivity, more primordial and more enduring than the system of my activities and goals, something that pierces the webs of my intentions.

Taken with appropriate seriousness, this destabilizing epiphany of the other is discerned by Levinas as the continually missing chapter in the history of philosophy, missing even in Heidegger, whose existential analytic points us to the essential and ineluctable *Mit-sein*, or being-with-others, of human existence. For the genuine relation to the other, Levinas insists, any conception based upon the preposition “with” is finally too weak, too insubstantial, too easy. The experience of the other is no mere add-on to an already constituted subjectivity, but is rather a radically primordial dimension, the absolutely primary givenness, a confrontation that has always already levied upon me a limitless demand for response. Ethics thus becomes for Levinas more elemental than metaphysics. Before all other beginnings, outstripping all knowledge and exceeding every intention, I am claimed by the other with an infinite and undischageable responsibility. In the face of the other, I am arrested by the weight of my own capacity of murder and frozen by an utterly resounding “thou shalt not kill.”

But to say this much still seems to me inadequate to Levinas’ thought if only because it misses the trenchant analyses of existence that give Levinas’ notion of the other much of its impact. The Levinasian point is neither a mere moralizing evocation of the vulnerable other nor an appeal for recognition and reciprocity. Levinas offers neither a feel-good philosophy of charitable do-gooderism nor a rewarmed version of Martin Buber’s I-thou relationship.

Much of what is most provocative and fascinating in Levinas is the way in which he evokes the encompassable, unassimilable Other in the midst of a disarmingly fine-grained analysis of solitude. It is in this analysis that existence appears for Levinas not as tinged with the vertigo of nothingness familiar to us from existential philosophy but rather as oppressed with the weight of a relentless burden, of an irremissible materiality that is the price of being a self. It is in this perspective that fatigue and indolence, far from being a mere entropy of the subject, are conceived as active posturings: “in weariness,” Levinas remarks, “existence is like the reminder of a commitment to exist, with all the seriousness and harshness of an unrevokable contract.” The suffering of solitude, finally, announces the trace of the other precisely in the very exposure of suffering, the inescapability and absence of refuge that constitutes the deepest reality of suffering. In this ultimate passivity of affliction, in what Levinas calls “impossibility of detaching oneself from suffering,” he discerns a primordial announcement of the other, the connection of the subject to something beyond and foreign to itself.

Perhaps the most surprising, suggestive, and far-reaching conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of existence is the identification of this other with time. For Levinas, the encounter with the Other is not just something that happens in time, but is time itself. The Other is the very heartbeat of time. It

is therefore the Other, whose face animates the most fundamental beyond of something unknown, that is the essential element of what is to come.

Levinas can thus propose that “relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems ... accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship. The condition of time lies in the relationship between humans.” Indeed, it is the relation with the Other that for Levinas grounds the uniquely human turning to the new that, tensed with the necessity of retaining the past, gives rise to history. To quote him again: “The Desire for the new in us is a Desire for the other; it distinguishes our being from existing, which is self sufficient, and which, *conatus essendi*, perseveres in existing, holding, above all, to this very existing. In the natural throbbing of the being of beings, the human would thus be the rupture of this ontological rhythm.”

To be sure, this enormously distinctive and ambitious perspective bristles with questions, questions the consideration of which is the very business of gatherings like this one. Yet, even having said just this precious little of Levinas’ philosophy, I cannot help wondering whether, at the outset of our conference, we don’t glimpse something enormously suggestive, something recognizably Levinasian, in the very form of our convocation.

I have in mind the fact that we are gathered to pay homage to Emmanuel Levinas a decade after his death, less than a year from the centennial of his birth. Our commemoration is that familiar form of human observance: the celebration of the centennial, of the passage of a century. Must we not be struck by the Levinasian features of this very exercise? That is to say, is not the marking of the centennial itself a deeply Levinasian gesture, reminding us of the way in which we are faced by the flow of time as by what is other, and that in the most literal sense? For it is not by accident, nor from any mere numerary regularity, that we rely upon the period of the century to mark out the measures of human existence in some particularly significant way. The nineteenth century, the seventeenth, the twelfth, the twentieth centuries. Our way of referring ourselves to the passing of centuries is not merely a matter of the convenience of a round number, the ten times ten of a hundred. It is not for nothing, I would suggest, that the century marks that great round number that is very dependably more than the duration of any single human life. No one in this room was alive when the centennial period we celebrate today commenced. Emmanuel Levinas did not survive to see its end. In this way, the period of a century is inevitably a measurement enclosed at beginning and end by death. Must it not then prompt us to ask: from what point of view is it that we reckon the meaning of a century? Must it not be from a viewpoint

that properly belongs to no one? Must not every reference to the century, to the centennial, refer us at least implicitly to a perspective that belongs intrinsically and unavoidably to an Other? And yet it is in this way more than any other that we limn the segments of history and seek to position ourselves in its gambit. The distinctively human act of reckoning the centuries thus seems perfectly spoken for in the words of Levinas himself as he describes the necessity of relating ourselves to “the signification of a past that has not been my present and does not concern my reminiscence, and the signification of a future that commands me in mortality or in the face of the other.”

As we dedicate ourselves in this conference to commemorating Emmanuel Levinas we can do no better, certainly in the terms Levinas himself left to us, than to risk the attempt to expose ourselves to the disturbing influence of an other voice, bringing to presence an other past and, who knows, an other future.