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What is meaningful knowledge?

The title of my address here today is a question: "What is meaningful knowledge?" This is clearly a philosophical question, yet is not a question that has been posed very often by philosophers. Why? The reason is that in the history of philosophy knowledge usually in and of itself is regarded as meaningful. According to philosophical tradition, to know something is already to encounter meaning. Meaning is then not something that is added to knowledge from outside knowledge itself. Knowledge is meaning precisely insofar as it is just that: knowledge. But not only is knowledge regarded as an instance of meaning, it is also viewed as the very paradigm of meaning. Knowledge is meaning *par excellence*. Consider for example Aristotle's claim in the opening line of the *Metaphysics*: "By nature, all men desire to know. " This is not some random characteristic, but points to the very essence of man. What defines man, according to Aristotle, is not that he walks upright, nor is it the Shakespearian passions. What defines man is the capacity of reason, the possibility of living a life in accordance with this capacity, of employing this capacity in research and contemplation of the first principles of thought and universe. Symptomatically, Aristotle clearly states in his *Nichomachean ethics* that it is the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life, that yields the highest form of happines.

Obviously, this is not just the tendency in Aristotle, but in all Greek philosophy and consequently the general tendency in the philosophies that follow up until today. The classic paradigm is that of the platonic myth of the soul as set forth in the *Phaedrus*. What life is really about is the drama of the soul, the soul which at birth finds itself cast into exile, delivered over to oblivion, but which nonetheless retains a vague sense of home, a sense of belonging. The journey home, however, is not made by climbing mountains and crossing rivers, but by recollecting a knowledge that the soul enjoyed before the fall into the body. But this knowledge regained does not constitute a map that would indicate this lost home. Home is not a place, it is knowledge itself.

We understand then that the question "What is meaningful knowledge?" is not itself automatically meaningful. There is obviously no problem in asking "What is knowledge?" as is asked in Plato's *Theaetetus*, nor is it a problem asking the question "What is meaning?", but the question "What is meaningful knowledge?" is not so easily posed. According to the tradition already cited, this question would probably have to be viewed as tautological. The

question “What is meaningful knowledge?” would then seem equivalent to the question “What is meaningful meaning?” Should the question be considered meaningful, one would therefore first have to call into question this venerable tradition that names knowledge the destiny of man. This is obviously not an easy endeavour, but it is exactly the undertaking that the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is attempting.

Levinas asks if it is obvious that knowledge is the measure of meaning. Is it really knowledge that constitutes the essence of the human? Is there not something in the drama of the human that is better than knowledge, that exceeds the adequation of thought and being? Does there not exist a relationship with the world, or if the concept of world sounds too Heideggerian, a relationship as such that is not one of knowledge, and that not only is meaningful, but in fact founds the order of meaning? Levinas points to the encounter with another human being, and claims that this encounter is different from the encounter with the world, which is consummated in knowledge. There is obviously a sense in which another human being is in the world and as such something to know, but there is also a sense in which this other human being is not of the world and in which it resists being known. This resistance, however, is not a violent resistance, nor is the inability to encompass the other a result of an insufficent reason. The inability is not caused by a lack of ability, as if a reason better equipped would be capable of knowing the other. The resistance is ethical, a peaceful resistance.

This resistance is consequently not a result of force, it is consituted by the absence of force, it is the resistance of weakness, a weakness so weak that it even seems to fall out of being. It is as if it cannot maintain itself in being. It is as if this resistance creates a gap in being itself, but this gap is not the gap Sartre was talking about when he said that the other was a gap in the world. According to Sartre this gap constitutes a void, a nothingness, but Levinas traces something else in the face of the other: He traces the overflowing of infinity that speaks of a responsibility without end. There is an inscription in the face of the other that cannot be read, but only heard, and this inscription is not in the indicative, but in the imperative. It is the commandment “Thou shalt not commit murder”. This commandment is not an appeal to our understanding, it is not a content that first must be understood by reason before it can take effect. The face of the other makes a claim on us before consciousness enters the arena. When consciousness wakes up, something has already happened. I am responsible for the other without ever signing up for this responsibility.

Consciousness was never offered the opportunity to reject it. It arrived too late, the decision was already made. But the point here is also that it would always arrive too late. However strenuous the efforts of consciousness to stay awake would have been, it would still always arrive too late, and the reason is that this vigilance is precisely that which in this case constitutes its sleep.

The relationship with the face is not, then, that of intentionality, where consciousness is directed towards some object. If there is intentionality in this relationship, it is a reversed intentionality. The I does not act, but is acted upon, but as we have already pointed out, it is not acted upon by a force, but by the absolute absence of force. This absence of force however is not the negation of force. The face is neither negation nor negativity. If that were the case, the weakness of the other would still refer to force. It would still remain within the dialectic of force. The weakness of the other is of another sort. The weakness of the other is not an inability that just lacks ability. It is weaker than a stone that does not have the ability to move itself. The other is so weak that not only does this weakness fall short of being an object of the intentionality of consciousness, he is also so weak that it returns as a demand on this intentionality. The other, Levinas says, is actually so weak that he makes a claim on us, so weak that this weakness becomes a demand.

The face of the other is the upsurge of the human in being. It is in terms of the responsibility for the other that the human must be understood, not in terms of knowledge, not in terms of the employment of certain cognitive powers. The face of the other places a burden on me, but this burden also tells me who I am and why I am here in this world. This burden thus does not just weigh upon me, it also lifts me up, is uplifting. There is exaltation in this burden. This means that not only does there exist meaning outside the realm of knowledge, but this meaning is also the very measure of meaning: The face of the other is meaning *par excellence*. We may then conclude that there does indeed exist something in the drama of the human that is better than knowledge, and this is the responsibility for the other, ethics. This is why Levinas claims that ethics cannot be a branch of philosophy, but must be considered first philosophy. There exists something better and more important than the insights that logic, theory of knowledge, philosophy of language and so on may yield. Ethics is not something that can wait for the philosopher to finish answering his questions. In this sense Levinas places a limitation on philosophy: No matter how many questions are still left unanswered, one answer has been given before a question was even posed: I am responsible

for the other. This cannot be undone by any philosophy, any inquiry. One may certainly enquire into the specifics of Levinas' philosophy, one may even disagree with him, but when the other faces, one leaves philosophy entirely to enter the realm of ethics, and in this realm I am not in charge.

Levinas has then wrested the exclusivity of meaning from knowledge. Knowledge is no longer the paradigm or measure of meaning. But what happens to knowledge when it no longer enjoys this privileged position? Is knowledge still meaningful? Obviously meaning is not something that can be ascribed by way of argumentation, nor is it accomplished by way of deduction. Meaning is a phenomenological event, and as such it does not need support from something extraneous to this self-showing to retain its status as meaning. Meaning is not something that requires a ground, it is something one simply encounters. According to this line of thought, then, if knowledge shows itself as meaningful, then it cannot not be meaningful.

After reading Levinas, however, something may well still happen to this meaning that previously has been allocated to, and more importantly, encountered in the sphere of knowledge. In the philosopher's case it is not unthinkable that the philosophy of Levinas would in fact make this meaning evaporate. Why is this so? The reason is that the meaning of ethics, which is meaning *par excellence*, overshadows all other meaning. With the face of the other, the philosophical question of meaning is already answered, leaving no room for a realisation of the human as such in philosophical questioning itself. Meaning no longer consists in the quest for meaning, instead the true site of meaning reveals this quest to be a sickness unto death. The philosopher may paradoxically find himself in a situation where he no longer cares for knowledge, where he no longer is interested in posing the ever unanswerable question "Why?". In ethics there is no "why?". There is no time to ask this question. If you ask "why" you are removed from the faces of others. But when the other faces, the commandment that is inscribed in the face makes you choke on your question. Ethics puts knowledge to shame. The glory of the infinite in the face of the other outstrips knowledge and questioning of all its grandeur and dignity.

It seems then that our little investigation into the question "What is meaningful knowledge?", has led us to a conclusion that is the opposite of our starting point. To begin with the question did not seem meaningful because knowledge in and of itself was

considered the measure of meaning. The meaningfulness of the question seemed accordingly to depend on calling into question the presumption that meaning and knowledge implicate each other. This calling into question of knowledge, has, however, apparently led us to the conclusion that knowledge has no meaning at all. The vast field of knowledge and research would then be but a desert, eclipsed by the face of the other.

But is it possible that the entire philosophical tradition from the early Greeks up until today could be so wrong in holding knowledge in such high regard? The answer to this question is perhaps both yes and no. What is clear after Levinas, is that knowledge can no longer be regarded as the essence of the human. The essence of the human is in fact not an essence at all – it is the undoing of essence, a peaceful resistance that awakens consciousness to a responsibility for the other. But obviously there is also some truth to the Aristotelian notion that happiness is found in the use of the abilities that are peculiar to the human species. And we most certainly would have to count happiness as an instance of meaning, although Levinas flatly rejects the notion that the essence of the human has anything to do with happiness.

But perhaps more importantly: When we are talking about Aristotle and the Greeks, , we should also remember the emphasis that the Greeks put on public life and community. There is a big difference between a quest for knowledge that is disconnected from any human bond, and inquiries that are already lit up by the human. There are not only contentions and arguments in the dialogues of Plato, there are also faces. When Socrates and Theaetetus enquire into the essence of knowledge, it is not certain that they find themselves only within the realm of philosophy. The questions that Socrates poses to Theaetetus may well be an expression of Socrates's being-for-the-other.

We understand then that meaningful knowledge derives its meaning from the ethical. It is because the human already has marked the scene with meaning, that knowledge is meaningful, that every meaningful human activity is meaningful. Without the meaning of the ethical, no meaning could ever survive. From this perspective, however, the meaningfullness of knowledge would perhaps not be very different from that of the meaningfullness of play. But there is also a sense in which knowledge not only is meaningful, but also crucial. We may recall that ethics begins with the face of the other, with an I facing an other. But these two are not alone in the world. There is the third party, which

troubles the infinite responsibility for the other. With the third party we are not only concerned with ethics, but also with justice and consequently politics. And in the realm of the political, knowledge and reason return to the heart of the human. It is still true that knowledge and reason no longer mark the essence of the human, but they are nonetheless essentially bound to the undoing of essence which *is* the essence of the human. Reason and knowledge are not to be regarded as accidental traits of human being, but rather as necessary for the never ending realisation of ethics which occurs in politics. It is as if the philosophers were in fact correct in holding knowledge and reason in such high regard. They just did not see the real reason why.

As a concluding remark, I would like to point out that in Levinas meaning is a fragile thing. The ethical cannot for obvious reasons be secured in knowledge. It is when the other faces that the meaning of the ethical is incontestable. When this happens, even the Cartesian *cogito* does not measure up in terms of certainty. But we do not always stand in this relationship to the other, and when we do not, meaning may be absent entirely. There is then a risk with respect to meaning in Levinas, because he has destroyed all the idols that pretend to be a source of meaning, while pointing to a true site of meaning that is fragility itself when its comes to securing meaning. Meaning is never secured in Levinas. The face of the other is not a constant, bright light, but a blinking star, which one may doubt ever blinked in the first place when the light is gone. The Cartesian question then comes to mind: Who will carry me between two evidences? Who will carry meaning between faces? In Levinas the ambiguity of meaning is never dissolved. But then again ethics is dependent on it never being dissolved.