

Emmanuel Levinas, 1906–1995

Emmanuel Levinas, who died in Paris on 25 December 1995, was born on 12 January 1906 in Kovno (Kaunas) in Lithuania. His parents were practising Jews and part of an important Jewish community. Most members of his family were killed by the Nazis. Levinas grew up reading the Bible in Hebrew, although Russian was the language of his early education and he had fluent German. In 1923 he went to Strasbourg, where he obtained a *licence* in philosophy, studying with philosophers like Charles Blondel, and began his lifelong friendship with Maurice Blanchot. After discovering Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, Levinas spent the year 1928–29 in Freiburg, attending Husserl's final seminar. However, during this time Levinas read Heidegger's *Being and Time*, attended the famous encounter with Cassirer in Davos, and became increasingly persuaded of the validity of the Heideggerian critique of Husserl's intellectualism and Cartesianism. The results of his research were presented in his doctoral dissertation, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, defended when Levinas was only twenty-three, and which, together with other early publications, introduced phenomenology to Sartre and other key figures in French philosophy. The importance of Levinas in the translation of Husserl and Heidegger into French philosophy cannot be overestimated.

Levinas did not enter the French university system as a professor until 1961, and most of his career was spent at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, where he became Director after the war. In 1939, he served as an officer in the French army, working as an interpreter of Russian and German. In 1940 he became a prisoner of war, and because of his officer status he was sent not to a concentration camp but to a military prisoners' camp where he did forced labour. The postwar years were marked by the meeting with Monsieur Chouchani, with whom Levinas studied the Talmud, a study which has resulted in a series of five volumes of Talmudic readings, the last of which, *Nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques*, appeared just a couple of weeks after his death. Most of these readings originate in lectures presented at the Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française, of which Levinas was an animating influence. Although Levinas's thinking is quite unthinkable without its Judaic inspiration, one should be careful not to categorize him simply as a Jewish philosopher. Levinas was a philosopher *and* a Jew, a point made by the fact that his philosophical work and his Talmudic readings appear with different publishers.

Turning to his philosophical work, although Levinas was thinking originally and independently prior to the war, notably in a stunning 1935 essay 'De l'évasion' (which anticipates many later developments), his first original book is *De l'existence à l'existant* of 1947, largely written in captivity. What this title discreetly announces is the complete reversal of the orientation of Heidegger's thinking of ontological difference, which attempts to think Being (*Sein, être, existence*) beyond its metaphysical determination in terms of beings (*das Seiende, l'étant, l'existant*). For Levinas, it is a matter of reversing the direction of Heidegger's thinking from the ontological to the ontic and focusing on another

form of transcendence, not the transcendence of Being but that of the other person. For Levinas – and for reasons that are as much ethical and political as epistemological – we must leave the climate of Heidegger's thinking, but we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian. The philosophical paradigm shift effected by Heidegger's radicalization of Husserlian phenomenology is decisive and irreversible.

In the heady intellectual context of Parisian postwar existentialism, Levinas's early philosophical work attracted little interest. Although a series of lectures given at Jean Wahl's Collège Philosophique in 1946–47 and published as *Le temps et l'autre* drew some attention (see, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's critical remarks in the Preface to *The Second Sex*), it is fair to say that until the 1960s, and even after, Levinas remained a minor figure in French philosophical life, primarily known as an interpreter of Husserl and Heidegger. For example, Vincent Descombes' *Contemporary French Philosophy* published in 1979, and claiming to give an overview of the French philosophical scene from 1933 to

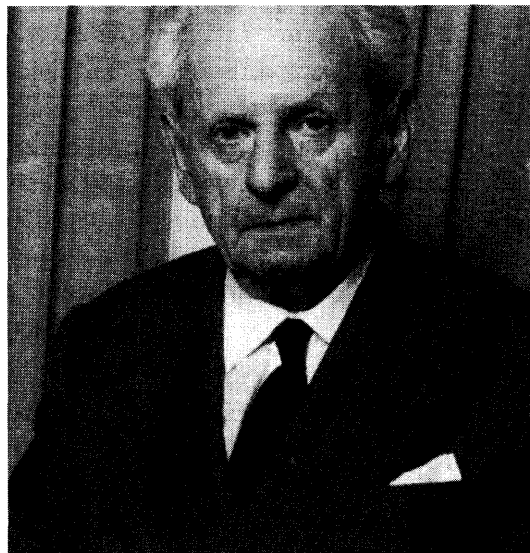
1978, makes absolutely no mention of Levinas. The first significant research on Levinas was done in Belgium and the Netherlands, and Levinas's presently towering influence in the English-speaking world is to a great extent due to Derrida's influence, based on the latter's brilliant 1964 essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'.

Levinas's independent philosophical reputation was established by the publication of his main thesis for the Doctorat d'Etat, *Totalité et infini*, in 1961. In the same year he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at Poitiers and in 1967 at Paris-Nanterre. He moved to the Sorbonne (Paris IV) in 1973 and retired in 1976, although he continued to direct a seminar until 1980. His second major book, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* – which many scholars consider his finest achievement – appeared in 1974, and since that time more than a dozen books have appeared, notably *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* in 1982. For Anglophone readers looking for a way in to Levinas, his series of conversations with Philippe Nemo, *Ethics and Infinity*, remains a good starting point. An anthology, *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, will appear later this year with Indiana University Press, who have also published a fine edition of Levinas's Talmudic readings.

What is Levinas's philosophical work concerned with? Levinas is usually associated with one thesis: *ethics is first philosophy*. But such an eviscerated statement risks creating more problems than



it solves, and goes no way towards capturing the phenomenological richness and breadth of Levinas's work. For me, what remains essential to Levinas's *writing* (and his extraordinary style of writing should be noted here: strange, elliptical, rhapsodic, sensual) is not its contribution to arcane debates in moral philosophy, but rather its powerful descriptions of the night, insomnia, fatigue, effort, *jouissance*, sensibility, the feminine, Eros, death, fecundity, paternity, dwelling, and of course the relation to the other. To my mind, like Heidegger before him, but also like Merleau-Ponty, Levinas is concerned with trying to excavate the pre-theoretical layers of our intentional comportment towards the world, an archeology of the pre-reflective constitution of existence, a discussion that, in *Autrement qu'être*, leads to a quite radical account of the subject as substitution, hostage, persecution, obsession and trauma.



But, that said, what does Levinas mean by saying that ethics is first philosophy? Perhaps this: the central task of Levinas's work is trying to describe a relation to alterity irreducible to comprehension – that is to say, irreducible to what Levinas sees as the *ontological* relation to others where alterity is reduced to what he calls the Same. Even the Heideggerian ontology that exceeds intellectualism and theoreticism is unable to describe this relation because the particular being is always already understood within the pre-comprehension of Being. Yet, how can a relation with the other be other than comprehension? Levinas's response is that it cannot, 'unless it is the other (*autrui*)' ('Is Ontology Fundamental?'). The claim here is that the relation to the other goes beyond comprehension, namely that it does not affect us in terms of a concept or theme. For Levinas, the relation to the other takes place in the concrete situation of speech or discourse. In speaking or calling or listening to the other, I am not reflecting upon him or her, but I am actively engaged in a non-comprehensive, non-subsumptive relation to alterity where I focus on the particular individual in front of me and forgo the mediation of the universal, the Hegelian Concept or Heideggerian Being. Now, it is this non-dialectical and non-ontological relation to the other that Levinas will qualify with the adjective 'ethical'. That is to say, Levinas does not posit, *a priori*, a normative conception of ethics that then instantiates itself in certain empirical experiences; rather, the ethical (rather than the substantive 'ethics') is a name that describes, *a posteriori*, a certain event of being in a non-subsumptive relation with the other. As he writes in the last words of his last published book, this is 'ontology open to the responsibility for the other' (*Nouvelles Lectures Talmudiques*).

Some excellent obituaries of Levinas have appeared in the French press, but special mention must be made of the dossier on Levinas that appeared in the February issue of *L'arche, le mensuel du judaïsme français* (No. 459). As well as including some fascinating and touching reminiscences of Levinas by friends and colleagues (Maurice Blanchot, Salomon Malka, Jacques Rolland, Daniel Sibony), it includes the full text of Derrida's moving and powerful funeral oration for Levinas. Another contributor, Jean-Luc Marion, writes,

If one defines a great philosopher as someone without whom philosophy would not have been what it is, then in France there are two great philosophers of the 20th Century: Bergson and Levinas.

Of course, this is hyperbole, isn't it?

Simon Critchley