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Emmanuel Lévinas. Praise of atheism

Summary

Lévinas presents atheism as the original good condition of the soul before acknowledging or rejecting God. Such description is closely linked to the notion of separation. Man is a created being, but a separated one, self-contained, though not absolute. Even if not *causa sui*, he may exist on his own. The description is radically different from that by Augustine, who refers to creation as the participation of man in God. Similarly, there is an almost literal contradiction between the statement by Lévinas and the words of Tertullian, claiming that the soul is Christian by nature. A comparison of Levinas' text with the theology of Karl Rahner also points to significant differences. Rahner presents the awareness of God as a transcendental, unthematic experience. Lévinas also states that the awareness of God is unthematic, however, he does not share Rahner's description of the experience of God as the primary transcendental experience. According to Lévinas, God comes from outside through the face of the Other. Levinas' analyses seem highly interesting for fundamental theology and the theology of spirituality.

Keywords: Lévinas, atheism, Augustine, Rahner, Tertullian

This article should begin with an explanation, or even justification of its title. Originally, it was meant to be entitled *Atheism According to Levinas*, which, however, would suggest that Levinas simply analyses the phenomenon and various perceptions of atheism, presenting their descriptions and his own interpretation which deserves to be studied. Such an impression would be totally false. The atheism

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which we are going to discuss here is a significant part of Levinas's own philosophy. It constitutes an irremovable part of his perception of human being and the whole reality, which he clearly expresses in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*.¹ It is his personal approach to atheism, created for his own use, involving a praise of atheism which is, at the same time, a praise of the Creator.

Status questionis

Philosophers studying Levinas's thinking are not particularly interested in the notion of atheism which appears in his writings. The bibliography for the article devoted to Levinas in *the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* contains a list of 254 studies, however, none of the titles contains "atheism" or a related word.

Neither do theologians seem to be keen on the notion. The *Electronic Bibliography of Theology and Religion FIDES*² which lists all the theological texts published in Poland, including those written by philosophers who are also theologians, shows 81 entries devoted to Levinas. The notion of atheism does not appear on the list but for one exception, which is the article *Hipostaza, ateista i Sługa Jahwe, czyli trzy koncepcje samotności w filozofii Emmanuela Levinasa* by Marek Jędraszewski.³ However, despite the suggestion in the title, the Author provides no analysis of the notion. Even though he quotes the appropriate passages of *Totality and Infinity* referring to atheism, he does not undertake an in-depth analysis of the dimension that is interesting to us. Such a casual treatment, only touching the surface of Levinas's approach to atheism, can be observed in the texts by other Polish theologians studying the idea of God in Levinas's thought. Another article by the same author, "*Interior intimo meo*": *św. Augustyn i Emmanuel Levinas o Bogu i o człowieku*,⁴ seems to be of interest in the context of this article. We will refer to it in the sub-chapter devoted to the relation between Levinas's and Augustine's thinking.

International bibliographies of theological texts⁵ yield similar search results: there is a large number of theological texts devoted to Levinas, however, judging

1 E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by A. Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969. Further referred to as TI.

2 <http://biblio.fides.org.pl/> (access 3.11.2020).

3 M. Jędraszewski, *Hipostaza, ateista i Sługa Jahwe, czyli trzy koncepcje samotności w filozofii Emmanuela Lévinasa*, "Filozofia Chrześcijańska" 2015, vol. 12, pp. 129–144. Jędraszewski is both a philosopher and theologian. He writes the quoted texts as a philosopher, yet his theological formation is clearly visible.

4 Idem, "*Interior intimo meo*": *św. Augustyn i Emmanuel Lévinas o Bogu i o człowieku*, "Filozofia Chrześcijańska" 2006, vol. 3, pp. 105–154.

5 Index theologicus: <http://www.ixtheo.de>, Global Digital Library on Theology and Ecumenism: <http://www.globethics.net/web/gtl> (access 2.11.2020).

by their titles at least, their authors are not interested in the issue of atheism in Levinas's thought.

The paragraphs above have been written as a result of a very quick and rather superficial query, however, we take the courage to claim that even such a query suffices to demonstrate that analysing of the notion of atheism in Levinas's thought does not mean a duplication of work that has already been done and concluded. Likewise, the very nature of Levinas's thought justifies its analysis "from within", which we will try to explain in the next subchapter.

Methodology

Before we present an analysis of Levinas's texts, we are obliged to describe and justify the methodology applied in this article. In the first place, this text has been written by a theologian, who interprets Levinas from a theological perspective, not necessarily adhering to the methods of analysis which apply in philosophy. It would be difficult here to provide a detailed description of the differences between theology and philosophy,⁶ let us, however, reiterate the old statement that *philosophia ancilla theologiae* (philosophy is the servant of theology). Unlike a philosopher, a theologian seriously considers the experience of faith (or, broadly speaking, a spiritual experience), it is never methodologically bracketed. In other words, whereas authentic philosophy requires neutrality as the point of departure,⁷ or methodological questioning of every assumption, theology precludes such neutrality as it builds on faith (spiritual experience), though, obviously, it poses every possible question concerning the act of faith, or the spiritual experience.

It seems justified to assume that Levinas as a philosopher never bracketed his own spiritual experience, namely the Talmudic reading of the Bible.⁸ In his works, he repeatedly introduces biblical passages as legitimate texts. Even though he frequently emphasises that he writes philosophical text and avoids stepping into the quicksand of religious deliberations, the biblical foundation is present in his philosophy not only in the biblical quotes, but also, for example, in the claim that man is a created being, which he takes as his starting point. Likewise, the category of

6 A more comprehensive discussion of the theme can be found in: J. Słomka, *Wprowadzenie do teologii katolickiej*, Wydawnictwo UŚ, Katowice, 2018, pp. 50–59.

7 The above mentioned deliberate rejection of neutrality by Levinas demonstrates that he is not a typical philosopher who smoothly fits in the canon of pure philosophy. Of course, that statement does not exhaust the full meaning of "the neuter" in Levinas's thought.

8 The thesis that Levinas is, first and foremost, immersed in the world of the Bible, and he reads the Bible drawing from the masters of Talmud, which cannot be omitted in the interpretation of his philosophy, is comprehensively substantiated by Azzolino Chiappini in his book *Amare Torah più di Dio. Emmanuel Lévinas lettore di Talmud*, Giuntina, Firenze 1999.

rationality in his writings is almost identical with that of spirituality. Pure and sterile rationality devoid of a spiritual aspect seems inhuman to Levinas.

Back to the realm of philosophy: to interpret Levinas's texts, it is essential to constantly remember the starting point of his philosophy. For Levinas, the foundation of all knowledge is the face of another human being, the concrete, personally encountered individual. That is the arche, metaphysics that is prior to any form of ontology, the Cartesian idea of infinity, primordial identification of I as I. One can accept Levinas's philosophical foundation or reject it, yet, it is impossible to read his texts with understanding unless one takes it into account. The nature and the inner structure of that primordial experience, which we are not even attempting to outline here, dominates the way in which Levinas develops his thought. In general, it runs across the set line of the European thought, and Levinas repeatedly signals the subsequent "clashes" in his texts.

Both comments presented above indicate a certain distinctness of Levinas's thought. He is an acknowledged philosopher of the European tradition, however, to interpret his thinking by merely comparing him to others and pointing to the similarities and differences within the said tradition is not sufficient to grasp the specificity of that thinking and, as we believe, it is not very helpful for the understanding of its essence. Likewise, the presentation of Levinas as a philosopher of dialogue, juxtaposing him with Martin Buber, may be correct but not fully satisfactory. Levinas himself mentions his significant indebtedness to Rosenzweig. A study of that relation is a separate important issue, which, however, will not be discussed in this article.

The statement that classification is of limited usefulness also refers to the literature devoted to Levinas. Relying on commentaries and multiplying references can be laborious and misleading if one really wants to study his thinking. There is a great number of various commentaries available, so in order to refer to them and choose from among interpretations that are often mutually exclusive, one needs to acquire an understanding of Levinas's texts which is based on personal reading.⁹ Thus, to begin with, one has to devote plenty of time to the exploration of his texts, searching for hidden messages and meanings. Since a thorough study of his relation to the earlier authors or going through commentaries fail to facilitate the understanding of Levinas, one needs to delve into the inner structure of his texts, treating the links with the other texts as a complement or continuation of that analysis. Therefore, referring to Paul Ricoeur and his distinction between exegetical analysis and structural hermeneutics, we give an absolute priority to the latter.

⁹ E.g. in her introduction to the Polish translation of TI, B. Skarga claims that God in Levinas's writings "is not the Christian God". The thesis is not obvious, yet any reaction to it, be it polemical, corrective or affirmative, requires prior comprehensive study of Levinas's texts.

Our intention is to first present the relevant text by Levinas, and then to develop our reflection, referring to the source. Ricoeur described the effect of such work, or the understanding of a text, as the construction of one or more new sentences based on the best possible comprehension of the grammar of the text.¹⁰

Thus, creating one's own text which grasps and transmits the thought of the studied text is the way to proceed and, at the same time, the evidence that the text has been understood. Such understanding is partial by nature and with no guarantee of its correctness, it does not provide the only possible interpretation. It only contributes to greater work which is required in order to understand Levinas's thinking on atheism. In the subsequent stages of our study, we will attempt to confront, or even clash Levinas's ideas with a few well known theological texts. The confrontation, however, belongs to the realm of structural hermeneutics rather than exegetical work.

To conclude this subchapter, we would like to specify the scope of our study, which is not explicitly expressed in the title. The analysis pertains exclusively to the essay *Totality and Infinity*, which is acknowledged as one of the most significant Levinas's text. It belongs to the second period of his writing, and it contains a comprehensive presentation of Levinas's perception of atheism. An analysis of its text alone presents a research problem that is sufficiently wide. To study other Levinas's texts and to examine how the author tackles atheism there, and whether his thinking on the issue evolves,¹¹ would require a separate research work.

Definition of atheism

Levinas writes about atheism at the beginning of the first part of his essay. The whole part is entitled *The Same and the Other*, and the relevant subchapter of its first chapter, *Separation and Discourse*, bears the title *Atheism, or the Will*:

One can call atheism this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief. The break with participation is implied in this capability. One lives outside of the psychic, being an accomplishment of separation, is naturally atheist [in the original text: “égoïsme” – J.S.]. By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as

¹⁰ See P. Ricoeur, *Esquisse de conclusion*, [in:] *Exégèse et herméneutique*, collectif, Paris, Seuil, 1971, p. 290.

¹¹ The suggestion that Levinas's perception of atheism evolves with time can be found in the texts by Marek Jędraszewski and Krzysztof Wieczorek.

I. It is certainly a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself.¹²

Levinas provides the above definition after several pages of introductory explanations. The most important concept which he introduces and which needs to be clarified is that of separation.¹³ It means disconnection which makes it possible for each of the separated beings to exist all by itself, without relying on another being for its own existence. For Levinas, a separated being is the only being that exists truly and independently and is not a function, an extension or part of another being. At the same time, Levinas acknowledges that human being is a separated being in that sense, and he develops his analyses, including those establishing the meaning of the notion of atheism, not to prove that separation, but to better understand and explain the primary situation of man. The separation is so fundamental and so absolute that it precludes the existence of an outside look that could see what is common; it precludes the possibility of a higher level synthesis that would join two separated beings into one and form a unity of higher order.¹⁴ The only link that can connect two separated beings is speech, a discourse. The belief referred to in the quoted passage exists only insofar as it is pronounced, or expressed in words.

Separation regarded as the relation of man to God proves to be atheism. It is, however, an atheism that is prior to acknowledging or rejecting God, it does not mean rejecting God as a result of reflection. Levinas is not interested in conscious atheism which rejects God following some kind of deliberation. The primordial atheism, on the other hand, is for him a prerequisite for the existence of human being as a being that is separate and finite, and, at the same time, aware of its own finiteness: a being that is born, that is mortal, vulnerable, weak and limited.

It is that primordial atheism that makes it possible for the soul to be at home with itself, to be the host of its own "I", the host who is or is not willing. Atheism is the foundation of possessing oneself. The will, the possibility of wanting or not wanting, is for Levinas one of the fundamental names of human being, of the soul,

¹² TI, pp. 62–63.

¹³ In Levinas's philosophy, it is one of the central concepts describing the nature of the relations between beings. Here we only refer to it insofar as it is significant for the description of the relation man-God.

¹⁴ Levinas thus suggests that when we believe we can embrace the whole reality with one synthetic look, we are under an illusion, while our look and our thought in fact embrace only the inside of "the same".

of the separated being. Only one who is at home, who is an independent host can, if he so wills, invite a guest, including God, to stay with him.¹⁵

In the subsequent parts of the essay, Levinas devotes much attention to the analysis of enjoyment as the fundamental manifestation of “I” being at home with itself, experiencing its own separateness, being “I” in the strongest sense of the word. The analysis helps to better understand that the word “egoism” used in the quoted passage has no negative connotation: it is just another notion describing the beautiful condition of “I” being at home. The enjoyment experienced by “I” is explicitly sensual, and therefore it truly means being at home.¹⁶ Feeling and senses are for Levinas the primary, fundamental way of experiencing oneself; sensual perception is a primordial experience. Here Levinas adopts a perspective that goes contrary to the Platonic tradition, which subordinates the sensual and volatile to what is transcendent, intelligible and eternal.

Levinas and Augustine

The description of atheism as the primary condition of human being that is regarded as good is in sharp contrast with another description of the situation presented by Augustine in the initial passage of the *Confessions*: “For Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee.”¹⁷

Thus, Augustine knows no peace of human heart without a “repose in God”. Left to himself, man cannot be at home, he is at home only in God. Therefore, a desire for God is the deepest and the only authentic desire of the human heart, even if hidden or stifled.

Similarly to Augustine, Levinas begins his essay with the phenomenology of desire that is constitutive for human existence. It is different form need, it is primary and unquenchable, directed towards the absolutely Other. In the first subchapter of his essay, entitled *Desire for the Invisible*, he describes that primary human desire as a metaphysical movement, “toward an alien outside-of-oneself [*hors-de-soi*],

¹⁵ One might ask whether the beginning of a relation with God, i.e. a religious relation, eliminates the primordial atheism, or it remains as the inner state of the soul as a pre-requisite for the existence of that relation. Levinas’s writings do not provide a clear answer. In his article on Levinas and Augustine quoted below, Jędraszewski, suggests that the atheism vanishes, however, it does not seem fully convincing to us.

¹⁶ The appearance of another human being radically breaks that primordial enjoyment. The Other, however, is never an obstacle, or a limitation. He or she always comes “from high up”. That thought is central for Levinas’s philosophy, and without bearing it in mind, one could read his analysis of enjoyment as a praise of selfish egoism.

¹⁷ Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. by E.B. Pussey, <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/Englishconfessions.html> (access 2.11.2020).

toward a yonder.”¹⁸ However, in his essay, Levinas does not identify that desire for the invisible as a desire for God, not even unconscious.¹⁹ Thus, we deal with two similar, though at the same time almost mutually exclusive descriptions of the primordial inner reality of human being. That contradiction becomes even more significant when one considers that both Levinas’s and Augustine’s anthropologies regard man as God’s creation which is limited and weak, yet aware of its limitations. More than that, they both perceive human being as a being that is free and desirous in the first place. Thus, the difference mentioned above does not result from radically different anthropologies. It reflects two different perceptions of the relation between man and God. We will elaborate on the subject while commenting on the notion of separation.

In his article, Marek Jędraszewski gives a comprehensive analysis of the similarities and differences between Augustine and Levinas, stressing some significant similarities which can only be detected after a thorough study. He writes:

That heteronomy inspired by Descartes, or the radical transcendence of the Other in relation to the Same, took a very specific form of the notion of the Other in the Same (l’Autre-dans-le Même) in Levinas’s philosophy, recalling, to a certain extent, Augustine’s thinking on God who is present in human soul – God who is *interior intimo meo*.²⁰

Jędraszewski focuses his analysis on Levinas’s late thought. In TI, the beginnings of the concept of God, the Other in the Same, are already present, however, the dominating motif is that of separation.

¹⁸ TI, p. 37.

¹⁹ Elsewhere, Levinas refers to God “at the level of desire that cannot be fulfilled or satisfied”. See *Korespondencja między Emmanuelem Lévinasem i Simonem Decloux*, “Logos i Ethos” 1991, issue 1, p. 116 (quote translated by J.S.) In the essay discussed in this article, he also refers to “the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High” (p. 38), yet, let us reiterate: firstly, in TI Levinas explicitly excludes the identification of desire for the invisible with religious longing, searching for God, and secondly, he repeatedly stresses the fundamental impossibility to satisfy that desire for the invisible, which is part of its very essence. The quoted exchange of letters took place in 1963–1965, it is thus later than TI. Jędraszewski believes that it was a period of an intensive evolution of Levinas’s thought combined with a change of some of his opinions. (See: idem, *W stronę prehistorii Ja. Korespondencja między Emmanuelem Lévinasem a Simonem Decloux*, “Filozofia Chrześcijańska” 2006, vol. 3, pp. 51–52).

²⁰ M. Jędraszewski, “*Interior intimo meo*”..., p. 131 (the quote translated by J.S.).

Man as created being

Let us now expand on what Levinas writes about man as a created being. It is explicitly referred to in the second part of the above quoted passage. Levinas always considers man as a being created by God. For him, it is not a mere metaphor, a verbal ornament or an attractive way of treating man in a more sublime way: it is a fundamental statement. For human beings, there is a beginning and the end of their earthly existence: birth and death, and those are not incidental or secondary elements of human life, which seem somewhat negligible even though unavoidable. They are constitutive for our lives. And it is exactly the man who is not *causa sui* that, here on earth, is at home with himself as a separated being. Being created belongs to his very essence. Consequently, Levinas perceives the original atheism of the soul as ground for proclaiming the greatness of the work of creation and the glory of the Creator: He created a being that is different from Him, separated and non-absolute, yet capable of autonomous existence. It calls to mind a statement by another Church father, Irenaeus, this time sounding in harmony rather than as a counterpoint: “For the glory of God is the living man.”²¹

Let us return to the description of human condition. Man cannot regard himself as an absolute being. If that is the case, it is clear for him that he is not *causa sui*, the first beginning. Such perception of man as created being poses entire Levinas’s thought against those existentialist trends which regard human freedom as autonomous, primary and absolute in its self-realisation. Man is not only freedom limited incidentally by external circumstances, man is a created being. His freedom, the Will which is autonomously at home in its own “I” is not an absolute will: it is a will that is established, and it needs to seek its own justification, yet that need does not mean its limitation, but the very foundation: “Existence is not in reality condemned to freedom, but is invested as freedom. Freedom is not bare.”²²

It has to be clearly stated that the close relation between the fact that man is a created being and atheism as the original condition of the soul makes Levinas’s notion of atheism significantly different from modern atheisms, which tend to perceive human being only in a physical or evolutionary perspective, or as “thrownness,”²³ coming from nowhere, and are thus atheisms which essentially mean the negation of the existence of God.

²¹ Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. I, Against Heresies: Book IV by Irenaeus, trans. by P. Schaff et al. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ante-Nicene_Fathers/Volume_I/IRENÆUS/Against_Heresies:_Book_IV/Chapter_XX (access 2.11.2020) It has to be noted, though, that Irenaeus would not be likely to fully embrace Levinas’s description of atheism. It seems, however, that Levinas’s thought has more in common with Irenaeus than Augustine.

²² TI, p. 89. It is obviously a hint to J.P. Sartre’s existentialism.

²³ Martin Heidegger *Geworfenheit*. See SuZ § 39, p. 181 (M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, elfte, unveränderte Auflage, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 1967) (Eng. *Thrownness*, p. 225 in: Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1962).

Separation, not participation

As has already been mentioned, separation is one of Levinas's fundamental concepts. He does not search for unity or synthesis, on the contrary, he accepts and strives to demonstrate in his reflection that there exists a multiplicity of beings which do not succumb to any form of synthesis. In particular, every human being is a separated being. Community has yet to be established, and it is established by Discourse. Levinas repeatedly contrasts the notion of separation with that of participation. According to him, there is no participation, there is only separation.²⁴ To make it more precise: man's relation to God does not consist in participation, he is separated from God. Let us reiterate: man is a separated being.

Thus, Levinas stands in clear opposition to the long tradition that uses the concept of participation to describe reality, including the relation of man to God. Let us, therefore, briefly recall the history of the notion in order to better understand the revolutionary nature of Levinas's thought.

Like many other significant philosophical ideas, the concept of participation was introduced by Plato, to be fully developed by the Neoplatonists.²⁵ It perfectly expresses both the unity and the hierarchical nature of reality, allowing for the gradation of perfection. It embraces the whole history of European philosophy. The concept was naturally adopted by Christian theology, with Augustine as the key figure for the Western tradition. He placed the concept in the centre of his philosophy, which is regarded as the foundation of theology. Participation makes it possible for Augustine to describe the goodness of created beings which come from God, and thus participate in His perfection, while, at the same time, they are imperfect since participation implies being only "a part". Likewise, in the opening sentences of the *Confessions*, man is referred to as "a particle of Thy creation" (*aliqua portio creaturae*).²⁶ Thus, the concept covers both being a part and being incomplete. In the East, the idea of participation has evolved to theosis, or deification, as the ultimate purpose of man.

Let us reiterate: Levinas opposes the above described tradition not only at the level of one notion, but also with the entire logic of his thinking. It is within the logic of separation that his perception of atheism has its place.

²⁴ He should thus be classified as a nominalist, yet, as we mention in the Introduction, those classifications do not bear much significance to us in this context.

²⁵ This short presentation is based on the article by Zofia Zdybicka in *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, which is also available on the website of the Polish Thomas Aquinas Society: <http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/p/partycypacja.pdf> (access 2.11.2020).

²⁶ Continuation of the already quoted passage of *Confessions*: "For Thou madest us for Thyself, (*quia fecisti nos ad te*)". Levinas, however, never refers to the purpose of creation in this way. The category of purpose is not significant to him.

The Soul as naturally atheist and *anima naturaliter christiana*

Levinas's claim that the soul is naturally atheist brings to mind the famous statement by Tertullian about the soul that is naturally Christian. Let us quote an extensive passage from *Apologeticus* which comprises the above mentioned statement:

Do you wish that we should prove this from his own works, so many and of such a character, by which we are restrained, upheld, delighted; nay even by which we are terrified, or should we prove it even from the evidence of the soul itself? Although weighed down by the prison of the body, though confined by evil customs, though emasculated by lusts and passions, though enslaved to false gods, yet, when it recovers its senses, as after surfeit, as after sleep, as after some illness, when it becomes conscious of its own health, it names God, for the sole reason that he alone is by nature the true God. "Good God", "Great God" and "Which may God grant" are expressions used by all. That he is also a judge is attested by the words: "God sees", "I commend to God", and "God will recompense me". O evidence of the natural Christianity of the soul! (*O testimonium animae naturaliter christianae!*) For when uttering these words it looks not to the Capitol, but to the sky. It knows indeed the place of abode of the living God; from him and from there it descended.²⁷

The reference to the whole passage enables us to see a significant element that is common to both thinkers. Tertullian knows that the beauty of creation can be considered as evidence of the existence of God, however, he does not attach much importance to it. What matters to him is the evidence of the soul. Levinas also focuses on human being, on the evidence of the human soul.

Let us now consider the final part of the quoted text. Tertullian contrasts faith stemming from the human soul with pagan beliefs and practices. His text (as well as the entire *Apologeticus*) is meant as a defence of Christian monotheism against the assaults of pagan idolatry. The defence essentially means attacking: Tertullian demonstrates the foolishness of idolatry, and his reasoning, which culminates in the quoted passage, points to the depth of the human soul as the ultimate authority. Levinas repeatedly raises the subject of pagan gods who have no face, and he would fully agree with Tertullian's criticism of idolatry.

The above mentioned similarities, however, must not obscure the fundamental difference. God referred to by Levinas does not dwell in the human soul, thus he cannot speak from its depth. God speaks exclusively through the face of another

²⁷ *Tertullian's Defence of the Christians Against the Heathen*, trans. by A. Souter, Chapter XLII, http://www.tertullian.org/articles/mayor_apologeticum/mayor_apologeticum_07translation.htm#59 (access 2.11.2020).

human being. Levinas often refers to God speaking in that way, here, however, we only raise the issue in the context of our study of Levinas's perception of atheism. The following juxtaposition will take us further.

Levinas and Rahner

In this subchapter, we juxtapose Levinas's text with a well-known passage from the beginning of *Foundation of Christian Faith* by Karl Rahner. Let us recall that Levinas and Rahner are contemporaries, and, as young people, they both listened to Heidegger.²⁸ Rahner openly admitted Heidegger's significant influence, while Levinas, even though he recognized his impact, polemicalized with him even more openly, also in the essay discussed here.

Levinas writes:

It was to escape the arbitrariness of freedom, its disappearance into the Neuter, that we have approached the I as atheist and created – free, but capable of tracing back beneath its condition – before the Other, who does not deliver himself in the “thematization” or “conceptualization” of the Other. To wish to escape dissolution into the Neuter, to posit knowing as a welcoming of the Other, is not a pious attempt to maintain the spiritualism of a personal God, but is the condition for language, without which philosophical discourse itself is but an abortive act, a pretext for an unintermitting psychoanalysis or philology or sociology, in which the appearance of a discourse vanishes in the Whole. Speaking implies a possibility of breaking off and beginning.

To posit knowing as the very existing of the creature, as the tracing back beyond the condition to the other that founds, is to separate oneself from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self in the self, outside of heteronomous opinions.²⁹

The following text is Rahner's:

We shall call *transcendental experience* the subjective, unthematic, necessary and unfailing consciousness of the knowing subject that is co-present in every spiritual act of knowledge, and the subject's openness to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality.

²⁸ Levinas was born in 1906, Rahner in 1904. Levinas studied in Freiburg under Heidegger in 1927–1928, while Rahner much later – 1934–1936.

²⁹ TI, pp. 90–91.

[...]

We shall be concerned later with showing that there is present in this transcendental experience an unthematic and anonymous, as it were, knowledge of God. Hence the original knowledge of God is not the kind of knowledge in which one grasps an object which happens to present itself directly or indirectly from outside. It has rather the character of a transcendental experience.³⁰

Both passages emphasise unthematicity as a fundamental characteristic of our “knowledge of God”. It is a significant concept, indispensable for any relevant theology cultivated today. Regarding our knowledge of God as unthematic by its nature sets it free from the scientific paradigm and guards it against the temptations of modern fundamentalism.

At the same time, the unthematicity of the knowledge of God precludes agnosticism, or, in other words, exposes the fundamental error in the assumptions of modern agnosticism. Having read the above quoted texts, one may define agnosticism as a desire to know God that is thematic, similar to acquiring the knowledge of mathematics, physics, or other lands. Rahner’s theology and Levinas’s philosophy explicitly demonstrate that the desire for such knowledge of God must remain unsatisfied as it is essentially incompatible with the only possibility to know God: the unthematic knowledge through the Other (Levinas) or a transcendental experience (Rahner). If one claimed, however, that he or she had found God taking agnosticism as a starting point and using the reason to search, it would be very likely that he or she never managed to reach the other dimension, that of unthematicity, but considered an aspect of the created reality around us to be God, and thus committed idolatry.

Apart from the common motif of the unthematic knowledge of God, the two texts are fundamentally different.

Rahner continues the tradition of transcendental philosophy and carries over its achievements as an intellectual foundation of his theology. Hence God is present beforehand, before we acquire any knowledge, he is present in a transcendental experience, therefore it can be stated that he dwells in the very depth of our hearts, minds, “selves”. It is a continuation of not only transcendental philosophy, but also the great tradition of Christian theology which perceives God as one that dwells in the heart of our hearts. Let us quote Augustine again and his declaration: “What, then, do you desire to know? I desire to know God and the soul. And nothing more? Nothing whatever.”³¹ God dwells in the depth of our souls even before we get to know him, and by entering that depth, we acquire the knowledge of God.

³⁰ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. by W.W. Dych, Crossroad, 1982, pp. 20–21.

³¹ Augustine, *The Soliloquies*, trans. by R.E. Cleveland, Little, Brown, and Company, Boston 1910; I, II, 7, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/augustine-the-soliloquies> (access 2.11.2020).

The point of departure of Rahner's theology, as briefly presented above, provides a foundation for his concept of anonymous Christianity. It is not a concept that is marginal to his theological deliberations: it permeates his whole theology as it stems from the fundamental assumption concerning the way of knowing God and his presence in the heart of man.

Levinas intentionally breaks with that tradition. For him, God comes exclusively from outside, through an experience that is primordial and irreducible, insusceptible to any kind of synthesis, subordination or generalisation: the face of another human being, the Other. The soul is originally atheist. God does not dwell in the human soul, therefore it is at home with itself. It is a separated being.

As a result, the primordially of a mystical experience can be contested. Levinas does not dwell on the subject in TI, however, such an implication seems to be obvious. Even if we do not exclude the possibility of such an experience, in Levinas's thought it will never be classified as primordial. Levinas, as can be inferred from his thought and is sometimes explicitly articulated, does not accept the existence of an inner voice that would have the form of speech and the status of God's voice. Speech means solely a discourse, and it only happens between me and the Other who is facing me.³²

Theological perspective

Turning to theological conclusions, one has to bear in mind that Levinas wrote a philosophical essay. If he mentions God, creation, or faith, he speaks as a philosopher. For those subjects especially, philosophical concepts are only prolegomena of theology. While pursuing theology, one does not have to accept or reject philosophical theses in their entirety, or subject them to the criteria applied for theological concepts. Yet, philosophy can provide an inspiration when regarded as an introduction, preparation for cultivating theology. Levinas's texts can also be interpreted in this way: as an inspiration for theological reflection on the ways in which God is present in human beings.

At the same time, Levinas's text is a meditation, reflection of spiritual nature; it is a record of a profound inner experience. It is also an attempt to understand the relation between God and man from the perspective of a Jew who survived the Holocaust.³³ Therefore, the text seems particularly interesting for fundamental and

³² Thus, also Augustine's *Soliloquies* – his conversations with himself – do not seem to be a concept of great value when viewed from this perspective. However, after having seen the vast differences between Levinas and Augustine, one should not be surprised.

³³ During WWII, Levinas, as a French officer, was a prisoner of war, his wife, a Jew, was hiding in France, while his brothers and parents were killed by the Nazis in Lithuania.

spiritual theology. The former might take interest in the basic structure of Levinas's thought: his philosophy explicitly polemicalises with that of Hegel, Heidegger, and all the trends of modern philosophy where the fullness of humanity is seen in total autonomy, while any heteronomy is considered as limitation, which is the case of the majority of existentialist movements.

Levinas is also one of the very few renown 20th century non-Christian philosophers openly writing about the Creator God. What is significant, he justifies his conviction of the existence of God referring to Descartes, the father modern philosophy. Levinas carries out a very thorough analysis of Descartes's *Meditations*, and there he finds a way which was abandoned by virtually all Descartes's followers. The analysis itself merits a separate study, however, it may be interesting to quote Levinas's comment on the adoration of God concluding Descartes's third meditation in which he attempts to prove the existence of God. Levinas writes:

The last paragraph of the Third Meditation brings us to a relation with infinity in thought which overflows thought and becomes a personal relation. Contemplation turns into admiration, adoration, and joy. It is a question no longer of an "infinite object" still known and thematized, but of a majesty: "...placet hic aliquamdiu in ipsius Dei contemplatione immorari, eius attributa apud me expendere et immensi huius luminis pulchritudinem quantum caligantis ingenii mei acies ferre poterit, intueri, admirari, adorare. Ut enim in hac sola divinae majestatis contemplatione summan alterius vitae felicitatem consistere fide credimus, ita etiam jam ex eadem licet multo minus perfecta, maximum cujus in hac vita capaces simus voluptatem percipi posse experimur...". To us this paragraph appears to be not a stylistic ornament or a prudent homage to religion, but the expression of this transformation of the idea of infinity conveyed by knowledge into Majesty approached as a face.³⁴

The central theme of this article, on the other hand, could prove interesting to spiritual theology. After all, the question about the way in which God dwells in the human soul belongs to its most significant issues. Because of the very nature of that

³⁴ TI, pp. 215–216. For the English translation of Decartes: 1911 edition of *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (Cambridge University Press), trans. by E.S. Haldane. "But before I examine this matter with more care, and pass on to the consideration of other truths which may be derived from it, it seems to me right to pause for a while in order to contemplate God Himself, to ponder at leisure His marvellous attributes, to consider, and admire, and adore, the beauty of this light so resplendent, at least as far as the strength of my mind, which is in some measure dazzled by the sight, will allow me to do so. For just as faith teaches us that the supreme felicity of the other life consists only in this contemplation of the Divine Majesty, so we continue to learn by experience that a similar meditation, though incomparably less perfect, causes us to enjoy the greatest satisfaction of which we are capable in this life".

branch of theology, it is very rare that questions, especially the one above, receive explicit answers, precluding opinions that seem contradictory at first sight. Therefore, having identified a radical difference between Levinas and Augustine, one is not obliged to take sides with one of them and rule out the arguments of the other.³⁵

Besides, the analysis of atheism as the original state of the soul, or the created human being, might be inspiring for other disciplines of Catholic theology, wherever the theme of atheism emerges. It allows a new perception of the widespread atheism which seems to be dominating in most European societies today. The perspective opened by Levinas shows that all the studies aimed at the sociological, cultural, psychological, or philosophical determinants of atheism may not be particularly significant for theological reflection. The present state of modern European societies may simply be regarded as the actualisation of one of the possibilities resulting from the fact that man was created by God as a separated free being. Thus, the prevailing situation need not be considered in terms a failure, a fall. A reflection on the source and motives of modern atheism remains interesting, but it may not necessarily be of key importance for the understanding of our faith.

Levinas's analyses of speech as the only way to overcome separation, the theme directly linked to his description of atheism, may provide an impetus for a renewal of the Christian perception of the mission, the obligation to proclaim faith, to spread the Good News about the God of Jesus Christ. Since God only comes through the Other, the call for the proclamation of God seems not to be a mere implication of faith, but its very essence, a requirement that is fundamental for our life of faith. For our faith exists and comes to life in proclaiming God and welcoming the Other. Discourse is a privileged place for the revelation of God.

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³⁵ To some extent, the above quoted article by M. Jędraszewski, "*Interior intimo meo*": św. Augustyn i Emmanuel Lévinas o Bogu i o człowieku, represents a search for a thread binding the two viewpoints. Yet, spiritual theology should avoid too quick syntheses. Theologians should rather act according to the words of Jacob: "I will move along slowly" (Genesis 33:14)

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Emmanuela Lévinasa pochwała ateizmu

Streszczenie

Lévinas przedstawia ateizm jako pierwotny, dobry stan duszy, przed przyjęciem lub odrzuceniem Boga. Taki opis ściśle związany jest z pojęciem separacji. Człowiek jest bytem stworzonym, ale odseparowanym, a więc samodzielny, choć nie absolutny. Pomimo że nie jest *causa sui*, może istnieć osobno. Taki opis jest radykalnie różny od opisu Augustyna, który pisze o stworzeniu jako uczestnictwie człowieka w Bogu. Podobnie, niemal literalna sprzeczność jest widoczna między twierdzeniem Lévinasa a słowami Tertuliana o duszy z natury chrześcijańskiej. Ważne różnice pokazuje też zestawienie tekstu Lévinasa z teologią K. Rahnera. Rahner przedstawia poznanie Boga jako doświadczenie transcendentalne, atematyczne. Lévinas również pisze, że poznanie Boga jest atematyczne, ale nie podziela Rahnerowego opisu doświadczenia Boga jako pierwotnego doświadczenia transcendentalnego. Według Lévinasa Bóg przychodzi z zewnątrz, przez twarz Innego. Analizy Levinasa są interesujące przede wszystkim dla teologii fundamentalnej i duchowości.

Słowa kluczowe: Lévinas, ateizm, Augustyn, Rahner, Tertulian

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