

However, since the thinkers both passed away, there are two possibilities: to side with one of them, thus criticizing the other, or to analyze their writings, in order to individuate analogies and differences from a third perspective. I would be a very bad lawyer, so I prefer to be a peace officer, opting for the second choice. I will show that, notwithstanding the deep divergences separating Levinas and Kierkegaard, there are also clear points in common, that the former (and perhaps even the latter) would never have admitted. The tension of subjectivity beyond itself, toward Infinity, will be the key point of their encounter.

### **1. The refusal of impersonal totality**

First of all, Levinas and Kierkegaard are thinkers of singularity. Their philosophical reflection starts with a critique to Hegel and to the universal Spirit. The latter manifests itself in history, knowledge and ethics. The so-called Totality involves all the aspect of human life, considering individuals as parts of a greater plan, the immanent becoming of the Spirit toward the highest awareness of Itself.<sup>1</sup> Each man is considered as a necessary, but only functional element of a super-individual entity, whose norms rule thinking and action.

Kierkegaard strongly lashes out against Hegel and his oblivion of singularity. It does not mean that the former denies the existence of universal principles of knowledge and ethics. As a matter of fact, societies are ruled by norms that everyone is expected to follow. One of these norms is the respect of human life, especially of the members of one's family.

When Abraham, in *Fear and Trembling*, is commanded by God to kill his own son, he falls into a deep crisis.

There is no higher expression for the ethical in Abraham's life than that the father shall love the son. The ethical in the sense of moral is entirely beside the point. Insofar as the universal was present, it was cryptically in Isaac, hidden, so to speak, in Isaac's loins, and must cry out with Isaac's mouth: Do not do this, you are destroying everything.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham knows that the sacrifice of Isaac means both a transgression of Jewish ethics and an unbearable suffering for the lost of his only child. God wants His gift back, without giving any reason. Abraham, a man of faith, obeys to the divine command and prepares his son for the sacrifice. His knife is ready to get dirty of his own blood. God then decides to hold the hand of the patriarch, who has proved his obedience enough.

Notwithstanding the reassuring epilogue, Abraham makes his choice for God's sake and despite ethics. Silentio, Kierkegaard's pseudonym in *Fear and Trembling*, justifies this decision as the highest expression of singularity. Faith is defined as a paradoxical push, according to which "the single individual is higher than the universal" and "determines his

relation to the universal by his relation to the absolute, not his relation to absolute by his relation to the universal”<sup>3</sup>.

The highness of singularity is then due to its relation to the Absolute. Totality and God are the two extremes among which the individual takes place. To follow the former or the latter is due to a choice.<sup>4</sup> The weight of each alternative is different: faith requires a leap, an act of courage and will directed to the highest task of a human being, ethics is a renounce to a real subjectivity. Shortly, the utmost duty of a person is to become singular, which requires one to be a believer.

Even if Silentio does not understand the movements of faith, because he does not experience them, he sees them through other men’s actions. The example of Abraham, and of other knights of faith, is the expression of a path toward infinity and real happiness.<sup>5</sup> Silentio, talking about the story of the patriarch, admits the impossibility to know the secret of his interiority. He describes the experience of another man, without understanding it, without grasping the relation between the latter and God. Here two important aspects come out: the first is the irreducibility of an individual to another, the second is the uniqueness of the relation to Infinity.

Levinas seems to forget both when he criticizes Kierkegaard in *Difficult Freedom* and *Proper Names*. He denies every commitment of the latter with Jewish philosophy. First of all, the concept of faith as a leap, as a decision of free will, has to be excluded. Judaism believes in the Torah, in the law belonging to the religious tradition.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Levinas reproaches Kierkegaard to put religion above ethics. According to the former, the latter is guilty of the amorality of Nietzsche and other contemporary thinkers, who philosophize with the hammer, regardless of everything.<sup>7</sup>

Defining ethics as belonging to Totality means confusing the tyranny of the Same with the one-for-the-other, the pre-original push of first philosophy. If the faith was an act of freedom, it would be considered prior to responsibility. And the latter is, in Levinas’ thought, the principal feature of ethics.

Subjectivity is in that responsibility and only irreducible subjectivity can assume a responsibility. That is what constitute the ethical.<sup>8</sup>

Levinas does not agree with the concept of ethics expressed by Silentio in *Fear and Trembling* and proposes another view, which is not in contrast with religion. The author of *Difficult Freedom* is right in underlining the differences between Jewish tradition and Kierkegaard’s thought, but he seems to ignore what the latter writes in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

Here another pseudonym, Climacus, expresses his concept of ethics. If becoming a subject is the highest duty of a human being, as it was said before, it is what both ethics and religion ask him. While objective thought, and totality, demand the individual to become an observer, giving birth to an impersonal ethics, subjective thought does not claim to grasp external truth but inner one. Ethics is present everywhere God is, in the historical process as in the secret of inwardness.<sup>9</sup> However, the individual cannot have a perfect knowledge of the former as he has of the latter. According to both ethics and religion, the man has to become a subject.

Therefore, says the ethical, dare, dare to renounce everything, including this loftily pretentious and yet delusive intercourse with world-historical contemplation; dare to become nothing at all, to become a particular individual, of whom God requires everything, without your being relieved of the necessity of being enthusiastic; behold, that is the venture! But then you will also have gained that God cannot in all eternity get rid of you, for only in the ethical is your eternal consciousness; behold, that is the reward!<sup>10</sup>

Even if Levinas has read the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, criticizing the “becoming subject” of the individual,<sup>11</sup> he does not consider that religion here agrees with ethics. He seems to ignore that Kierkegaard always writes through pseudonyms and that every pseudonym has a singular perspective, which never coincides with the perspective of another pseudonym. This is why Silentio and Climacus have different views of ethics and religion. What Climacus says seems to be more detailed and, perhaps, similar to Kierkegaard’s thought: he underlines the difference between objective and subjective ethics. While the former expresses totality, the latter belongs to singularity.

Subjective ethics is very close to Levinas’ one, since the individual is seen in his uniqueness of election. He emancipates from totality and objectivity, looking for his principles in relation to God, to Infinity. The criticism of Hegelian thought is strong both in Levinas and Kierkegaard, thus leading to singularity and to a responsibility which cannot be transferred to anyone else.

The philosophers both contest the absorption of the Other in the Same and state the necessity of an individual ethical answer. They are, generally, against every impersonal system, even if Levinas does not recognize this aspect in Kierkegaard’s thinking. Accusing the latter of violence and amorism seems really unjustified.<sup>12</sup>

Anyway, Levinas is not always severe with his predecessor. He appreciates Kierkegaard’s scepticism towards objective truth and the immanence of thought. Actually, in the *Postscript*, Climacus points out the limits of disciplines as mathematics or history, which are inevitably incomplete and make the subject accidental. Becoming an observer deprives the latter of its individuality, whose existence is wholly indifferent.<sup>13</sup> Levinas makes the same criticism to

Husserl's intentionality, which sees the ego as an impersonal "who". The immanence of thought, the sleep of *il y a* ("there is"), is the greatest alienation for a human being. He becomes an individual only when he is independent from theoretical activity.<sup>14</sup>

Being subjective is thus a necessary task for both philosophers. It implies a separation from universal knowledge and, furthermore, a relation to absolute alterity. Kierkegaard states that subjective truth involves a passion of the infinite. What really matters is not the correspondence between the thought and the object, that is the idea of God and God Himself. Subjective thought is focused on inwardness, on the relation between God and the ego. Subjective truth is nothing else than faith. Objectively, it is a paradox and implies uncertainty.<sup>15</sup> However, Kierkegaard gives it the highest value and Levinas clearly appreciates it.

Thus Kierkegaard brings something absolutely new to European philosophy: the possibility of attaining truth through the ever-recurrent inner rending of doubt, which is not only an invitation to verify evidence, but a part of evidence itself. I think that Kierkegaard's philosophical novelty is in his idea of belief. Belief is not, for him, an imperfect knowledge of truth, a truth without certainty, a degradation of knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

Doubt implies a continuous retreat from certainty, presumed by the right sciences and historical knowledge. It pushes toward the pursuit of something else, whose existence is not proved. Doubt is inseparable from belief, from subjective truth. Objectively, it is an expression of an imperfect knowledge, while, subjectively, it is the expression of truth itself. The uncertainty of the latter implies justification, or even silence.<sup>17</sup> The choice of "Silentio" as a pseudonym for *Fear and Trembling* reflects the impossibility of Abraham to communicate his behaviour to his people. Subjective truth is an individual experience, requiring a relation with an absolute and unknowable alterity.

The uncertainty of faith does not imply either degradation or negativity. The same can be said about the idea of God in Levinas' philosophy. In *Totality and Infinity*, the Infinite in the finite causes a breach in theoretic intentionality, overflowing every concept. Human thought is imperfect, because it is incapable of containing God. It does not mean that the perfect (infinite) is a negation of the imperfect (finite), but that the perfect transcends the imperfect. The idea of Infinity is then positive: it is not a lack of relation, but a relation to the absolutely distant.<sup>18</sup>

This relation, according to both Kierkegaard and Levinas, cannot be expressed with an objective knowledge. Turning to transcendence means separating from universal thought and becoming a subject. Furthermore, recognizing one's own individuality means, at the same time, recognizing the irreducibility of the other person.

Even if the philosophers agree on this general statement, there are some differences separating them. While Kierkegaard is more concerned for the subject, Levinas gives priority to the other. According to the former, truth is subjectivity because it is focused on individual experience: “that every human being is such an entity existing for himself, is a truth I cannot too often repeat”<sup>19</sup>. It implies that one is able to know one’s inwardness, one’s own existence, but is unable to grasp alterity.<sup>20</sup> The irreducibility of the subject is the condition of the irreducibility of the other.

The author of *Totality and Infinity* thinks in the opposite way: the irreducibility of the other is prior to the individuation of the self. While Kierkegaard focuses only on the separation of the ego from totality, Levinas has two concerns: the individuation of the subject and the irreducibility of the other to the violence of the ego. Thinking through intentionality and acting through free will are means of power on the other person. This is why Levinas puts responsibility before freedom and the other before the self.<sup>21</sup>

The subject, in Kierkegaard, follows its own will: the leap of faith is an act of freedom. It does not mean that life involves egoism, since the other person is important. The relation to God does not make sense without a commitment to the neighbour.<sup>22</sup> Levinas does not say that the subject is not free, but that responsibility precedes will. At this point, the subject is considered in a passive acceptance (“subject to”), not as an “I”, but as a “me”.<sup>23</sup>

The priority of the other on the self is what differentiates Levinas from Kierkegaard. That aside, they both refuse impersonal totality, conceived as a theoretical and/or ethical system. They also assert the relation to Infinity as a modality of subjective uniqueness, that leads to recognize the irreducibility of the other person.

## 2. The irreducibility of the Infinite

Another point in common between Levinas and Kierkegaard is the view of Infinity itself. It coincides with God, who is absolutely Other and distant from the subject.

Precisely because there is the absolute difference between God and man, man expresses himself most perfectly when he absolutely expresses the difference.<sup>24</sup>

Kierkegaard’s thought is extraordinary. This sentence places him in the middle of Christian tradition and contemporary philosophy. The author of *Fear and Trembling* never hides his protestant culture and concern for the life of faith. Anyway, his thought is not strictly theological, but primarily existential. The relation to Infinity, apart from its religious meaning, gives the highest sense to individual life. It does not matter if God exists or not, if He is a supreme being or something else. This is a concern of observers, of objective thinkers. What is really important is the relation between the subject and the divine, the finite and the

infinite. Turning to transcendence, to the absolutely Other, is the only way for the individual to be itself. God is distant and irreducible to the subject, but, at the same time, extremely close. Dealing with infinity means dealing with one's inwardness, with one's utmost secret (*Deus in interiore homine*).

This secret cannot be communicated, only justified or expressed with silence. Saying the difference means exactly this: going beyond thought and language, thus facing incomprehension. The only way to express difference is manifesting Infinity in a finite existence.

Becoming subjective means becoming an extraordinary being, in the middle of worldly immanence and divine transcendence.<sup>25</sup> The individual is called by God to follow a vocation in everyday life, to be a witness of His will. It implies going against the universal systems of thought and ethics, against an established order, to affirm individuality and follow what is asked to inwardness.

Notwithstanding the impossibility to grasp Infinity, the finite being answers to its call. The relation between the two goes beyond ontology and leads to ethics (not the universal one, but the one following religion). Infinity manifests itself through the evidence of a singular existence, so that the latter is, at the same time, the object of transcendence and the condition for its incarnation.<sup>26</sup> There is a sort of exchange between Infinity and a finite being: the latter gives space to the former through transfiguration, while the former knows itself through the gaze of absolute alterity.<sup>27</sup> Transfiguration (*Forklarelse*) is not an explanation (*Forklaring*), but an expression without words, recalled by the witness of faith.

The separation between man and God, that initially causes anxiety and a sense of alienation, becomes a push towards one's own existence. When Abraham raises the knife over Isaac, he is answering to the divine call, even if he does not understand it. Leaving aside his people's ethics and his sadness for the lost of the only child, he directs his free will toward the will of God. Abraham expresses Infinity through a finite action. And, when his hand is drawn back by a new command, he rejoices. He has obeyed and, at the same time, his son is alive. The epilogue of the story gives sense to the choice of Abraham: only through the paradox of the patriarch's action the goodness of God is revealed. The passion for divinity, that pushes the individual toward an incomprehensible choice, leads to transfiguration. Infinity is expressed through the existence of a finite being.

Even according to Levinas, the distance between the finite and the infinite is overwhelming, though the latter is inside the former. The subject is separated from God and lives an independent life. It does not need anything else, but feels a tension inside. The relation



between the finite and the infinite is Desire, which is not directed to fulfilment, but to absolute alterity.

Desire is absolute if the desiring being is mortal and the Desired invisible. Invisibility does not denote an absence in relation; it implies relations with what is not given, of which there is no idea. Vision is an adequation of the idea with the thing, a comprehension that encompasses. Non-adequation does not denote a simple negation or an obscurity of the idea, but – beyond the light and the night, beyond the knowledge measuring beings – the inordinateness of Desire. Desire is desire for the absolutely other.<sup>28</sup>

This tension towards the absolutely Other is primarily affective. It goes beyond the limits of thought and the adequation of the object to its idea. The Desire of Infinity originally belongs to subjectivity, which is affected by transcendence in an exceptional way. It is the trace of absence, of otherwise than being. It is called *illegality* (from the latin *ille*, “he”) and is nothing else but the mark of an original creation. It cannot be grasped by thought, because it goes beyond ontology and does not imply the existence of the creator. It is a semantic ambiguity, what unsays itself without negating. The trace of Infinity cannot thus be represented, since there is nothing in common between the subject and God.<sup>29</sup> Levinas’ concept of transcendence refuses theology and every interpretation of the man as representing God. The affective relation to an absolute alterity, paradoxical and impossible to be explained in words, thus unites both Levinas and Kierkegaard.

However, the former does not agree with the latter, when he describes the nature of the metaphysical desire. First of all, it has nothing to do with need or passion. The subject feels a tension to Infinity when its separation is complete: the ego is wholly atheist and its material needs are satisfied by the external world (“without separation there would not have been truth; there would have been only being”<sup>30</sup>). The Desire of God is not looking for fulfilment, but pushes the subject to ethics. The command of Infinity indicates the other person as the addressee of moral action and establishes freedom on responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

Levinas’ desire of Infinity is thus very different from Kierkegaard’s passion of Infinity. First of all, the latter has its root in anxiety, the former in responsibility. The revelation of God strikes Levinas’ subject when it is quiet and satisfied, pushing it towards the other person. Kierkegaard’s individual, instead, is troubled by doubt and looks for the unity with Infinity. Secondly, Kierkegaard’s passion is oriented towards activity, Levinas’ desire to passivity. Even if they are both sources of morality, the former is based on freedom, the latter on responsibility, which precedes freedom itself.

Shortly, the infinite is, according to both the thinkers, absolutely different from the finite. The latter is moved by the desire of the former, even if the authors do not agree on its nature: the

tension is active and passionate for Kierkegaard, passive and responsible for Levinas. However, the desire of Infinity leads, according to both, to the ethical/religious behaviour.

### 3. From the absolute Other to the singular other

The desire of Infinity is that which primarily constitutes the subject. However, according to Levinas and Kierkegaard, it is not enough for the fulfilment of individual existence. Being subjective means, at the same time, put in practice one's tension to ethics, whose direction is indicated by the divine command. The relation to the absolute Other thus leads to the relation to the singular other.

Levinas accuses Kierkegaard of transcending the ethical stage and ignoring the other person for the sake of religion.<sup>32</sup> He seems not to have read the *Works of Love*, where the neighbour is essential for the life of faith: "the single individual is committed in the debt of love to other people"<sup>33</sup>. Stating the irreducibility of the subject and of the other person is not enough for Kierkegaard. It could lead to an egoistic life, where the relation to Infinity would be purely ascetical. The love towards the other person, instead, is a commitment that cannot be avoided.

Levinas is the philosopher of alterity *par excellence*, since the relation to the other, both singular and absolute, is constitutive of the subject. And this relation implies a radical view, that is the impossibility for the I to exercise its power on the other person. Even if the latter can be partially reduced to phenomenality or submitted to freedom, there is something escaping the grasp of the ego. When the subject is wholly constituted as separated, the other person reveals, through the Face, the command of Infinity.

Freedom is then inhibited, not as countered by a resistance, but as arbitrary, guilty, and timid; but in its guilt it rises to responsibility. [...] The relation with the Other as a relation with his transcendence – the relation with the Other who puts in question the brutal spontaneity of one's immanent destiny – introduces into me what was not in me.<sup>34</sup>

Immanence is considered brutal, because it submits the individual to the anonymity of Totality. The violence of thought and freedom are nothing but expressions of the tyranny of the Same. The encounter with the other person makes the subject aware not only of its own individuality (already discovered in the atheistic separation), but even of its own uniqueness. The transcendence of the Face is a transfiguration, not an incarnation, of the transcendence of God. The call of Infinity indicates the other person as the addressee of ethics, pushing the subject to responsibility. The latter cannot be assumed by anybody else, it is the sign of a uniqueness in election. The transcendence undoes the deepest core of the ego with an unavoidable assignation.<sup>35</sup>



Ethico-religious life is then directed by the divine call to the other person. Both Levinas and Kierkegaard see absolute alterity as directed towards singular alterity. It is a threefold relation, whose terms are the subject, God and the other person. However, the two thinkers have different views about its modality.

Kierkegaard thinks of the subject as directly relating to God, who is the very link between the self and the other: “in love for the neighbor, God is the middle term. Love God is above all else; then you also love the neighbor and in the neighbor every human being.”<sup>36</sup> There is not any mediation between the finite and the infinite. Paradoxically, the mediation is between the finite ego and the finite other. The relation to Infinity is then primary, the real condition of the encounter with the other person.

Levinas thinks exactly in the opposite way. Even if the infinite is in the finite as a trace of creation, one has to meet the other to be aware of *illegitimacy*. The middle term is, in this case, not God, but the other person.<sup>37</sup> Singular alterity is the place where absolute alterity reveals itself. The call to responsibility happens simultaneously to the encounter of the Face. The phenomenal dimension of the other man refers to what transcends phenomenon itself. The paradox is that, without seeing the finite, it is impossible to relate to Infinity. Kierkegaard and Levinas describe the threefold relation among the subject, God and the other in two opposite, but equally paradoxical ways: according to the former, the finite needs the infinite to relate to the finite, according to the latter, the finite needs the finite to relate to the infinite.

Other differences between the two philosophers concern their general view on the subject and on the other. These poles are both important, but, as it was stated before, Kierkegaard gives priority to the former, Levinas to the latter. The author of *Totality and Infinity* takes the risk of alienating the subject, while his predecessor tends to fall into solipsism.

In *Fear and Trembling*, for instance, subjectivity experiences its vocation without being understood. Abraham, going against the ethics of his people, feels a tension between his behaviour and the external judgement. Kierkegaard's knight of faith cannot help but feel a deep solitude.

His behaviour leads him to detach himself from the system of needs of his community, in order to follow his vocation. He is extraordinary and, for this reason, runs the risk of being misunderstood. The “tribunal of the world” condemns his actions, which are oriented to please the “tribunal of God”.<sup>38</sup> And, since the former is always there and the latter does not need him, the individual is always on the verge of falling into the abyss of nothing.

What has been said about ethico-religious behaviour is valid also for subjective thinking, well described in the *Postscript*.

The reflection of inwardness is the subjective thinker's double reflection. In thinking, he thinks the universal, but as existing in this thinking, as assimilating this in his inwardness, he becomes more and more subjectively isolated.<sup>39</sup>

The risk of solitude is then unavoidable. Even if the individual thinks to universality, he is not an abstract entity. He is a singular and concrete being, whose thought cannot be separated from his existence. It does not imply subjectivism, because the truth of an object does not depend from the belief of the subject. It is possible to have a general concept of how a human being thinks, since it is a matter of observation. The latter implies the possibility of communication and is not submitted to anxiety or other emotional states. This saves Kierkegaard's philosophy from the extremes of solipsism, subjectivism and irrationality.<sup>40</sup> However, subjective truth is more important than objective one. The highest task of a human being is not becoming an observer, but becoming subjective: one has to focus primarily on the relation between oneself and the object, that depends on the perception of one's own inwardness.

Levinas, on his side, is worried about the violence of subjective thought and freedom. This is why he develops an asymmetrical ethics and puts the other above the I. The latter is called by the Infinite to a pre-original and unavoidable responsibility. This election makes the subject wholly unique, but is connected to a risk of alienation.

The subject in responsibility is alienated in the depths of its identity with an alienation that does not empty the same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation, constrains it to it as no one else, where no one could replace it.<sup>41</sup>

In *Otherwise Than Being*, the very core of the subject is undone by the other, who is inside the ego as *ipseity*. It is an expression of Levinas' mature thought, where ethics is took to an extreme and identity is destroyed from inside. In *Totality and Infinity*, instead, the risk of alienation is avoided, because *ipseity* is still a nucleus of genuine egoism.<sup>42</sup>

Levinas, as much as he strives to save the subject from alienation, gives way to it in his mature thought. Kierkegaard, on the other side, is able not to fall in solipsism, but is on the edge of a cliff. Focusing on the subject or on the other leads the two thinkers to opposite forms of extremism. Notwithstanding this and the modal differences, they are united by a threefold view of the relation between the finite and the infinite: the subject (finite) relates to God (infinite), who leads it toward the other person (finite).

#### **4. A lifelong suffering**

The last aspect of the relation between the infinite and the finite in Levinas and Kierkegaard is an unavoidable suffering of the subject. The latter, in its tension towards God, cannot help

but experience a *pathos*, inextricably connected to the conscience of its own limits.

Individual existence is, according to Kierkegaard, a synthesis of the finite and the infinite. It is the place where transcendence reveals itself through the actions of an exceptional singularity. The subject is thus in the middle between its own needs as a worldly entity and the tension to go beyond the systems regulating these needs and their satisfaction. Becoming subjective means living in this world and striving for another world. The individual who follows his vocation knows already what his priority is: he has to renounce to satisfy his needs, when they hinder the pursuit of eternal happiness.<sup>43</sup>

It is not a matter of doing something and avoiding something else. The tension to Infinity is not only a limit to hedonism or to universal ethical life. It completely changes the existence of an individual, orienting it to that which is always there. A finite need disappears according to the subjective mood or to its satisfaction, while Infinity is eternal. It does not matter if it exists in an ontological sense, because it is constitutive of the individual and transcends his inwardness.

The choice of a religious life, of following “that which is always there”, causes an unavoidable *pathos*.

But suffering as the essential expression for existential pathos means that suffering is real, or that the reality of the suffering constitutes the existential pathos; and by *the reality of the suffering is meant its persistence as essential for the pathetic relationship to an eternal happiness*. It follows that the suffering is not deceptively recalled, nor does the individual transcend it, which constitutes a retreat from the task [...] Viewed religiously, it is necessary [...] to comprehend the suffering and to remain in it, so that reflection is directed *upon* the suffering and not away from it.<sup>44</sup>

The reality of suffering implies the persistence of the tension to Infinity. God is constitutively inside the individual, but following His will is a choice. Who pursues eternal happiness cannot avoid suffering and has to remain in it. The voluntary component of Kierkegaard’s philosophy is here strongly evident.

Levinas’ thought, on the other side, refuses the power of free will in relation to Infinity.

But giving has a meaning only as a tearing from oneself despite oneself, and not only *without* me. And to be torn from oneself despite oneself has meaning only as a being torn from the complacency in oneself characteristic of enjoyment, snatching the bread from one’s mouth. [...] Signification, the-one-for-the-other, has meaning only among beings of flesh and blood.<sup>45</sup>

The suffering of the subject does not depend on a choice, but happens “despite oneself” and comes from one’s original constitution. Being sensible means being permeated by the other in the fibres of one’s own skin. The divine command, which urges upon responsibility for the

other person, is directed to the spoliation of one's flesh. There is no distinction between body and soul: the man, as a sensitive being, is affected by the enjoyment of its pleasure and, at the same time, by the indigence of the other person.

Suffering is then involuntary in Levinas and voluntary in Kierkegaard. However, both agree on considering pain as constitutive of the relation to Infinity and ethical life. The individual who follows the divine command puts aside the satisfaction of his needs, in order to give himself to the other person.

The reason for suffering is the same in Levinas and Kierkegaard. What really separates them is its aim. Accepting pain of one's existence makes sense only if oriented to afterlife, writes Kierkegaard. The pursuit of eternal happiness is the reason of renouncing to one's need and pleasures. According to Levinas, on the other side, it does not matter if there is life after death. Responsibility has to be undertaken despite any other reason.<sup>46</sup>

However, there is no certainty of an eternal happiness, neither in Kierkegaard nor in Levinas. According to the former, it is an orientation toward Infinity, a relational modality, according to the latter it has nothing to do with responsibility. They both theorize a life of possibility, of uncertainty and doubt, which, paradoxically, has a higher value than objective truth.

Levinas recognizes the positivity of possibility in Kierkegaard,<sup>47</sup> even if he does not acknowledge the existence of a religious ethics in the *Postscript*. As it was stated before, Climacus distinguishes universal morality from subjective one: the former constitutes a dogmatic system, while the latter is inconclusive and ongoing. The tension to God, driving force of religious ethics, does not lead to the certainty of beatitude, but at least deploys its possibility.

Levinas and Kierkegaard, notwithstanding some differences, agree in stating the singularity of the subject, which primarily explicates itself in relation to Infinity. The absolute difference between man and God hinders whatsoever objective certainty, but it does not make it less important. To face Infinity inside oneself is inevitable and leads to the realization of one's own existence. What is more, the divine command indicates the other person as its real addressee. Life means giving oneself to singular alterity. However, in spite of a correct ethical behaviour, striving for Infinity is connected with suffering.

An intense and almost unbearable pain, involving the body and the soul, accompanies the subject until the end of its life. Levinas and Kierkegaard both assert the inevitability of suffering, due to a uniqueness in election. Individual existence is where God reveals Himself and shows the way of giving. This path never ends, until life stops, until worldly existence gives space to a new existence, or, if faith is meaningless, to nothing else (the anxiety over

doubt never ends). Subjectivity, despite its finiteness, infinitely strives for what goes beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hegel G. W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Miller A. V., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977, §§ 793, 805, 808.

<sup>2</sup> Kierkegaard S., *Fear and Trembling* (FT), in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Hong H. V. and Hong E. H., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> According to Pojman, the leap of faith is an act of pure free will (cf. Pojman L., *Religious Belief and the Will*, London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986, pp. 143-8), while Sagi asserts that it has its root in existence (cf. Sagi A., *Kierkegaard, Religion and Existence. The Voyage of the Self*, Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi B. V., 2000, p. 41).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. FT, p. 33-9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Levinas E., *Difficult Freedom* (DF), trans. by Hand S., London: The Athlone Press, 1990, p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. DF, p. 117; Id., "Existence and Ethics", in *Proper Names* (PN), trans. by Smith M. B., London: The Athlone Press, 1996, pp. 72-3; Id., "A propos of Kierkegaard vivant", in *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. PN, p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard S., *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (CUP), trans. by Swenson D. F., London: Humphrey Milford Oxford University Press, 1941, pp. 118-23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133-4.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. PN, p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Simmons Aaron J. – Wood D., "Introduction: Good Fences May Not Make Good Neighbours After all", in

Simmons Aaron J. – Wood D. (eds.), *Kierkegaard and Levinas: ethics, politics, and religion*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, p. 2; Westphal M., “The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard”, in *op. cit.*, pp. 22-5, 32-9. According to Simmons, Levinas criticism of Kierkegaard is due to the influence of Jean Wahl (cf. Simmons A. J., “Existential Appropriation: The Influence of Jean Wahl on Levinas’s Reading of Kierkegaard”, in *op. cit.*, pp. 51-67).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. CUP, pp. 175-9.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Levinas E., *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority* (TI), Duquesne: Pittsburgh, 1969, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. CUP, pp. 181-2.

<sup>16</sup> PN, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Simmons Aaron J. – Wood D., *op. cit.*, p. 3; Simmons A. J., *op. cit.*, pp. 48-9.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. TI, pp. 24-5, 41.

<sup>19</sup> CUP, p. 169.

<sup>20</sup> This is even the presupposition of Kierkegaard’s deconstructive readers, who are against logocentric and one-way interpretations. Cf. Jegstrup E., “Introduction”, in Jegstrup E. (ed.), *The New Kierkegaard*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 1-2.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. TI, pp. 21-7, 203-4; Id., *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (OB), Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1981, pp. 15, 19-20, 88, 114-5, 138-9. Cf. also Janiaud J., *Singularité et responsabilité. Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, Levinas*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006, pp. 311-4.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Kierkegaard S., *Works of Love* (WOL), ed. and trans. by Hong H. V. and Hong E. H., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 190. Cf. also Westphal M., *op. cit.*, pp. 25-32.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. OB, pp. 15-6, 50-6, 72-5, 142. Cf. also Llewelyn J., “Who or What or Whot”, in Simmons Aaron J. – Wood D. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 72; Lellouche R., *Difficile Levinas. Peut-on ne pas être levinassien ?*, Paris-Tel Aviv : Editions de l’éclat, 2006, pp. 81-3.



24 CUP, p. 412.

25 Cf. Janiaud J., *op. cit.*, pp. 155, 158.

26 Cf. Sagi A., *op. cit.*, p. 134.

27 Cf. Podmore S. D., *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God : Anatomy of the Abyss*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. xii-xiii, 180.

28 TI, p. 34.

29 Cf. OB, pp. 12-3, 151-2; TI, p. 104. On metaphysical Desire, cf. Ciaramelli F., "Levinas e la fenomenologia del desiderio", in Moscato A. (ed.), *Levinas. Filosofia e trascendenza*, Genova: Marietti, 1992, pp. 144-58; Baccarini E., *Lévinas. Soggettività e Infinito*, Roma: Studium, 1985, pp. 40, 46-7. Lellouche defines it as a hetero-affection (cf. Lellouche R., *op. cit.*, pp. 86-7). About the semantic ambiguity and non-representativeness of Infinity, cf. Baccarini E., *op. cit.*, pp. 30-8; Chalier C., *La trace de l'Infini. Emmanuel Levinas et la source hébraïque*, Paris : Cerf, 2002, pp. 65-73 ; Moscato A., "Semantica della trascendenza. Note critiche su E. Levinas", in Moscato A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 58-9, 73-8; Plourde S., *Emmanuel Lévinas. Altérité et responsabilité*, Paris : Cerf, 1996, pp. 136-7 ; Rolland J., *Parcours de l'autrement*, Paris : PUF, 2000, pp. 1-2. According to Visker, the intrigue of the Infinite is anything but *il y a*, where the subject, being one-for-the-other, loses its individuality (cf. Visker R., *Truth and Singularity. Taking Foucault into Phenomenology*, Dordrecht-Boston-London: Kluwer, 1999, pp. 236-7, 241-6, 265-72).

30 TI, p. 60.

31 Cf. TI, pp. 50, 203-4. Cf. also Chalier C., *op. cit.*, pp. 44-8, 56-60; Plourde S., *op. cit.*, pp. 19-21; Petitdemange G., "Au dehors : les enjeux de l'altérité chez Emmanuel Lévinas", in A. Münster (ed.), *La différence comme non-indifférence. Éthique et altérité chez Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris : Kimé, 1995, pp. 30-2 ; Rolland J., *op. cit.*, pp. 111-4. According to Westphal, Levinas' transcendence is traumatic because it destabilizes the inwardness of the subject (cf. M. Westphal, "The Trauma of Transcendence as Heteronomous Intersubjectivity", in M. M. Olivetti (ed.), *Intersubjectivité et théologie philosophique*, Padova : CEDAM, 2001, pp. 92-8).

32 Cf. PN, pp. 76-7.

33 WOL, p. 190.

34 TI, p. 203.

35 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 279; OB, pp. 141-2.

36 WOL, p. 58. Cf. also *ibid.*, p. 108. Gibbs points out that the alterity of the other person is mediated by the alterity of God (cf. Gibbs R., "I or You: The Dash of Ethics", in Jegstrup E. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 146). Seeskin states that the transcendence of Kierkegaard's God is anonymous and excludes every form of dialogue (cf. Seeskin K., *Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990, p. 134).

37 OB, p. 12. Cf. also Haar M., "L'obsession de l'autre. L'éthique comme traumatisme", *Cahiers de l'Herne : Lévinas* 1991, pp. 444-5; Plourde S., *op. cit.*, pp. 119-24; Rolland J., *op. cit.*, pp. 106-9; Westphal M., "The Many Faces of Levinas as a Reader of Kierkegaard", *op. cit.*, p. 24.

38 Cf. Janiaud J., *op. cit.*, pp. 191, 197, 308-10.

39 CUP, p. 61.

40 Cf. Gouwens D. J., *Kierkegaard as religious thinker*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 49-53, 56.

41 OB, pp. 141-2.

42 Cf. TI, pp. 39, 44, 60, 117-8, 208, 277-9.

43 Cf. CUP, p. 350-3. According to Sagi, the voyage to Infinity and to the self are the same, since obeying to God's will means realizing one's own existence. Notwithstanding its weakness in understanding Infinity, the subject has the strenght to follow it. (cf. Sagi A., *op. cit.*, p. 16, 147).

44 *Ibid.*, pp. 396-7.

45 OB, p. 74. Unlike Westphal, Lellouche defines Levinas' ethics as traumatic because it coincides with suffering (cf. Lellouche R., *op. cit.*, pp. 54-7, 70-1).

46 Cf. OB, pp. 6, 117.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Sheil P., *Kierkegaard and Levinas. The Subjunctive Mood*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2010, pp. 4, 144-5.

Share this:

Share