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META-DIALOGUE AND IDENTITY
OR THE RECOVERY OF MEANING

“The idea of responsibility for the other plays a central role in the philosophy of Lévinas. Influenced among others by Dostoevsky, he develops an ethical I-concept which is based on encountering the other/Other.

... la relation intersubjective est une relation non-symétrique. En ce sens, je suis responsable d’autrui sans attendre la réciproque, dût-il m’en coûter la vie. La réciproque, c’est son affaire. C’est précisément dans la mesure où entre autrui et moi la relation n’est pas réciproque, que je suis sujétion à autrui; et je suis ‘sujet’ essentiellement en ce sens. C’est moi qui supporte tout. Vous connaissez cette phrase de Dostoïevski: ‘Nous sommes tous coupables de tout et de tous devant tous, et moi plus que les autres.’ Non pas à cause de telle ou telle culpabilité effectivement mienne, à cause de fautes que j’aurais commises; mais parce que je suis responsable d’une responsabilité totale, qui répond de tous les autres et de tout chez les autres, même de leur responsabilité. Le moi a toujours une responsabilité de plus que tous les autres.”

The aim of the following is, by means of Lévinas’ epistemes, to enable the subject in crisis to find a way out of its postmodern atrophy and, at the same time, attempt the reconstruction of meaning instead of the decay of meaning. The text is therefore divided into four parts. First, the constitution of the ethical subject in Lévinas and its linguistic expression will be dealt with. This will be followed by a section about the anthropological aspect of his model of subjectivity. Thirdly, the

2. Ibid., p. 105.
role and function of mnemonics in forming the identity of the ethical subject will be examined, and fourthly, I will go into the textological consequences arising especially in literary theory from the before mentioned insofar as they are relevant for the postmodern debate.

I. Speaking between saying and said

The genesis of the ethical subject includes, in Lévinas' thought, not only an anthropological but also a linguistic model that I will call meta-dialogue in the following. This model tries, in the context of the so often "lamented" end of the individual in the modern age which at the same time also includes the end of communication, to make interpersonal communication possible again. In other words, the meta-dialogue asks the fundamental question about ability and/or consensus of the subjects. Thus, the meta-dialogue, because it is based on the concept of "person," can enable the individual to get out of his "original" indivisibility which implies an "un-communicability".

Both components of the meta-dialogue are, on the one hand, the informal form of address in Jewish mysticism (יהוה שומע [hear!]), what Lévinas calls the genesis of the ego through the Other, that is the "fact of being called," the process of the active "moi-forming" from the passive "soi," and the resulting movements in two directions: one forwards, active towards the other (person), and one backwards, which is, however, not reflexive and which refers to itself. The latter demands a mnemonic-practising ego that is subject to the command of "ז"כח" (Zackor [Remember]). The meta-dialogue is therefore a double dialogue which opposes nominalistic thought, which encourages the retreat of the individual and consequently his renunciation of communication.

My thesis is that in the meta-dialogue, which consists of two aspects of subjectivity, in one of which two directions are inherent, meaning can, at the moment of their encounter be re-established, when we start from the Hebrew דבר (dāvār) instead of the occidental Greek λόγος.

What do we gain by this assumption? It is known that the occidental philosophical thinking, that had been predominant in the philosophy of the West for centuries and reached its limit in the modern era, is based upon the fundamental connotation of λόγος that includes many different meanings such as "word," "sentence," "speech," "thought" and also "calculation". Boman rightly refers to the root "λέγω" of "λόγος = to collect, to order" which is inherent in the word. We must therefore start from a conception of the word which has nothing to do with the speech function but with the sense which has to be well-ordered - and that means here "rational". Λόγος in its purest expression refers to divine (well-


4. This aspect is also found in Buber. He calls it the "I-Thou-relation." Cf. M. Buber, Ich und Du (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1994).