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The Shame of Reason in Organizational Change: A Levinassian Perspective (Issues in Business Ethics)

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Rational thought according to Levinas has the merit of making the world lucid and controllable. But at the same time it strips things and people of their identity and incorporates them in a homogenized rational order. Illusory, but nonetheless oppressive. Rationality's totalitarian character can provoke resistance and grief with people who are enlisted by it. This can lead to a shameful confrontation in which the thinker is being confronted with his victim's resistance and sees himself and his thinking made questionable. By proceeding along this route, thinking can be brought to self-criticism and to revision of standpoints.

This description by Levinas of rational thinking shows similarity to what managers do in organizations. They make their business controllable, but at the same time with their planning and schemes they create a totalitarian straitjacket. This similarity suggests that also the reactions to imperialistic rationality from Levinas' description ought to be found in organizations. Is it indeed possible to indicate there the kind of resistance and grief Levinas speaks about? Does that give rise to confrontations between managers and their co-workers who are supposed to subordinate to their schemes? Do managers then feel shame? And do those shameful confrontations consequently lead to self-reflection and change?

Desk research suggests that the above elements are partly to be found in the literature of management theory. Interviews with managers show that Levinas' line of thought can also be found in its completeness within organizations. At the same time it becomes clear that becoming conscious of the elements of that line of thought – that rationality is all-conquering, that it provokes resistance, that that can lead to shame as well as to a new beginning – this is a difficult path to travel. The related experiences are easily forgotten and sometimes difficult to excavate. Translation of Levinas' thinking into terms of management and organization can help us spot them where they play their role in organizations.

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