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„The Empirical Countertruth”

Lévinas, Feminism and Phenomenology

The concept of a „woman figure”, by Emmanuel Lévinas, serves as an example, in which the notions of „masculinity” and „femininity” serve to determine the character of a certain proposition of a Subject. Lévinas introduced sexual difference into the neutral subject. However, Lévinas is inconsistent in his treatment of the idea of Woman and, besides, he assigned subjectivity to a single gender: the masculine. In his work *Time and the Other*, where his ideas about the Other were only just beginning to form, Lévinas not only describes femininity as total otherness, but he also calls the subject masculine and writes about „the virile power of the subject”. Also later, in *Totality and Infinity*, he writes about „virile and heroic I”.

The feminist criticism of Lévinas's model of a „woman” is neither simple nor clear. Lévinas continually evades such criticism. He re-establishes the body and sensuality as key aspects of encounter with the Other. He also criticizes the western ontological tradition as a theoretical source of violence against the Other, because – as he claims – on a high level of abstraction it appears that, thematization itself is a form of violence. At the same time, Lévinas proposes the ontology of a „woman”. In relation to this, one needs to ask the question: why does Lévinas, whilst stating the need to be freed from ontology, creates at once an ontological woman? Also, what are the philosophical and ethical consequences of the phenomenology of femininity presented by Lévinas?

The idea of de-neutralising the subject corresponds with the thinking of Luce Irigaray, for whom it is impossible to build a model of the subject without a concept of gender difference. As she states, there is no such thing as humans, there are women and men. Irigaray accuses Lévinas of creating a feminine ontology on the basis of commonly held cultural stereotypes, where all that is masculine is strong and active and all that is feminine: weak, gentle and in need of care. As a matter of fact, when describing femininity, Lévinas uses terms such as: delightful weakness, gentleness, light-heartedness, timidity, but also animality and ultra-materiality.

Lévinas, however, claimed that his concept of femininity is not assigned to empirical sex. For these reasons, questions arise: what is the relation between the conception of the phenomenon of femininity in the work of Lévinas and a real, concrete woman? To what extent does language remain neutral while being dubbed „phenomenological”?