Levinas, Benjamin, and the Oppressed

Annabel Herzog
University of Haifa, Israel

Passages and Impasses

Any attempt to read Levinas and Benjamin conjointly might, at first glance, seem somewhat contrived. Levinas was an ethical philosopher and Benjamin's work is generally seen as literary criticism. It would be more than trite to observe that Benjamin's interest in Romanticism and Marxism does not match Levinas's phenomenological influences and that his mystical attention to Kabbalah is rejected by Levinas, who preferred Talmudic sources. Furthermore, Benjamin and Levinas wrote during different historical periods: the "pile of ruins" watched by the horrified "Angel of History" in 1940 seems benign in comparison with the mounds of ashes faced by the witness of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. All of this explains why an affinity between these authors has been noted, but never explored at length.1 In this paper, I will attempt to explore this affinity, which appears in spite of the clear differences between these two thinkers. I will examine what could be called passages or correspondances in the Baudelairean sense between the thought of Benjamin and Levinas.

At this point, I do not intend to add to the discussion about the connections between critical theory and post-structuralist readings of Levinas, which would exist despite the dispute between Habermas and postmodernists.2 The affinity that I wish to analyse is not immediately extendable to trends of thought, although such an extension could be attempted in future discussions. As I interpret them, Levinas and Benjamin converge in


their focus on the weak, poor, and oppressed “others”. The others that I “face” in Levinas’s ethics are homeless and persecuted; they are outsiders, they exist “beyond the State”. I will argue that Levinas’s others are therefore similar to the dead and the oppressed mentioned by Benjamin in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”.

Some might claim that the focus on defeated and marginal others is merely a reformulation of the Marxist emphasis on the “wretched of the earth”, and that “to brush history against the grain” or to be in relation to “a surplus always exterior to the totality” does not indisputably constitute an alternative to proletarian revolution (moreover, Benjamin was a Marxist). However, Marxism sheds light on the marginal side of history in order to reveal it as authentic humanity: The wretched of the earth form the majority of genuine social actors who are at the same time controlled and denied by a minority of oppressors, and who will reach full consciousness of their reality thereby to end alienation. In Benjamin’s as in Levinas’s thinking, there is no hope to establish authenticity, then to reconcile humanity. The poor and defeated are not revealed as authentic but they are “faced” and “traced” (Levinas), or “shown” and “remembered” (Benjamin). In both cases they are regarded as poor and defeated, never as potentially and hence, essentially, victorious.

Therefore, this paper does not simply bring Benjamin and Levinas together; but it also deals with a possible deadlock in their philosophies. A deadlock because, as Rebecca Comay says of Benjamin, “It is not here a question of . . . bringing the margins into the center, essentializing the inessential, thus turning losers into winners according to the endlessly familiar dialectic . . . of the qui perd gagne”. A deadlock also because is it not true that the refusal to essentialize the inessential leads to inertia, and to a simple acknowledgment of the weakness of the weak? How do historical materialism and ethics avoid turning losers into winners? What is their function if not to help the poor become “rich”? Can we decently face the poor, brush history against the grain, without bringing the margins into the centre? Does this not mean complete passivity (Levinas uses the word), a passivity that is unacceptable in the context of the fate of the defeated and repressed?

I will first focus on Benjamin and Levinas’s concern for those who transcend, or are left outside of the victors’ narrative of sameness and, hence, outside all versions of the ontological “jargon of authenticity”. I will illustrate that this concern leads Benjamin and Levinas to conceptualize – albeit differently – human relationships as “catastrophe”.

---


