

Société Internationale de Recherche Emmanuel Levinas

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

TOTALITY AND INFINITY: A WORK OF RUPTURES

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Presentation

Today it is universally acknowledged that *Totality and Infinity* is one of the most influential philosophical works of the 20th century. This can be ascribed to the twofold nature of the book itself. On the one hand, it engages resolutely in the debates sweeping the history of philosophical thought, in particular in the form it has taken in our times. On the other hand, it created an initial rupture in this tradition that extended rapidly to other domains well beyond the sole confines of philosophy, and defined *Totality and Infinity* as a work of ruptures –the title of this conference. In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas acknowledges his debt to Rosenzweig, stating that "this is where I encountered a radical critique of totality for the first time". In Rosenzweig, Levinas explains that he discovered "a completely different path towards the search for what is meaningful". This initial rupture, the impetus for all the others, ascribes to ethics, defined on the basis of the relation to the Other and no longer as a search for perfection, the status of a "first philosophy", thus breaking with a tradition that since Aristotle had applied this term to general metaphysics or more specifically to ontology.

This led Levinas first to specify what he would retain and the ways in which he would depart from other philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Descartes, Leibnitz, Spinoza, Kant, Bergson, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Buber, to mention only a few of the key names that appear in *Totality and Infinity*.

Let us abandon pure philosophy: this rupture led Levinas to reject any form of theology which presents itself as a dogma, mysticism, or even as knowledge of God or an attempt to attain such knowledge. Theological statements are now only considered to have meaning when they apply to human relations.

The principles of the *Rights of Man* are no longer based on the notion that all human beings share a fundamental nature, a nature which must be respected and whose wellbeing must be protected, but rather on "the rights of the other man", with no reference to a shared concept encompassing the self and the other.

The prime essence of language does not reside in the exchange of information or even in its dimension as *dialogue* since this is where the dissymmetry in the relation to the Other is occluded, the Other who here is a formal You rather than an intimate You.

These are only a few examples of the ruptures, the outcomes of what could well be termed the '*revelation of the face*' of the Other, to use Levinas' phrase. In fact, the entire set of notions describing what is human, underwent a transformation of its meaning and its relations, in particular in politics, science, technology, teaching, and love.

This conference, devoted to *Totality and Infinity*, celebrates the 50th anniversary of its publication. Beyond its function as a commemorative event, the purpose of this conference is to encourage its participants to query and discuss the different ruptures inspired by this work.