

CAN JUSTICE HIDE BETRAYAL? LEVINAS'S DISCUSSION WITH FREUD

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Abstract

Levinas places each of the philosophical or even scientific theories in the dimension created by the monotheism on the one hand, a personification of which is Judaism, and paganism on the other hand that finds shelters for itself in the shape of infinite numbers of modern rationalisations. The difference is rooted in the attitude towards violence and justice. Can justice be free of violence? Or maybe not? This conflict hides a deep philosophical and ethical controversy: can morality be free of violence, or maybe the law is always conditioned by the brutality of the force? The theories, stating that violence, even if hidden in being, always prevails, are qualified as pagan. In my paper, I will ask the question: is the severe accusation of Levinas against psychoanalysis, the accusation of paganism, justified? I will try to prove that despite many misunderstandings, there is some essential truth in this accusation.

Keywords: Freud, Levinas, justice, violence, morality, Oedipus complex.

I would like to discuss the critique of Freud's psychoanalysis formulated by Emmanuel Levinas. So, it will be the discussion of a philosophical critique of a therapeutic theory. But what matters to me, is the motif of the conflict between monotheism – represented by Judaism, and polytheism, the paganism. This conflict hides a deep philosophical and ethical controversy: can justice be free of violence, or maybe the law is always conditioned by the brutality of the force?

Let me begin with a story, told to Freud by Jacob, Freud's father. A story, which Freud himself rendered as a significant element that shaped his attitude towards Judaism. Once when Jacob was taking a walk down the streets of the small Moravian town, Pribor /Freiberg/, the town he had originated from, he got attacked by a local citizen, probably a Christian, who denied Freud's father, a Jew, the right of walking down the pavement. Freud's father gave in. However that did not satisfy the aggressor. He knocked off Jacob's hat. The small Schlomo – Sigmund Freud asked his father a question: «What happened then?» «Nothing, – came the answer. – I picked up the hat, brushed it down and went off».

A few years later Freud would refer to another story, namely the story of Hannibal, the 'Semitic character', as Freud called the

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hero himself. Hannibal challenged Ancient Rome, the synonym of the Western culture. Despite the fact that he eventually failed he did shake the Roman foundations, which means the Western foundations. One may speculate that Freud would have seen himself rather in the role of the Semitic hero, than as his humiliated, peacefully acting father.

Freud abandoned Jacob's faith, became a non-believer, atheist, a secular Jew. But Judaism was stuck deeply in his soul, like a splinter. This splinter was constantly provoking Freud to simultaneous acts of rebellion, criticism and apology.

It is in the relation with Freud's father where most of critics have seen the source of the peculiar Freud's theory of the origin of religion in general, and Judaism in particular. The core of this theory is the hypothesis saying that the source of religion lies in patricide, the memory of which had been denied. In *Totem and Taboo* Freud writes about the primitive horde where brothers kill the forefather. Later on the denied memory of the victim they transform into the Totem. In his essay about the future of religion the source of it is the desire of the father's care. In his book about Moses Judaism is being founded through assassination. The memory of the deed returns filling up the severe Yahveh's religion with the characteristic need of expiation.

Those who have written about Freud's attitude towards religion in general and towards the monotheistic religions in particular usually have referred to the texts mentioned above. Therefore, a common opinion has reoccurred that Freud was another prophet of the monotheistic 'religion of the Father'. In more subtle authors, he was seen as the renovator of the Talmudic art of interpretation.¹ Even if the later opinion can be defended, the first – more important – appears to me as quite incorrect. The misconception is the result of the focusing attention on the way Freud interpreted beliefs and not what he believed himself.

What did he believe in? He believed in the unconsciousness, conditioned by drives, in which he saw the source of the whole psychic apparatus shaped in first place by the Oedipus complex. And he also believed that psychoanalysis, as a science, allowed tracing this 'definite reality'.

Is this legitimate to place this kind of «scientific belief» alongside with other 'traditional' religions? Post-phenomenological philosophical tradition, rooted in Edmund Husserl's and Martin Heidegger's thinking proposes this kind of attitude towards sciences. Let us try it. Science, treated as any other metaphysical attitudes, becomes legitimised throughout its extra scientific assumptions. Freud himself did call the drives «the mythology of psychoanalysis», understanding at the same time the fact that every science, even physics, has its own mythology.

For an insightful thinker such as Emmanuel Levinas, it was obvious that the essence of Freud's 'religiousness' was all this what Freud himself saw as genuine, thus existing, thus good. And this is where the discussion between Levinas and Freud begins. Since Freud remained, in Levinas' opinion, follower of paganism.

It is necessary to explain Levinas's understanding of the opposition between pagan polytheism and monotheism. This opposition is rooted

in Levinas's thesis formulated in one of the first sentences of his probably most important works, *Totality and Infinity*: «To the philosophical thinking the Being appears as war». What does this mean? This means that whatever exists, the Being, philosophically defined as immanence, always possesses the nature which might be described as predatory, grabbing, subduing, ego-centric. This is what life is like. And the cult of life is, in fact, pagan. For Levinas the other way, the «monotheism» in philosophical sense of this word, would be to go beyond the limits of the immanence, «yearning for the infinity», having the transcendence as its target. And finding the answer in the Face of the Other. This constitutes the foundation of justice.

Levinas does not proclaim the existence of any transcendence, namely God. His key idea is the «yearning for the infinity». The infinity which would exceed anything what might be grasped by the mind, but shall be found through the meeting with the Other.

Now we can return to Levinas's objections against Psychoanalysis. He thought that Freud was one of those, who rendered possible the process of merging of polytheistic imagination into the monotheistic universe. What is more, he could show with great philosophical precision, how – despite many inspirations by the climate of Jewish spirituality – Freud in his fundamental intuitions still remains in the pagan world.

One could object that Levinas is not a good judge of psychoanalysis, as his prejudice and aversion against it is well known, along with his poor knowledge of the matter. However, I would say, that the importance of Levinas's thought should make us try to rethink his critical opinion.

Here a digression. Levinas's aversion against psychoanalysis hides numerous surprises. The positive aspect of this tension is connected with the acknowledgement of perceptiveness of Freud's thinking. In the text *Le Moi et la Totalité* Levinas states that «within its philosophical self» psychoanalysis may be understood at least as «the complement to rationalism: for the reflection psychoanalysis demands all the same as the reflection demands for the naïve thought»².

I do agree with these, not quite obvious to many readers, statements saying that Freud in his desire goes along with modern rationalism – his craving for the cognition, craving for the understanding is insatiable and constitutes the guideline of the whole work. Despite this fact, we ought to remember the father of psychoanalysis renders the sources of this desire dubitable. He deprives rationality of its self-contained status and searches for the conditions that might justify its existence. As usual he keeps struggling between numerous projects. On the one hand the desire of cognition is connected with the sexual drive. On the other hand cognitive consciousness becomes as a phenomenon of the conscience. The motif that is vividly presented in *Introducing the Notion of Narcissism*, in which Freud is searching for roots of the rational thought (and temporality as well) in the space where the moral consciousness is being constituted.

Let us return to the aversion Levinas felt towards psychoanalysis. In *The lesson of justice derived from Talmud* Levinas writes:

«One should set one's mind against the paganism of the expression 'Oedipus complex' on the strength of the lines from Deuteronomy 8:5 (even if they do not appear overly instructive on the surface): 'Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the LORD your God disciplines you'. Paternity has the meaning here of a constitutive category of the sensible and not of its alienation. On this point at least psychoanalysis confirms the profound crisis of monotheism in contemporary sensibility...»³.

As I have been saying, Levinas places each of the philosophical or even scientific theories in the dimension created by the monotheism on the one hand, a personification of which is Judaism, and to paganism on the other hand, paganism which finds shelters for itself in the shape of infinite numbers of modern rationalisations.

One can suspect that Levinas is rather extreme and one-sided in this opinion. Paul Bercherie, French philosopher and psychoanalyst, rather sympathetic to Levinas, describes the phenomenon:

«The Levinas's 'clinic' does not have the ability of differentiating matters: for example it does not give itself the possibility of differentiating the syncretic polytheism of sources, with the father's function being dispersed, from the fully self-conscious anti-monotheism, Gnostic or Wagnerian; or telling the dualistic philosophy of Cartesian origins from the Hegel's totalitarian system ... differentiate universalistic generosity of the French Revolution from cynical Anglo-Saxon capitalism or the German nationalism, Reich from Freud or Lacan...»⁴.

It is difficult to treat this remark light-heartedly.

Especially as one might suspect that Levinas happened to be a victim of some misunderstanding. In another version of the quoted note he adds: «Throughout all her works Mrs Amado Levy-Valensi stressed the deeply pagan character of the Oedipus myth»⁵. This is a reference to the writing by the French scholar studying Freud's texts, deeply attached to Judaism, and at the same time who originated herself from the psychoanalytic tradition. This may indicate the source of the misunderstanding remaining in Levinas's reception of this fundamental for psychoanalysis notion.

In accordance with his reluctant attitude towards untamed vital forces Levinas criticizes the 'Oedipus complex' notion as yet another form of expression of this, what he considered as the essence of paganism. Oedipus is for him the rebellion of the natural against this what remains beyond nature. Yet, Levinas criticizes the 'Oedipus complex' as if Freud would recall the Greek myth without introducing the fundamental modification to the whole construction – the modification which Freud named 'the castration crisis'. Nevertheless, this is precisely the crisis which is the key to the Freudian understanding of humanness coming to existence. In Laplanche's and Pontalis's formulation we read:

«The castration complex should be referred to the cultural order, where the law ... is always correlated with a ban. In the 'threat of castration' ... the function of Law places itself. The Law which establishes the human order»⁶.

The mythical Oedipus shows, who the human being would be, if the Law were not there, the Law in the form of the ban.

Lacan has formulated this fully and explicitly. He has stressed that: 'the Name of the Father 'doesn't come up in the proper moment, this means that it doesn't introduce an obstacle to the fully experienced mother-child fusion, the human being will submerge in madness. Inevitably he will lose his human status or, to put it precisely, his capability of placing himself in the system of symbols, thus to respond to the 'Great Other', as Lacan calls it.

When Levinas writes: «The Evil, which psychoanalysis discovers in illness, would be pre-determined by betrayed responsibility. The very libidinal relation does not take the secret of the human *psyche*. In fact, what the human is, explains the sharpness of the conflicts which are interwoven in the shape of Freudian complexes»⁷, he does not remain far from self-consciousness of psychoanalysis, or at least those currents which follow Freud's legacy.

A similar thing happens when Levinas puts the stress on the meaning of bans, which populate the Judaist tradition.

«[The ban] is *par excellence* an obstacle. A pure obstacle: It is an obstacle through its authoritarian form, through its content, since it imposes limitation, which has to be forced on life ... on this very life which is being lived as "power which flows on" (*la force qui va*). Bans limit life, particularly ... they put restrictions on the blind affluence of sexual desire».⁸

And again: this doesn't stay far from the Freudian: «conscience is the consequence of renouncing the drive»; written down in the canonical essay *Civilisation and its discontent*. Even the fact that in psychoanalysis unconsciousness is the source of the ban, whereas in Levinas's theory it is the Other who does the same, doesn't rise any major contradictions between the two streams of thinking: in the text *Transcendence and Evil* Levinas says: «...the stage of the unconsciousness ... [is nothing else then] a temporary shelter for the otherness, the only one which psychoanalysis is able to develop within the world»⁹.

And yet I think that in Levinas's violent accusation against psychoanalysis, in the accusation of paganism, the core of the truth is to be found. It is a fact that Freud borrowed the Greek myth. However it is not the fact of borrowing the pagan myth which is pagan. Philosophically speaking, the problem underlies the problem we discussed: it means the moral attitude towards traumatic obstacle constituting conscience and consciousness. Do we underline its violent, vital character, as psychoanalysis does? Or, like Levinas, do we try to differentiate, in an absolute way, justice and life?

So, the antagonism between Freud and Levinas becomes really sharp within the judgement of the ban, the one which establishes the Law. Is it possible to constitute morality without harm? Does the kingdom of justice remain entirely separated from the sphere of life – and the violence, as Levinas wants it? Or as Freud says, is justice, in its very source, always founded on non-justice?

Here the answers come as mutually contradictory. Even if Levinas accepts the severe character of paternal power, he defends it. We can find this apology in the comment formulated while reading the passage from the book of Isaiah:

«Youth is the state of susceptibility to all this which is unchangeable, an entire reverse to the “complex of the Father”»¹⁰.

These words should be understood within the context of the quoted line from *Deuteronomy*, which defends the fair character of the punishment.

As Paul Bercherie suggests, this is an: «...idealisation with the euphoric touch, as Freud would say ... the loss (the symbolic *castration*) the form of which is the acceptance of the Law, is given a cheerfully positive character of a voluntary sacrifice to the ideal Father»¹¹. A psychoanalyst maintains then, that the loss, or the punishment – even if they are the condition justice and reason – are immanently bound with violence, with unjust character of life the shadow of which falls on any established justices.

With Levinas the act of establishing the justice takes the human out of the sphere of any violence whatsoever, which remains immanently bound with the being. The human in the state of justice is the exile from the sphere of existence and in this journey he shall not take anything with him. In one of his comments found in *The lesson of justice derived from Talmud* he writes:

«Rabbi Hanania breaks off with the bleak predestination of myth to proclaim that there is no such guilt in front of the heavens which could not be – amongst humans and surrounded by brightness – atoned and given to be atoned. Assembly freed from the blind life instincts ... would be a place, in which the divine will of repair appears...»¹².

In Freud's thinking it is quite on contrary: the more the sphere of justice would be established, the more injustice of being will be seen through it. Freud assumes that to become a man one has to betray a part of his self. Even if apparently forgotten, this betrayal follows him and claims justice.

For someone who wants to understand the ethical intention of the founder of psychoanalysis this thought appears as fundamental. In his discussion on four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis Jacques Lacan, faithful to this intention, tells us: «The status of the unconsciousness, whose fragility on the ground of being I always point you out, is of ethical nature?» ... as unconscious regions «are limbic spaces», filled with harmed creatures, harmed because weakly existent, nearly non-existent, repressed. In these words Lacan draws a linking line between the question of non-fullness of being and the question of harm caused by repression. As they are harmed, existences of this realm are also the most vindictive. «To touch anything in this sphere of nightmares is never secure»¹³ he adds.

On his journey towards the realm of morality the man always takes a doze of the brutal character of life, of what is there. Here Freud is the successor of strictly pagan, pre-Socratic wisdom of **Anaximander**, who

speaks about guilt, which is the being of each thing, against the thing that could not come to being, because the first one took its place. Putting this in other, more formal words, Freud shows always the connection between what is normative and what exists, he shows the origin of what is normative within the violence of the being. The direction of thinking leads from ontology to ethics.

This is what Levinas calls paganism. And he traces in the entire Western philosophy this pagan motif, the primacy of being over justice. His mission is to turn the order backwards, he wants to establish the moral duty, responsibility, as the condition for any being, any consciousness. That's why each philosophy, which begins with violence of this-which-is-being, he will call pagan. In this meaning, no matter how much Freud's thought is marked by Judaism, it remains pagan.

Finally I'd like to make a digression. Freud's thought, in the same way as Levinas's, may be looked at as the response to dramatic experience of the violence of the first half of 20th century. Especially the anti-Semitism. Both of them in a similar way state that previous and current idealizations, consolations, either derived from religion or from philosophy, or finally from rational science, proved to be an illusion. Pure being, the way it is, the Being, revealed its brutal appearance. However the conclusions drawn from this finding, they were utterly different. Freud thinks that the source of the violence is precisely human craving for illusion. For instance the «illusion of moral goodness» which told his father to come to terms with the anti-Semitic aggression. So Freud demands any illusion which hides the Being should be forgotten.

Levinas would probably defend Freud's father. He would say: what can the just man do in case of such violence? For Levinas it is the Being, with its supremacy and violence that must become an illusion.

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