

THE PRIORITY OF RESPONSIBILITY IN
THE ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

by

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Abstract

Utilizing all of his major philosophical texts from 1930 to 1987, this phenomenological study investigates, historically and thematically, Emmanuel Levinas' argument for the ontological priority of ethical responsibility. The analysis of responsibility is constructed from the context of Levinas' critique of Husserl and Heidegger worked out under the influence of the horror of the Holocaust.

According to Levinas, responsibility is a pre-conscious, sensible responding to the exteriority of the Other. Insofar as the invisible alterity of the Other is irreducible to comprehension, it necessarily involves a critique of the primacy of rationality, consciousness, and freedom as the meaning of the human. This leads to a new understanding of subjectivity. For Levinas, subjectivity 'is' responsibility. If we define the human by rationality, consciousness, and freedom, i.e., as an individual or agent, this leads to the problem of explaining how the transcendence of intersubjectivity is possible. It also leads to atheism and totalitarianism. Levinas overcomes this problem by arguing that human being is both separate and not separate, an identity in difference, a transcendence-in-immanence, an ambiguity.

The 'positive' content of this critical position, however, is wholly 'negative'. It is a skepticism pointing toward an unachievable utopia. Nowhere in Levinas' ethical phenomenology will one find him taking a stand on

particular moral issues. Despite his critique of the primacy of theory, his work is thoroughly theoretical. The argument for the priority of responsibility is a theory of ethics. Levinas' theory of responsibility is an ontological or fundamental ethics in that it asserts how things are rather than how they should be. The most positive aspect of the theory is the conception of subjectivity that emerges from this critique and the argument for the possibility of transcendence it entails. But exactly what difference this will make concretely is not made clear. That one is responsible for all others is one thing, but how one should actualize this responsibility is another.