BEYOND BEING. ONTOLOGY AND ESCHATOLOGY IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

Paradoxalement c’est en tant, qu’aliens — étranger et autre — que l’homme n’est pas aliéné. Le Dit et le Dire, 48.

BY

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Nearly forty years ago Vollenhoven announced his program of a “reformation” of philosophy. I would like to use the opportunity of his eightieth birthday to draw attention to another critique of current Western philosophy, a critique which is no less radical than Vollenhoven’s and is also inspired by religion. When, in the preface to Totalité et Infini, Levinas opposes the “eschatology of messianic peace” to the “ontology of war”, he posits an antithesis between the Jewish prophetic tradition and the whole of Western philosophy which he considers dominated by the concept of totality.\(^1\) In contrast to totalitarian thinking that would comprehend God, men, and history in one all-embracing system where individuals are no more than moments of the whole, he poses an ontological pluralism.

Levinas speaks of the fundamental fact of the “ontological scission between Same and Other.”\(^2\) Now there exist in Western philosophy also many forms of dualism and pluralism along with monistic systems. In order to understand Levinas’ thought, it is, however, essential to understand this pluralism in terms of his idea of messianic peace. The relation between the beings, which makes it impossible to reduce the Other (l’Autre, Autrui) to the Same (le Même) is very specific. Levinas certainly does not plead for the existence of autonomous monads which, for their plurality, must pay with an ontologically necessary self-limitation. In Totalité et Infini, the relation between the Same and the Other is characterized as responsibility,

In this article we have employed the following abbreviations to refer to the works of Levinas:

HAH Humanisme de l’autre homme, Montpellier, 1972.

For an analysis of the early works of Levinas, including TI I suggest my article ‘De wijsbegeerte van Levinas als ethische transcendentalfilosofie’, Algemeen Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Wijsbegeerte, 64 (1972), 39-65.

\(^1\) TI X.
\(^2\) TI 251 ff., 282.
goodness, hospitality, and humility; in later articles he prefers the terms substitution and pledge (otage). It is this ethical relation, which he also calls "religion", that founds pluralism. When the Other is reduced to the Same, messianic peace turns into the peace of the imperia (pax Romana, pax Americana), i.e., into the peace resulting from death or from the subjection of the other.

I.

In the preceding brief account, it is not difficult to recognize two themes that Vollenhoven has stressed. According to Vollenhoven, the 'leading motive' behind Christian philosophy is the distinction between God and the creation. The second motive is that religion is a covenant (unio foederalis). Both motives or themes dovetail, as the following pronouncement indicates:

"Now this covenant is certainly not a relation that must be sought within the cosmos, for in this covenant God relates to man, thereby relating man to Himself. Thus, this relation is one in which God does not but man does belong to the cosmos: the relation does not lie within the cosmos, but, since the cosmos is included in it, it points beyond the cosmos".

Here we can again say that the distinction between the Creator and the created is not just any distinction, but must be understood in terms of the specific relation of the covenant. This cannot be compared with any intra-cosmic relation or connection. I believe this is one of the reasons why Vollenhoven has always been careful to dissociate from current forms of dualism and pluralism. The covenant is a relation sui generis, characterized by faithfulness and obedience. Levinas expresses this same notion with his favorite play upon words: the difference between the Same and the Other is a fundamental non-indifference.

We see how Vollenhoven wrestles with language when he tries to show the distinction between God and man. He speaks of a boundary between God and the cosmos. Vollenhoven remarks, however, that the term "boundary" can evoke something spatial, e.g., a circle divides a plane in two parts, that which the circumference includes and that which it excludes. But this cannot be his intention. A spatial boundary separates something within the cosmos from something else, "and this is done in such a way that the latter lies outside the former". But this, according to Vollenhoven, does not do

3 D. H. Th. Vollenhoven, Het calvinisme en de reformatie der wijsbegeerte, Amsterdam, 1933, 51. The question of the boundary between God and the cosmos is also called the "first question of philosophy", see also ibid., 21.
4 Vollenhoven, op.cit. 21, 38. The third motive (hoofdstelling), which is about the fall into sin, death, and the grace of God through the Mediator, is outside the scope of this article.
5 Vollenhoven, op.cit. 41.
6 Vollenhoven, op.cit. 53; characteristic for Biblical philosophy is that it does not reduce to intra-cosmic relations "the relation between God, who is elevated above the cosmos, and mankind, which belongs to the cosmos".