

Simon Critchley, *The Problem with Levinas*, Alexis Dianda (ed.), Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 176, £ 25.00, ISBN 9780198738763

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The book arises from a tragic circumstance: the Author fell in the middle of the night and suffered of a painful fracture to his writing arm, which forced him to think over the Levinasian philosophical approach. The symbolism of the injury and the fall in the dark immediately evokes some famous pages written by the Author of *Totality and Infinity*, rushing the reader into the midst of the arduous landscape of Levinasian thought. Critchley aims to find a new path to overstep the problem of Levinas, namely: turning the tragic drama of finitude into divine comedy.

The book is divided into five lectures: each one explores a different perspective on a problematic aspect in Levinasian reflection, which represent a fracture or a divergence in the Western philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger. Since philosophers sought to write “a one-act drama whose hero is a character called Being”, conversely, Levinas tried “to write a drama with a multiplicity of acts” based on an ontological pluralism (p.108). The problem with Levinas is that his philosophy is been often reduced “to a series of slogans” (p.132) about the notion of alterity or on the priority of ethics, when the picture is more complex, as the Author suggests from the beginning of his work.

The first section immediately exposes the innovative foundation of the entire book: Levinasian thought cannot just be considered as philosophy or as moral reflection, but also as drama (p.11). Such a peculiar method helps the reader to go beyond the strictly phenomenological interpretations of Levinasian works and to challenge philosophy on an uncanny field. In fact, drama is the place for inaction, “the action happens elsewhere, offstage” (p.10), so it is the place for ambiguity. When Plato creates a specific discursive disposition, called *philosophia*, by the exclusion of the tragic poets in the *Politeia*, he leads his thought to another form of drama, the Socratic dialogue, while “the lesson of tragedy, the truth of what Plato would see as its lie, consists in the ability to bear moral ambiguity” (p.11). This splits justice into two conflicting opposites and introduces the relational form. This conception of drama follows through an innovative method of

inquiry in Levinasian works, which Critchley exploits to unlock some controversial aspects in the relationship between Levinas and Heidegger. Both of the thinkers link the fundamental ontology “to the rich variety of intentional life” (p.15) and they both develop the problem of facticity. Nevertheless, “the dramatic event of Being-in-the-world” (p.20) as an involvement and an affective disposition does not originate pure action. Every act leaves some traces: everything I intentionally do entails many *other* actions I did not intend to do. This is the tragedy of finitude, for Levinas: I am responsible beyond my intentions and my actions. Thus, Levinas introduces the concept of the infinite in order to escape finitude: a key process in Lecture two.

In the first part of this lecture, the Author dismantles the comfortable picture of Levinas upholding liberalism. Critchley takes the study of the early writing on the philosophy of Hitlerism as his starting point to show the incapacity of liberalism to respond to Hitlerism Liberalism “simply extends the unthinking privilege of theoretical consciousness onto the political domain, producing a subject of rights” (p.34). Judaism, Christianity and liberalism share a common trait: “the idea of freedom from the limitation of historical existence” (p.35) that relieves us from the tragedy of being stuck in time. The Marxist critique of liberalism, then, cannot break this eschatological aspect, although it accomplishes it. To overcome this problem, Levinas focuses on the notion of embodiment. Western thought has often been committed to the separation between the body and the soul. In contrast, Hitlerism is based on “the *identity* between the self and the body” (p.37), so the human being is riveted to himself. The social structure arises from a community of consanguineous bodies claiming to universality from which racism arises. Even if Levinas shares the need to remove the gap between spiritual life and concreteness of the flesh with Heidegger (and with the philosophy of Hitlerism), his inquiry goes in a different direction: the Author of *Otherwise than Being* intends to show that “being is brutal. It is the experience of brute weight, a burden we have to carry” (p.58).

Corporal brutality is strictly connected to the experience of need and especially of desire, both revealing the condemnation to malaise and undermining the idea of self-sufficiency: human beings are radically partial, constitutionally not free and imprisoned in the to-and-fro structure of pleasure and desire. In these pages, Critchley highlights that both the notion of freedom

and the process of embodiment are perilously close to Heideggerianism and Hitlerism, but if facticity is something we are riveted to, then “Levinas raises the question of trying to get out being by a new path” (p.60). The impasse, here, consists of the absence of any guarantee to reach an unexplored path. Moreover, in Levinas’ early writings there is no secure answer to the exigency of a way out from Metaphysics.

Fortunately Levinas spent the rest of his philosophical career trying to reply to this question and to develop the potentialities of the *otherwise* than being. Critchley neatly explains this intent in the third Lecture, beginning precisely from some considerations on *Otherwise than Being, Or beyond Essence* where Levinas pursues a strategy to escape the bonds of facticity by understanding subjectivity “as a non-coincidence with the self itself, an otherness in the self, a substitution” (p.65). Subjectivity is a *non-lieu*: this specific null-site is the place where the escape reconfigures the subject as an account of responsibility for the other, who keeps the subject in hostage and persecutes him. The notion of null-site offers the opportunity to meditate on the “immemorial” versus the obsession for memorization. As the monument represents an ode to memorial, always related to the “place and, to speak crudely, the organization of visibility, image, and impersonal phallic power” (p.67), the “immonument” is deeply personal, unrepresentable, invisible. The language Levinas uses to describe such a dynamic is characterized by words like “traumatic”, “obsession”, “hostage”, “persecution”, “wound” and so on. It is precisely in these terms that ethics can resort, turning negativity and passivity into the ultra-passive responsibility. Critchley, then, shows clearly the connection of this kind of responsibility with anarchy, a form of negation without affirmation, which uproots the principle of non-contradiction and affects the subject from outside.

Levinas describes the “dramatic movement of passivity that *is* the self” (p.72) as enigmatic, indescribable and beyond words, bound to the circulation of the Saying and the Said, where the first is “the pre-positional experience of language that takes place in the relation to the Other” (p.76) and the second is the actual expression in words. There is not a pure Saying since it needs to be articulated in an actual language. Critchley moves from this consideration to describe the role of antic scepticism, “which is not a theoretical worry about the external world, but a *life practice*, an orientation for living” (p.77) in Levinasian argument.

Once more, the otherwise than being reveals its connection with the concrete existence, made both by a radical ambiguity in the articulation of any moral principle and by a powerless performativity: “we cannot evade responsibility” (p.80) which keeps the subject in hostage.

The Author argues that, from *TI* to *OTB*, Levinas is putting onstage a kind of identity that can only exist by virtue of the impossible relation with the other. In *OTB* the alterity is internal to subjectivity: I cannot escape my limbs, my blood, my lungs, I am *this* body, but I can operate a substitution. Critchley displays a wide overview on the concept of substitution, which avoids the obstacle of evasion and presents an eccentric, anarchic and asymmetric form of identity (which is immediately relational in her deep structure). Substitution becomes a “strong claim for pre-conscious, non-conscious, un-conscious conception of identity, an identity that repeats, that throbs, that insists, that contracts” (p.86), but it does not offer anything except a different form of imprisonment and captivity.

Reaching this stage, the Author moves back to *TI* in order to highlight the other side of the dynamic of substitution in the father-son relationship and in the notion of fecundity. This is one of the most controversial – sometimes stodgy – points in Levinasian philosophy, as thinkers like Derrida and Irigaray variously observed. Lecture four concerns both these questions, related to the notion of eros in Levinasian thought, and their connection with Mysticism. The relationship with the Other is antecedent to the ego, is pre-reflective and is ethical. Critchley wants to underline that this relation is based on notions like eros, fecundity, fraternity and especially pluralism expressed in the section “*Beyond the Face*” in *TI*, where “Levinas’ entire phenomenology finds its condition of possibility in a drama of *conjunctures in being*” (p.95). Eros is the way out of the tragedy of finitude because it is the conduit “through which the father finds transcendence for himself in his relation to the child” (p.97), who is always a *son*. The child provides the ground for the comedy since he establishes a radical pluralism and suspends the repetition of ego, where plurality is meant not simply as a political form but as “something that ontologically structures our relation to and through the child” (p.105). This rupture of continuity suggests a connection with the messianic time (introduced in the Preface of *TI*) in which “the infinite time of my relation with the child would be overcome in eternity” (p.109). Mentioning

Irigaray's works on Levinas, the author hinges his argument, in the following pages, on the *Song of Songs* in order to examine the difference between male and female – who is the *hidden* – in Levinasian eros and to clarify that this “nuptial drama” tends towards a proliferation of voices from the narrative one. From the different interpretations and translations of the *Song of Songs* to the Christian female mystical experience, Critchley elaborates a vivid perspective on the connection between love, eros and identity capable of breathing life into Levinasian relation to the other.

The problem *of* and *with* Levinas, indeed, lies exactly in the urgency of escaping facticity by “the experience of love, at once mystical and somatic, where both are rooted in an experience of enjoyment” (p.139) which is not a simple exchange of favors. Mysticism is not intended as a fusion with the other, but as a practice of de-creation, absence, darkness. Ultimately, mysticism represents a privileged route to contrast the tyranny of egoity and to nurture a truly *ethical* relationship. Even if the author does not examine this connection with mystical elements in the Jewish tradition, he outlines the importance of a different standpoint on Levinasian thought. This book can steer the research on Levinas into a partially uncharted field, a *problematic* one since it raises many unsolved questions.

What Critchley does in his book is not simply to explain how Levinas impressed a new twist to Western thought – preventing the chance to go back to a pre-Levinasian philosophy – he is also experimenting this method by dramatizing philosophy. Finally, drama is intended as “a series of ascending negations: neither tragedy nor comedy, neither epic nor lyric, neither sentimental nor cynical”, something that portrays and represents our lineaments “in all the difficulty of being us” (p.132). *The problem with Levinas*, written in a colloquial style, provides both an accurate confrontation between Levinas and Hegel, Heidegger, Derrida and Irigaray, and many lively, brilliant parallels with literature (i.e. Racine's *Phedra*, Shakespeare's *Sonnets* or Joyce's *Ulysses*). Therefore, it portrays Levinas from many different angles. Moreover, by an intense skin-to-skin approach to Levinasian writings, Critchley discloses a “less familiar – and perhaps more troubling picture” (p.134) of an often misunderstood thinker, and a way to enhance the potential of a different – more dramatic? – Philosophical project.

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