

Ephraim Meir, *Dialogical Thought and Identity. Trans-Different Religiosity in Present Day Societies*, Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter and Magnes, 2013.

Dialogical thought and identity. *Trans-different religiosity in present day societies*, the most recent monograph of Ephraim Meir (1949), professor of Modern Jewish Philosophy at Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan, Israel), can be read as the ripe harvest of a scholar who for forty years has devoted his researches to the 20th century Jewish thought, covering a wide range of authors and issues, from F. Rosenzweig to E. Levinas, from M. Buber to A. J. Heschel, from Zionism to the Shoah. What does the shaping of identity in secular, disenchanted, and pluralist societies mean, and how does it happen? Is religion still a keyelement in the processes of identity-definition in our time? Can the Jewish dialogical thought offer us a way to face (and even to solve) these problems? Taking these questions into account, Meir's volume is articulated in two main sections and eight chapters. The first one, *Elucidating identity and alterity* (pp. 4-19), has a clear introductory function. Several concrete questions about the problematic of identity in our time are immediately raised by the author (see in particular, pp. 8-10), who establishes already here the foundation of the subject with his/her relationship with the Other. Like in Fichte, but without any idealistic connotation, the Other received here the appellative "non-I", which is considered not only as a stranger who lives outside the I, but even as a stranger presence who lives inside the self. And contributes, in a decisive way, to shape and define it. Alterity lives in fact, according to Meir, "at the heart of identity" (p. 12). The author therefore directs his attention to *The problem of identity in Dialogical philosophy* (pp. 21-129). Even if he chooses a hermeneutical approach, neither does he intend to provide a comprehensive image of the authors he presents, nor does he want to pay an uncritical homage to them. Rather, he wants to ask them and to discuss with them the possibility of a relational subject. Martin Buber (Chapter 2) and Franz Rosenzweig (Chapter 3), the two Jewish founders of the so-called *Dialogisches Denken*, are read here carefully. The relational nature of the I as I-You subject is convincingly reconstructed as a primary element towards a definition of identity: "what makes a human being really human – writes Meir via Buber – is the movement towards the other" (p. 31). *Mutatis mutandis*, the author can read (according to Rosenzweig's thought) the nature of subject as an "animated-I" who finds his real dimension in the biblical experience of being addressed by and approaching the divine call. Buber's engagement with Zionism and religious socialism, Rosenzweig's direction of the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* of Frankfurt am Main, and both commitment for a new translation of the Bible as well as for interreligious dialogue, are evaluated here as traces of a thought (and life) that includes the presence of the Other in the processes of identity-definition. Meir's pages are then devoted to the Polish-American rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (Chapter 4), speaker of a prophetic existence in constant dialogue with a God in search of man, therefore to the Christian thinker Franz Fischer (Chapter 5), which "xenology" teaches how finding ourselves is only possible through a life oriented towards the other, and finally to the French-Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, theorist of an "ethics as first philosophy", in strong opposition with the all-encompassing activity of the ontology (Chapter 6). Through the aforementioned authors, Meir's aim is to show the possibility of another I, who gains its foundation and its concreteness through the relationship with the Non-I. All these philosophers "approach the subject as being in relation" (p. 133), and show the necessity to overcome the egocentrism as epistemological and moral attitude, through a conversion "from self-centeredness to other-centeredness" (p. 133). The living experience of the encounter with a human being is for them not an obstacle, rather a necessity on the way to the encounter with God. Being in the divine presence does not mean, according to their perspective, an escape from the duties of this world: responsibility, solicitude and love are the main features of the Self. This is the real meaning of the dialogical principle as the deepest dimension of the human identity. Similar

theses are confirmed in the second section of the book, Self-transcendence, self-difference, and Trans-difference. Philosophical and theological considerations (p. 133- 223), articulated in two chapters: The Non-Identical I (Chapter 7) and The Interpreted and Interpreting I (Chapter 8). Self-transcendence means here the process and the disposition through which a subject can live with and for the Other, grounding a common world based on the contact with the Other. Self-difference implies rather discovering the otherness that the self contains in it, the dramatic experience of the foreignness of the self to itself. Transdifference, finally, imply learning to conceive the relationship with the Other as based on the experience of the difference. It shows us how a higher self, the true self, is never closed in itself, but it has to be freed from its egocentrism towards its belonging to a common cosmos. Meir's volume conveys a model of identity as a self-shaping process, nurtured and constituted by the element of the Other. The author is able to articulate a comprehensive theory of identity, conscious of its fluid character, even more urgent in a dynamic, ever-altering society like ours. Neither the I nor the Non-I are definable: the deepest core of each of them remains ineffable and inassimilable. Rather, the subject shapes itself, and at the same time, in a mutual interaction, is here comprehended as essentially shaped by the Other. "The greatness of the subject – so writes the author in the very first lines of the volume – lies in transcending itself and becoming other to itself in the concrete encounter with others" (p. 1). Here is already expressed the deepest lesson of the author. As well as in the conclusion: "one does not find the I by searching for oneself, but only in relation, in trans-difference. In the continuous process of self-transcendence the I become self-different, with otherness in itself. From this perspective, the real identity crisis consists of the self-centeredness of the isolated I. The way out of this crisis is through dialogue with or answer to the non-I" (p. 223). Only a similar determination of identity allows the subject to remain, and then to become, what he or she is.

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