The Risk and Promise of Communication: Levinas and Ricoeur on Language, Responsibility, and Recognition

Andris Breitling

The aim of this paper is to confront Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of responsibility with the philosophy of mutual recognition (reconnaissance mutuelle) that Paul Ricoeur has developed in his last book, The Course of Recognition. In this confrontation, the concept of communication will serve as a guide, since it seems well suited to help introducing the central ideas of both authors, as well as to mark the point of disagreement between them.

From the perspective of a hermeneutic phenomenology, such as Ricoeur has developed it since the 1960s,1 the main problem posed by communication would seem to be that of understanding and interpreting what others have said or written,—a task which requires overcoming the differences between persons belonging to different cultures, having a different outlook on the world, or speaking different languages. On Levinas’ view, on the contrary, the crucial problem of communication is that of the “opening” of communication, which confronts us with the question of what it means to respond to the other’s address, and why we should do so at all,—that is, the ethical question of responsibility. For Levinas, the relation of address and response is marked by the absolute alterity of the other, and thus by an ineradicable dissymmetry. This position presents a challenge to Ricoeur, who maintains that by way of a communicative exchange leading to mutual recognition, a common ground of understanding can be established.

The first part of this paper is devoted to explaining what Levinas means when he describes communication as an “opening” or an “overture” (ouverture) in Otherwise than Being, characterizing it as “a fine risk to be run” (un beau risque à courir) (1). In the second part, the problem of a transition from “saying” (le Dire) to “the said” (le Dit) is briefly discussed,—a problem that Levinas tries to solve by introducing the notion of “the third” (le tiers), which already served to designate the connection between language, truth, and justice in Totality

and Infinity (II). As will be shown in the third part, this problem is the focus of Ricoeur’s critique of Levinas, as he has articulated it especially in Oneself as Another (III). Taking this critique as an introduction to Ricoeur’s own conception of the relation between the self and the other, his philosophy of recognition is presented in the fourth part of this paper (IV). In this context, the question will have to be discussed whether it is possible, as Ricoeur claims, to “integrate” the dissymmetry which Levinas shows to mark the ethical relation, within a relation of mutual recognition. Returning to the theme of language and communication, then, the fifth part examines to what extent Levinas’ conception of language as a paradigm of a “non-allergic” relation to the other (as presented in Totality and Infinity) can be related to Ricoeur’s notion of the gift (le don) (V). Finally, Ricoeur’s notion of “linguistic hospitality” (hospitalité langagière) will be compared with Levinas’ notion of hospitality or “welcome” (accueil), in order to specify in what sense communication contains not only a risk, but also a promise: namely, the promise of a peaceful, creative exchange between interlocutors who do not thereby merge in the unity of a common identity, but still remain others for one another (VI).

1 “A Fine Risk to be Run”: Levinas on Communication

In Otherwise than Being, Levinas characterizes communication as “a fine risk to be run” (un beau risque à courir). This telling expression makes it clear that for him, communication does not primarily serve the function of transmitting messages or pieces of information, as in classical communication theory. Nor is its main purpose to establish an understanding or agreement about certain norms or matters of fact by exchanging arguments, as in Platonic dialogue or in Habermas’ theory of “communicative action” and of consensus-oriented “discourse.” For Levinas, what is essential about communication is the “opening” or the “overture” (ouverture) of communication, that is the act or rather the event (passively experienced by whoever is addressed or spoken to) of entering into a relation with an interlocutor, which implies an openness or opening up towards the other.

This opening of communication presents a risk insofar as it is not warranted by the regular functioning of any “language game” or “discourse” (in the sense

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2 Emmanuel Levinas, Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence (Paris, 2001), p. 190; Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, 1981), p. 120.
3 Levinas, Autrement qu’être, p. 189; Levinas, Otherwise than Being, p. 119.