

Silvano Petrosino

LEVINAS' CONCEPT OF "FIRST PHILOSOPHY"

*Catholic University of Milan in Piacenza
Department of Semiotic and Moral Philosophy
Largo Lemelli No2, 20135 Milano
e-mail: petrosino.silvano@inwind.it*

The assertion that the specific feature of Levinas' speculative proposal is found in the emphasis on the supremacy of ethics over ontology is clearly undisputable, although it is necessary to admit that this has often been a trap for scholars. Indeed how is it possible to assert that morality coincides with first philosophy itself, and more particularly, in what way should this coincidence be understood?

Faced with the radicalism of such a thesis, some interpreters have acknowledged that insisting on this supremacy would inevitably run the risk of creating a mere countersense, given that the thought and language horizon in which the terms "ontology" and "ethics" have their meaning is the same as the one that – precisely because it defines them as such – establishes the hierarchy which collocates ontology "above" or "before" ethics. From this point of view, "first philosophy", being "first", not only *must not*, but above all *cannot* coincide with morality. This was Derrida's objection in 1964. Perhaps it was too easy and obvious, but nonetheless, it is still relevant. Levinas wants to break away from Parmenides and get away from being – but how can a non-Greek, who speaks the language of Greek philosophy, escape from Greece? Indeed, how is it possible, in philosophical terms, to write a philosophy book

that says we should break with philosophy, Greece and even being, without realising that this same writing and the denunciation it contains would have never been conceivable, and could not be conceivable in the future, without Greece and its philosophy of being? We must conclude that these interpreters appreciated the existential, humanistic and religious aspects of, and some phenomenological analyses in, Levinas' works, but that they nevertheless had no doubt concerning their ambiguity and even theoretical inconsistency.

In order to react to the superficiality of this interpretation, other scholars made the opposite naïve mistake of only considering Levinas' emphasis on the human being (especially on the Other) and on ethical responsibility. What neither Nietzsche, the last of the metaphysicians, nor even Heidegger, the last after the "last metaphysician", were able to succeed in doing, was finally accomplished thanks to Levinas and his philosophy of *Otherwise than Being*: a critique of totality, a detachment from metaphysical violence, the exaltation of the difference of the Other and, therefore, the evasion from being.

It seems to me that, analysed in this way, Levinas' idea of ethics – undoubtedly with all the speculative tension, but also with all the difficulties and the questions that characterise it – is bound to dissolve in that sugary non-concept which recurs in most philosophical and non-philosophical debates on values and ethics (which these days are even too frequent). In order to avoid this kind of way out, which eventually always becomes a trap for thought as I mentioned before, it is necessary to try to understand (patiently and partly even beyond Levinas' words) the most profound sense and meaning of the above mentioned "supremacy" of ethics over ontology.

ETHICS AND BEYOND ETHICS

It is undeniable that the expressions used by Levinas were so strong that they seemed exaggerated to some people. I will just mention two of the most famous extracts:

"Ethics (...) delineates the structure of exteriority as such. It is not a branch of philosophy, it is First Philosophy" (Levinas 1990: 313)¹; "(...) it is necessary to understand that ethics is not a secondary layer above an abstract reflection on totality and its dangers. Ethics has an independent and preliminary range. First Philosophy is an ethics" (Levinas 1984: 93).

On the other hand, Levinas' obvious "intolerance" or "resistance" to the interpretation of his thought as moral philosophy should not be underestimated. It is as if he wanted to stress the irreducible detachment from a certain way of interpreting ethics in order to clarify the basic intention that is at the origin of his speculative proposal:

¹ All English translations are mine.

"My task does not consist in creating an ethics; I am only trying to find its meaning (...) It is undoubtedly possible to create an ethics based on what I said, but this is not my specific topic" (Levinas 1984: 105).

In this respect, it is useful to recall Derrida's statement:

"Yes, ethics should come first and beyond ontology, State and politics, but ethics should also go beyond ethics. One day, in *rue Michel-Ange*, during one of those conversations that I love to remember, enlightened by the splendour of his thought, the goodness of his smile, the graceful humour of his ellipses, he told me: 'You see, what I do is often labelled as ethics, but essentially what I am interested in is not ethics, not only ethics, but the Sacred, and the Sanctity of the Sacred'" (Derrida 1998: 59-60).

I will have to come back to this last point. For now, it is sufficient to recall that the Hebrew term for "sacred" is "*kadosh*" and that it indicates (as it is referred to God) the "separate". In this sense, as J. Rolland quite rightly points out, the ethical subject, as conceived and developed in Levinas' works, should be interpreted above all as a discourse of and about separation (Rolland 2000: 17). According to Levinas, separation regards the "sense" of ethics. Derrida spoke of an ethics which is "first and beyond ontology", but also of ethics "beyond ethics". In his 1964 essay, he also mentioned the following: "(...) let us not forget that Levinas does not want to propose us laws or moral rules, he does not want to determine *one* morality, but the essence of the ethical relation in general (...) it is Ethics of Ethics"(Derrida 1978: 140-141).

Here is the main question which comes up: all these formulae endeavour to show the irreducible gap which separates Levinas' thought of ethics from a conception of ethics itself as second philosophy and the locus of the institution of laws and precepts ("sense of ethics", "Ethics of Ethics", "ethics beyond ethics") – to what do all these formulae refer? Beyond their words, what are they actually about?

For now, based on Heidegger's analysis in his *Letter on Humanism* (in which, incidentally, the German philosopher also speaks of "original ethics"), it is sufficient to establish at least the following point: Levinas' ethics as "first philosophy" does not belong to the "thought that proceeds by discipline" (Heidegger 1987: 305)². In this respect, Rolland's statement in his interpreta-

² As known, Heidegger's position in this respect is particularly strict: "Before trying to determine more precisely the relation between 'ontology' and 'ethics', we should ask ourselves what essentially are 'ontology' and 'ethics' (...) However, if 'ontology' and 'ethics' were to collapse together with all the thought which proceeds by discipline, and if in this way our thought were to become more disciplined, what would happen to the relation between the two above mentioned disciplines of philosophy? 'Ethics' appears for the first time, along with 'logic' and 'physics', in Plato's school. These disciplines originated at the time when thought became 'philosophy', philosophy became *epistēmē* (science) and science became a school issue and a scholastic matter. *By passing through philosophy meant in this way, science is born and the thought dies.* Before this, thinkers did not know a 'logic', or an 'ethics', or 'physics'. Nevertheless, their thought is not illogical or immoral" (Heidegger 1987: 305) (my italics).

tion of Levinas' philosophy should not be understood as a provocation. As a matter of fact, after observing that his work "will necessarily be an ethical discourse" (Rolland 2000: 16) and after asserting, based on Heidegger and also on Levinas himself (Lévinas 1982a: 228)³, the necessity to distinguish *die Ethik* as a discipline from *das Ethische* as the ultimate structure of exteriority, Rolland points out the following: "From this, the consequence to be drawn is that – and this is a statement that could come across as provoking – *das Ethische*, whose description will be the only subject of our work [which is evidently aimed at understanding the base itself of Levinas thought], *is morally neutral*" (Rolland 2000: 22-23).

Perhaps what has been said so far makes less paradoxical or "provoking" a remark which, in some way, deconstructs the assertion of the supremacy of ethics over ontology from which we started. In fact, it seems to me that it is possible and even necessary to state that in Levinas the word "ethics" always sounds like the expression of the essence of "ontology" itself, at least ontology in the broadest sense which regards the deepest and innermost nature of reality in other words the base itself of being. This interpretation is absolutely not inadequate: "ethics" is the term through which he tries to express the ultimate nature of being, the ultimate way of being of the being, to which, according to Levinas, it is not possible to gain access starting from an ontology conceived as a discipline. It could also be said that in Levinas, before reaching ethics – and consequently the way of thinking and speaking and the *logos* itself that it implies – it is impossible to reach the ultimate border of being in front of which he defines the "secret of reality"⁴ in *Totalité et Infini*.

THE EVENT AND/IS ETHICS

For the time being, based on what has been said so far, it would be possible to assert that in Levinas' writings, ethics does not only have to do with man and the human, because ethics concerns, more essentially, the deepest nature of reality and therefore of reality as such. (This thesis is undoubtedly not Levinas' and it goes beyond his writings, although, as such, it could perhaps be a means to understand something essential in the spirit of his thought.) A partial confirmation of such a paradoxical thesis – especially for a certain school of thought – may be found in one of the best-known definitions of "ethics" formulated by him: "We call ethical a relation whose terms are not united by a synthesis of the intellect or the relation between subject and object

³ Here Rolland refers especially to E. Lévinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*.

⁴ "Reality must not be determined only in its historical objectivity, but also starting from the *secret* which interrupts the continuity of historical time, starting from inner intentions. The pluralism of society is only possible starting from this secret. It asserts this secret." (Levinas 1990: 56).

and in which, nevertheless, a term is important or meaningful to the other. A relation whose terms are linked by a plot which is not exhaustible and cannot be disentangled from knowledge" (Levinas 1998a: 262).

In this definition there is no reference to human being or to the relation between humans. It is as if Levinas wanted to express the ultimate structure of the ethical relation here in the most abstract way possible, and thus decided to avoid any humanistic reference by only speaking of "terms". The main feature of this structure is determined on two levels; first of all, there is an emphasis on the concept of "separation", which has already been mentioned. However, in this case, the separation in question (the one that eludes all intellectual synthesis) does not regard the relation between human beings and God, but rather, more "neutrally", the relation between two "terms". At the same time – and this is why it is partly necessary to correct what has been asserted about the absence of any reference to the human in this definition – Levinas stresses that, "however", in order for ethics to exist, there must be a "weight", an "importance", a "meaning" of one term "for" and "towards" the other one. The difference of this separation is never conceivable as neutral indifference. As we will see, this "importance" and "meaning" is the very locus of the human.

There is a particular route of access to the radical claim that characterizes Levinas' determination of ethics as first philosophy. This route passes by Heidegger – and not by chance. In the final passage of *Totalité et Infini*, in which he declares the exit from Parmenides's being, Levinas asserts: "Being is produced as multiple and split into Same and Other. This is the ultimate structure. It is society and thus time. In this way we exit from the philosophy of Parmenides's being" (Levinas 1990: 277).

In my humble opinion, this statement, even before the reference to Parmenides, plays a central role in Levinas' thought, both for the determination of the "ultimate structure" of being as multiplicity and, especially for the very conception of being which "is produced", and which is always in the context of accessing and happening. The reference to Heidegger here is absolutely clear and primary. In *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps*, Levinas powerfully confirms: "The most extraordinary thing which Heidegger introduced is a new *sonority* of the verb 'to be': precisely, it is its *verbal* sonority. To be: not what is, but the verb, the 'act' of being (...) This idea constitutes the unforgettable contribution of Heidegger's work" (Lévinas 1993: 138).

Summarising what has been said so far, we should remember what Levinas' writings keep repeating: ethics conceived in this way is not a discipline that concerns moral principles and laws, because it has to do with the "ultimate structure of being", with the "secret of reality" and therefore with the most essential nature of everything which exists. Using Heidegger's terminology, this thesis could be formulated as follows: being, which is in that it occurs and

happens, carries out its “task of being” (Levinas 1984: 58)⁵ *only within a scene which, from the beginning, has an ethical character*. It is a primary, “anarchic” scenario which, as Levinas would say, determines itself as ethical precisely in relation to the mode of producing itself and the happening of being. In this sense, there is no happening that could be originally morally neutral, and only later qualified as ethical, as it is this happening itself, *within its own mode of accessing, which assumes the form of “ethical event” from the very beginning*. In Levinas’ view, therefore, “event” and “ethics” are inevitably synonyms. As a consequence – and here’s the critique of Heidegger – it is necessary that the thought of the event, thanks to which Levinas tries to overcome the entifying conception of being, is formed through that overdetermination of ontological categories which transforms them into ethical terms (Levinas 1983: 144). To conclude this thought: remaining within the field of Heidegger’s concepts, for Levinas, the verblatity of being is always ethically qualified, and therefore a thought of the mere event – precisely because it is limited to thinking of the event as just event – does not grasp and is not at all able to describe the “ultimate structure” of being.

THE ULTIMATE SEPARATION OR UNIQUENESS.
STARTING FROM THE IDEA OF CREATION

The claim at the basis of Levinas’ work is radical: ethics is first philosophy because it is only in ethical terms that it is possible to express the “secret of reality” or, using *Totality and Infinity*’s terminology, the “ultimate structure” of being. The question that arises from this thesis is the same again: how should the reasons for such an extreme claim be interpreted? *In my opinion, in order to correctly understand the object of Levinas’ thought, it is necessary to switch from the topic of difference to the topic of uniqueness*. This is the passage that concerns Levinas’ phenomenology of the face, which, from this point of view, should always be meant as a “phenomenology of the unique self”⁶. However, here I will not follow this line. I prefer to shift to the idea of creation.

In Levinas’ writings, the meaning of the reference to the idea of creation has been made explicit several times by the philosopher himself. As far as our topic is concerned (ethics as the locus where the “structure of exteriority

⁵ Expression from chapter “Heidegger”.

⁶ What is and what could a phenomenology of the unique self ever be? Indeed, the uniqueness of the face or the uniqueness as face constitutes the irreducible obstacle which alarms – but at the same time also fecundates – every interpretation in phenomenological terms of Levinas’ thought, but also the “phenomenology” itself that this thought has always endeavoured to develop. In fact, in Levinas the face is never conceivable as “alterity”, but always and only as “uniqueness”; in this respect, it is not a coincidence that Derrida spoke of “a singular interruption, a suspension or an *epoché* which, even more and even before being an *epoché* in phenomenology, is an *epoché* of phenomenology” (Derrida 1997: 95).

as such" is produced) it may be useful to read the following extract from the last pages of *Totalité et Infini*: "*The absolute gap of separation that transcendence presupposes finds its best expression in the term of creation* in which, at the same time, the kinship of beings between each other is asserted, but also their radical heterogeneity, their reciprocal exteriority starting from nothing" (Levinas 1990: 301-302)⁷.

Through the idea of creation⁸ it is possible to summarize and explain both the previously mentioned reference to the "production of being" and its verblatity, and Levinas' emphasis on sanctity and separation. It will also be possible to better understand the undoubtedly paradoxical hint (from a certain point of view) of an abstract structure of ethics as not immediately connected to the human – or only to the human. In this respect, it will be sufficient to mention one important passage from *Totalité et Infini*:

"An infinity that does not close itself circularly, but which withdraws from the ontological dimension to leave room for a separate being, exists divinely. This inaugurates, above totality, a society. The relations which are established between the separate being and Infinity redeem what constituted a reduction in the creative contraction of Infinity. Man redeems creation (...) Creation *ex nihilo* breaks the system, collocates a being outside all systems, i.e. where its freedom is possible. Creation leaves the creature in dependence, but a unique kind of dependence: the dependent being draws from this exceptional dependence, from this relation, its independence itself, its exteriority from the system. The essential feature of created existence does not consist in the limited character of its being, and the concrete structure of the creature cannot be deducted from this finitude. The essential feature of created existence consists in its separation from Infinity. This separation is not simply negation" (Levinas 1990: 105-106).

I think that the main concepts of these lines can be summarised as follows:

1) The idea of creation undoubtedly asserts the production of a total dependence, but a unique kind of dependence: it is a dependence from which the creature draws its most absolute independence, which constitutes its own uniqueness. As a consequence, thinking of this dependence independently of the independence to which it is connected on the level of creation would mean not thinking of creation in an adequate way.

2) In this sense, "the essential feature of created existence does not consist in the limited character of its being", but "in its separation from Infinity".

⁷ My use of italics.

⁸ I have developed these remarks more thoroughly especially in S. Petrosino, *Fondamento ed esasperazione. Saggio sul pensare di Emmanuel Lévinas*, Marietti, Genova 1992, pp. 121-140 (chapter IV, "L'idea di creazione: dipendenza ed alterità"), in "Creazione ed etica. Sullebraismo di E. Lévinas", *Discipline Filosofiche*, 1999 (IX), pp. 229-250, e in "Negatività della creazione?", *Communio. Rivista Internazionale di Teologia e Cultura*, 2001 (n. 180), pp. 40-49.

As a consequence, thinking of the creatural relation only in connection with the power and the free initiative of the Creator, only as a demonstration of this power and this freedom, without paying attention to the absolute value and the infinite mystery of the creature, would mean not thinking of creation in an adequate way.

3) The value of the creature, of every creature, and therefore not only of human beings⁹, is absolute and its mystery is revealed as infinite precisely in relation to the separation from the Creator, within which, and *thanks to which* (it is in this way that this separation is a dependence), it is freed to its most radical independence. The name of this “unique independence” that coincides with independence itself and with the ultimate value of the creature is “uniqueness”.

4) In creation, separation is therefore not a limit or a fault, but the condition of that independence that constitutes the wonder itself of the creatural order: here determination is absolutely not, especially and essentially, negation, but the face of the most irreducible positivity of the creature. It is the very assertion of the goodness of creation and of creation as goodness. It is in *Totalité et Infini* that exteriority is defined at the same time as “essence of being” and as “wonder”: Exteriority as essence of being means resistance of social multiplicity to the logic which totalises the multiple. For this logic, multiplicity is a decadence of the One or Infinity, a reduction in being that each of the multiple beings should overcome in order to return from multiplicity to the One, from finitude to Infinity. Metaphysics, the relation with exteriority, i.e. superiority, indicates on the contrary that the relation between finitude and infinity does not consist in finitude being absorbed in what stands before it, but in remaining in its own being, in collocating itself in it, in acting down here (...) Conceiving being as exteriority – breaking the ties with the panoramic existence of being and with the totality in which it produces itself – enables us to understand the meaning of *finitude*, without its limitation within Infinity, implying an incomprehensible decadence of Infinity, without finitude consisting in nostalgia for Infinity, in a backfiring pain (...) Exteriority is not a negation, but a wonder” (Levinas 1990: 300-301).

5) From this point of view, creation assumes the form of the scene where the evidence of a being that “is produced as multiple and split into Same and Other” appears. But it could also be said that the idea of a being which “is produced as multiple and split into Same and Other” is only conceivable within the scenario of creation. In this sense, in the context of this separation

⁹ In this respect, it seems to me that Levinas shares the statement expressed by Maimonides in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (III, 13) according to which “One should not believe that all beings exist for the existence of man. On the contrary, all other beings have also been wanted as an end in themselves and not as a means for some other aim (...) As far as each being is concerned, He has wanted precisely that being”.

not as a limit or a fault, Infinity “exists divinely” and proves, so to say, its deepest divinity. “*Existing divinely*” here means “*existing ethically*”. This ethics – at this level, Heidegger’s expression “original ethics” could be used – does not refer to laws and principles, but rather to the Creator’s capacity/will (at this first stage, ethics manifests itself primarily within the Creator’s initiative) to generate such a separate, other, autonomous and free being, such that it emerges as unique. It is therefore in creation, or as creation, that the idea of this ethics is particularly emphasized, an ethics meant as a “relation whose terms are not united by a synthesis of the intellect or the relation between subject and object and in which, nevertheless, a term is important or meaningful to the other”.

6) From this perspective, ethics is not a discipline which rules and legislates, but is rather, more originally/anarchically, the position or the nature itself of a being which is not collocated to be taken away – a being which is not generated to be “absorbed” and go back to the Infinite which collocated it, and which thus is its own uniqueness. As a consequence, at the “origin”¹⁰ of the creature’s being there must be that “leaving a place”, that “letting be” or “freeing” that precisely as such is ethically qualified from the very beginning. As a consequence, the multiplicity (of unique selves) is not only “compatible with Infinity’s perfection”, but it is the mode itself through which Infinity unfolds its extraordinary articulation or “production”, or, better still, “verbality”.

The path through “creation” inevitably leads to “uniqueness”. In fact, another way (and the only adequate one) to approach the idea of creation is by trying to interpret it within the perspective of *gift*. Creation, as is usually asserted, not only can, but must be meant as a donation of being from the Creator to the creature. But the term “gift” here has the deepest and most authentic meaning (or we should say the only possible meaning) in which – beyond all reciprocity/obligation, beyond all law of exchange and economy – a final and irreversible legacy is left: *being is not loaned to the creature, but given, and in this sense it is definitively its own*. From this point of view, the Creator creates and “exists divinely” precisely because He gives, but He gives because and only because He frees the creature from all obligation to give back, i.e. He lets it be, up to the point of emphasis of its uniqueness, in which the being of the creature, as it only belongs to that creature, is revealed according to the order of the most absolute event. Therefore, it is far from obvious to assert that the creature is not the Creator. Consequently, if uniqueness defines the identity of the Creator (i.e. thanks to the Creator and within the event and the “verbality” of its creation), it also certainly defines the identity of the creature.

¹⁰In connection with this idea of creation, this reference to the category of origin should be investigated thoroughly – questioned and perhaps even suspended. It is not a coincidence that Levinas did not find anything better than introducing the idea or non-idea of “anarchy”.

At this stage it is necessary to read again the following statement which, according to me, is one of the most important of all Levinas' writings: "Only the unique self is absolutely other" (Lévinas 1991: 214).

Starting from this statement, it is possible to take a big step forward towards the understanding of Levinas' thesis of ethics as first philosophy. In this case too, I will proceed in a schematic way, stressing two essential points:

1) In Levinas, the "*unique self*" is never the "*only one*", but the condition for the possibility of an authentic multiplicity, i.e. of a multiplicity that cannot be collected and arranged in a totality and which, as such, escapes all possible synthesis of the intellect. It is precisely the emphasis on uniqueness that enables us to understand in what sense, without any contradiction, it is possible to interpret this philosophy as a thought that determines itself based on an ethics as first philosophy, and which simultaneously assumes the form of an opening "beyond" ethics – or at least of a certain ethics and of a certain way of interpreting and conceiving ethics. Derrida recalled Levinas' confided words: his interest is in the sacred, rather than ethics, it is in the sanctity of the sacred, i.e. the separate, the absolutely separate, in the self who is delivered – based on this absolute separateness – to "relation without relation" with the other, with another separate self, another absolutely other and separate self, i.e. with the unique self. From this perspective, ethics emerges as the locus of separation/tie, and thus significance, between unique selves. Ultimately, Levinas' philosophy is therefore not a philosophy of the other, of the difference of the other man, but not even of the unique self. It is rather a philosophy of exteriority/multiplicity of unique selves, or, better still, *it is a conception of ethics as the locus of that "relation without relation" in which the affirmation and the meaning of the unique selves emerge*. This specificity can also be formulated in another way. If, as for example in Medieval thought, the knowledge of being in its own individuality is infinitely deeper and nobler than its knowledge in an abstract and universal way, then this "knowledge"¹¹, - in order to be such and to be expressed as such, thus avoiding sublimation in ineffability or in mystical silence – requires reference to the *logos* of ethics as the only possible locus where the thought of the one can be developed in positive terms: "The way in which the face *indicates* its absence under my responsibility *requires* a description which uses the ethical language" (Lévinas 1974: 118)¹².

The distance emphatically introduced by Levinas between his way of meaning ethics as first philosophy and the way of meaning it as a discipline –

¹¹ The inverted commas are necessary here to indicate once again the distance that should be established from a "thought which proceeds by discipline". Referring to Heidegger for the last time, it is still that thought which is not yet "ontology"/"ethics" or philosophy as "science", but which is nonetheless not "illogical or immoral".

¹² My italics.

as belonging to the “thought that proceeds by discipline” – should now be completely clear, precisely in relation to the event of uniqueness and the event itself as uniqueness: “The ethical language which has been used does not proceed from a special moral experience, independently of the description given so far. *The ethical situation of responsibility cannot be understood starting from ethics (...)* The tropes of the ethical language are suitable for certain structures of description: approximation which emerges over knowledge; the face which cuts short with the phenomenon” (Lévinas 1974: 151-152)¹³.

Finally, then, in Levinas' thought, ethics never assumes the form of the locus of the ineffability of the unique self, but always and only of its meaning, the locus of the sayability of the unique self in relation to the exteriority/multiplicity of the unique selves.

2) The second point that should be stressed regards Levinas' concept of “otherwise than being”. Here it seems to me that his thought should be interpreted from two different perspectives: if being is meant in a univocal sense – and undoubtedly, this is how Levinas means it – then, in order to understand being in its “ultimate structure” (in which it “is produced as multiple and split into Same and Other”), it is necessary to escape, abandon “being” and all that this term implies. More precisely, it is necessary to abandon the way of thinking according to which the term “to be” – meant in this first way – is both cause and effect.

If, on the contrary (and here is Levinas' thesis, although he does not express it in this way), being can be expressed in “many ways”, then it is exactly these “ways”, this “diversity” of and in ways, it is the idea itself and the possibility of ways that has an ethical character from the very beginning and even before the beginning. If there is a way – which obviously means if there is a diversity of ways – then it is necessary (as already mentioned, in a certain sense even before man, even before human modality) to make use of the *logos* of ethics in order to say and think of the being in its different ways of being.

At this stage, the reference to “category”, or rather, to the “position” of uniqueness is revealed in all its importance. Uniqueness must be meant as the way of the very being of being. Consequently, if “being is produced as multiple and split into Same and Other”, and if the way of being itself of being ultimately refers to its uniqueness, then being always is, or is produced, or happens, or occurs as otherwise than being. It could also be said that if the verbliness of being is indissoluble from the modality of uniqueness, being always and only is and carries out its “task of being” according to the modality of otherwise than be-

¹³ My italics. Based on the analysis developed so far, the sentence in italics should be interpreted as follows: the ethical situation of responsibility, and therefore the “sense of ethics”, “the ethics of ethics” or “original ethics” cannot be understood starting from ethics as a discipline, as a group of laws and principles. This “original ethics” therefore concerns a situation, a position and it regards “certain structures”; in this sense it is an ethics beyond ethics.

ing. In other words, as the unique self, as such, is always otherwise, and as the otherwise is the modality itself of uniqueness, then being in its occurring always occurs according to the modality of otherwise than being. The way of being of the unique self is always the way of otherwise than being.

THE CENTRALITY OF MAN OR THE REDEMPTION FROM CREATION

In order to understand the meaning of Levinas' determination of ethics as first philosophy, we should take a final step. In fact, it is now necessary to review and partly correct the above mentioned "paradoxical" thesis according to which in Levinas' writings, ethics does not only have to do with man and the human, as ethical concerns, but more essentially, with the deepest nature of reality and therefore of reality as such. The last step that should be taken now heads towards the following statement by Levinas, which is included in the above mentioned passage about the idea of creation: "Man redeems creation". What does this redemption mean and what relation does it have with the ethics described so far?

As a matter of fact, this "redemption" regards every creature because it concerns a creature's uniqueness. As stressed several times, it is precisely the absolute positivity of the creature, which is absolute to the extreme of uniqueness, which glorifies the Creator, who is Creator because "capable" of leaving a total being, of freeing the creature and delivering it completely and definitively to itself. It is in this delivery, in this radical legacy which is given, that Infinity "exists divinely". However, this delivery, which concerns every creature as it is an end in itself, is revealed in man for what it ultimately is – that is a call to being, which should never only be meant as a call to the Creator, but also as a call from the Creator to the creatures' selves. The Creator, by creating, delivers the creature to itself, but in this way He also calls it to itself, not to get mistaken and not to mistake, thus recognising the uniqueness that constitutes it.

In this context, human being can be meant as the only uniqueness which is up to the idea of uniqueness itself, i.e. as that creature which is able to recognise and respond, thanks to its uniqueness, to the call to uniqueness which certainly concerns every creature, but which is not exalted as such in all creatures. From this point of view, it is as if in human beings the call to the self which concerns the deepest nature of the idea of creaturalty were exalted in the meaning of the response. This response (using the above mentioned definition of ethics by Levinas) is the relation itself in which the "weight", the "importance", the "significance" of a unique self *for* another is emphasized.

The response of the creature that emerges in the human or as human, therefore the response of a unique self, can only be a response simultaneous

to the uniqueness of the Creator, the uniqueness of the other creatures and the uniqueness of the selves as creatures. Man is that unique self in which uniqueness is exalted in the acknowledgement and the response to the unique selves, a unique self responding as unique self, the unique selves. Beyond this response, uniqueness undoubtedly persists, but it is as if it did not mean anything, as if it always remained confused and unexpressed. By responding, on the contrary, it can only respond according to the uniqueness which characterises it. In the response, *which only belongs to man*, uniqueness is exalted and thus it has a meaning for what it is, i.e. for the other.

This response is responsibility itself. The "redemption" that Levinas speaks about in relation to human is nothing but this condition of responding/responsible: "I am one and irreplaceable – one as irreplaceable in responsibility" (Lévinas 1974: 129).

Ethics appears as the locus of meaning of uniqueness as uniqueness within the response of the unique self towards and for the unique selves. Before coming to my conclusion, I would like to mention the most rigorous consequence that Levinas draws from his idea of ethics as the locus of "relation without relation" between unique selves. This consequence must be meant as the accomplishment of the assertion according to which "Only the unique self is absolutely other". I will mention briefly a passage of *Totalité et Infini* which, if not read in the context of the turn from alterity to uniqueness on which the idea of ethics as first philosophy is based, would emerge (based on the usual conception of Levinas' thought) as not only contradictory, but even completely incomprehensible. In the first section of this work, in the few lines which precede the chapter entitled "Transcendence Is Not Negativity", using *Totalité et Infini's* typical lexicon, Levinas asserts: "Thought' and 'interiority' are the breaking point from being and *the production (not the reflex)* [my italics S.P.] of transcendence. We know this relation – which is already important for this reason – only to the extent in which we realise it. *Alterity is only possible starting from me* [my italics S.P.]" (Levinas 1990: 37-38).

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Silvano Petrosino

LEVINO „PIRMOSIOS FILOSOFIJOS“ SAMPRATA

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnio tikslas – išnagrinėti Levino etikos kaip pirmosios filosofijos apibrėžimo prasmę. Iš tikrųjų, visą Levino kūrybinį palikimą persmelkęs siekis yra radikalus: čia ne tiek nustatinėjami kokios nors moralės principai, kiek veikia apčiuopiama ir išreiškiamą moralės terminais gilioji tikrovės esmė. Šia prasme etika yra „pirmoji filosofija“, nes, filosofo manymu, tik etiniais terminais įmanoma mąstyti ir nusakyti „tikrovės paslaptį“, ar, vartojant *Totalité et Infini* leksiką, „galutinę buvimo struktūrą“. Šio straipsnio hipotezė: norint adekvačiai suprasti šio radikalaus siekio prasmę, būtina nuo skirtumo temos pereiti prie vienatinumo temos.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Levinas, etika, pirmoji filosofija, skirtumas, vienatinumas.