

Reading Levinas on Ethical Responsibility

by
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I

For Levinas, there can be no doubt that human relation begins at the encounter with the face; this face-to-face relation is the basis for all other discourse in society. He wants philosophy to begin with this relation, and this relation comes with an ethical demand, i.e., before the face of the other you shall not kill and in fact, you have to defend the life of the other. As you encounter another's face, you cannot escape from this ethical command. It is inescapable. You cannot *not* respond to the face of the other whom you encounter, and this response always comes with your responsibility for the other. For Levinas, to be responsible is to be responsible for the other. Once in his interview, he says:

Q.: Concretely, how is the responsibility for the other translated?

E.L.: The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him. It is exactly the biblical assertion: Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless. The material side of man, the material life of the other, concerns me and, in the other, takes on for me an elevated signification and concerns my holiness. Recall in Matthew 25, Jesus' "You have hunted me, you have pursued me." "When have we hunted you, when have we pursued you?" the virtuous ask Jesus. Reply: when you "refused to feed the poor," when you hunted down the poor, when you were indifferent to him! As if, with regard to the other, I had responsibility starting from eating and drinking. And as if the other whom I hunted were equivalent to a hunted God. This holiness is perhaps but the holiness of a social problem. All the problems of eating and drinking, insofar as they concern the other, become sacred. (IB, 52)

Levinas here brings philosophy down from abstract ideas into a concrete experience concerned with the need of the other. At the moment I face the other, I cannot release myself from this ethical relation. I have to be

responsible for the other at the level of basic material needs. In the act of facing the other, I cannot hide myself from the other. I cannot enjoy my life within myself alone because an act of facing here is an openness of the self to the other without return to the self. This concrete situation moves the I to be responsible for the other; the ethical relationship is prior to any system of moral thought.

When Levinas mentions the teaching in the Gospel, Matthew 25, he reminds us about the way we treat the other is the way we treat God. The infinite is revealed through the other. He always refers to the Jewish proverb: “the other’s material needs are my spiritual needs.” Ethical relation, for him, begins with the response to the other’s material needs. To feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, give shelter to the shelterless, are my responsibilities. Holiness begins with practical morality, and practical morality is essentially based on ethical relation, and this relation cannot be abolished from human relationship. He says,

I have been speaking about that which stands behind practical morality; about the extraordinary relation between a man and his neighbour, a relation that continues to exist even when it is severely damaged. Of course we have the power to relate ourselves to the other as to an object, to oppress and exploit him; nevertheless the relation to the other, as a relation of responsibility, cannot be totally suppressed, even when it takes the form of politics or warfare. Here it is impossible to free myself by saying, ‘It’s not my concern.’ There is no choice, for it is always and inescapably my concern. (LR, 247)

Responsibility is usually understood in relation to the I and its actions. If I fail to do this job, I have to be responsible for this failure. If the other fails, responsibility belongs to the other and is not my concern. If the other does something wrong, she or he has to be responsible for that. Responsibility belongs to the subject who acts willingly and intentionally. This form of responsibility is limited to the doer and someone who co-operates in this doing. We can calculate how far this responsibility extends, and how many persons are concerned. For Levinas, however, responsibility is irreducible to any calculation and is not limited to any individual person. In his interview with Mortley, he says: “I cannot live in society on the basis of this one-to-one responsibility alone. There is not calculation in this responsibility: there is no pre-responsible knowledge” (Mortley, 1991, p.18). And elsewhere he observes: “To be me is always to have one more responsibility” (EN, 103).

Responsibility, for Levinas, is not conditioned by any knowledge. Instead, it happens at the moment we encounter the face of the other. This ethical responsibility is prior to any knowledge of the other; in other words: I have to be responsible for the other even though I do not know him or her. As Levinas puts it: "I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face" (EI, 95). Before the other, we have no choice, and we cannot escape from our responsibility for the other. "To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality. The I before another is infinitely responsible" (TTO, 353). If the other is beyond any limit and grasp, then responsibility is limitless. Levinas uses the term "infinite responsibility."

Before the other I have no choice, I have to be responsible for the other. To escape from this responsibility, for Levinas, is not possible. He says, "To be an I then signifies not to be able to slip away from responsibility" (TTO, 353). He talks firmly about this inescapability by mentioning the story of the prophet Jonah in the Bible. Jonah could not escape from his duty to God, and God commanded him to go to Nineveh and warn people there about the divine punishment for their sins. But for Jonah, the people of Nineveh were considered as the other and not his concern. He wanted to deny God's command. According to Levinas, we cannot be free from responsibility just as Jonah could not escape from responsibility for the other. Jonah could not deny his responsibility for the people of Nineveh even though Jonah wanted to escape from this responsibility. This ethical responsibility is not a reciprocal relationship, where we ask something in return. This asymmetrical relationship imitates God's mercy on the people of Nineveh. Jonah ought to perform his responsibility without any expectation from them in return.

For Levinas, the asymmetry of the ethical relationship is very important for human relationships. It does not imply demanding the other's responsibility for me; my responsibility for the other does not mean the other will do the same in return. The model is not that of the Czar's mother who, according to the story Levinas mentions, says to a dying soldier: "You must be very happy to die for your country." For him, this is a demand from the other. Responsibility is not a demand from the other. It is an asymmetrical relation, the departure from the I to the other without any return to the I. Levinas is very fond of quoting Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas remarks:

As Alyosha Karamazov says in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky: 'We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others.' And he does not mean that every 'I' is more responsible than all the other, for that would be to generalize the law for everyone else—to demand as much from the other as I do from myself. This essential asymmetry is the very basis of ethics: not only am I more responsible than the other but I am even responsible for everyone else's responsibility! (Kearney, 1984: 67)

II

To be responsible for the other is, for Levinas, essentially to be a "substitution" for the other. Being a substitution means: to put myself in the other's place, not to appropriate him or her according to my wishes, but to offer to the other what he or she needs, starting with basic material needs. To be an I is to substitute for the other. To be an I does not begin and end in itself, but departs from the self to the other without any return into the self. To substitute for the other is to leave oneself for the other. It is to transcend one's egoism. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says: "Responsibility, the signification of which is non-indifference, goes one way, from me to the other. In the saying of responsibility, which is an exposure to an obligation for which no one could replace me, I am unique. Peace with the other is first of all my business" (OB, 138-139). And in the same book, he adds:

To transcend oneself, to leave one's home to the point of leaving oneself, is to substitute oneself for another [...]. It is through the other that newness signifies in being the *otherwise than being*. Without the proximity of the other in his face everything is absorbed, sunken into, walled in being, goes to the same side, forms a whole, absorbing the very subject to which it is disclosed. (OB, 182)

Concerning this substitution, I am unique and no one can replace my responsibility. And this responsibility for the other stems from the alterity of the other. An ethical relation from the I toward the other is asymmetrical, and no one can take my place to be responsible for the other. The uniqueness of the I is the uniqueness of being irreplaceable. My responsibility for the other also has to regard the other as other, and the other is unique. This uniqueness of the other cannot be reduced to be the same genus. This is the ethical relation of the uniqueness of the I to the uniqueness of the other. In his interview with Mortley, Levinas says:

When I talk about responsibility and obligation, and consequently about the person with whom one is in a relationship through the face, this person does not appear as belonging to an order which can be 'embraced', or 'grasped'. The other, in this relationship of responsibility, is, as it were, unique: 'unique' meaning without genre. In this sense he is absolutely other, not only in relation to me; he is alone as if he were the only one of significance at that moment. The essence of responsibility lies in the uniqueness of the person for whom you are responsible. (Mortley 1991: 16)

The irreplaceability of the I as substitution for the other as an absolute other is Levinas's essential teaching on ethical responsibility. To substitute for the other is to be hostage of the other. I have no choice of being a hostage of the other. I could not run away from the other, and I could not avoid my responsibility. Responsibility as substitution is to even be responsible for the crimes of the other. Levinas says, "I am in reality responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes" (IB, 169). This is an ethical moment that comes prior to any rule, or any constitution. "The hostage is the one who is found responsible for what he has not done. The one is responsible for the sin of the other. I am in principle responsible, prior to the justice that makes distributions, before the measurements of justice" (IB, 216). The destiny of the hostage is to be responsible for the other and even responsible for all the other's responsibilities.

Levinas seems to put ethical responsibility as a substitution for and a hostage of the other prior to any other philosophical concepts. This is the priority of ethical responsibility over ontology and epistemology. Lingis, in his *Translator's Introduction*, explains Levinas's ethical responsibility, which does not only consist in offering one's properties or one's possessions to the other, but in giving one's own substance for the other (OB, xiii). To be human, for Levinas, is therefore to be for the other, to bear responsibility for the other, to substitute for the other, and to be a hostage of the other.

The meaning of life is always hungry for the other at the level of basic need. The "I" cannot remain in itself in order to find the meaning of itself inwardly. The "I" has to leave the self for the other, the departure from the self to the other is to approach the neighbor, and this approach brings me to be responsible for the other, to substitute for the other. This ethical moment is the basis and prior to any philosophical discourse; this ethical responsibility for the other is, for Levinas, the essence of subjectivity. The meaning of the human person begins with this ethical moment. He says,

Man has to be conceived on the basis of the self putting itself, despite itself, in place of everyone, substituted for everyone by its very non-interchangeability. He has to be conceived on the basis of the condition or uncondition of being hostage, hostage for all the others who, precisely qua others, do not belong to the same genus as I, since I am responsible even for their responsibility. It is by virtue of this supplementary responsibility that subjectivity is not the ego, but me. (CP, 150)

Levinas's ideas concerning substitution and hostage emphasize the infinite responsibility for the other, an openness of the I for the other. "For-the-other" now becomes a key phrase for his account of ethics. This account of one-for-the-other challenges Heidegger's *Dasein*, being-in-the-world. Just as Heidegger's *Dasein* was a move beyond Descartes's *Cogito*, Levinas's *for-the-other* is a movement beyond Heidegger's ontology. Responsibility for the other as substitution and being a hostage of the other, according to Levinas, could not be understood within being, or at the level of ontology. This is the turn of subjectivity as *being* into subjectivity as *responsibility*. The essence of subjectivity is not intelligible within the meaning of being, but it happens at the moment I encounter the other and am responsible for the other. Responsibility for the other, then, is the true essence of subjectivity. In his interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas says: "I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility" (EI, 95).

III

Levinas posits responsibility for the other as the essential structure of subjectivity. He challenges Sartre's distinction between two types of being, between *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. For Sartre, man creates his own essence through his freedom, and freedom is essentially within man's existence. Levinas takes account of freedom in a way that is very different from Sartre's. He says, "We must therefore emphasize here the fact that *freedom is not first*. The self is responsible before freedom, whatever the paths that lead to the social superstructure [...]. Freedom can here be thought as the possibility of doing what no one can do in my place; freedom is thus the uniqueness of that responsibility" (GT, 181). For Levinas, responsibility for the other is prior to my freedom. Freedom is therefore not the essence of subjectivity. For Sartre, "Man is condemned to be free," but for Levinas,

“Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself all naked. This investiture of freedom constitutes moral life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy” (CP, 58).

Freedom, for Levinas, does not mean that I am free to do according to my will as an autonomous being, but responsibility for the other comes to me and questions me before the exercise of my freedom. Substitution for the other and a hostage of the other seem to point out an ethical relationship that begins with the I as responsibility for the other rather than the I as Sartre’s being-for-itself. In his interview with Richard Kearney, Levinas says:

The ethical ‘I’ is subjectivity precisely in so far as it kneels before the other, sacrificing its own liberty to the more primordial call of the other. For me, the freedom of the subject is not the highest or primary value. The heteronomy of our response to the human other, or to God as the absolutely Other, precedes the autonomy of our subjective freedom. As soon as I acknowledge that it is ‘I’ who am responsible, I accept that my freedom is anteceded by an obligation to the other. Ethics redefines subjectivity as this heteronymous responsibility in contrast to autonomous freedom. Even if I deny my primordial responsibility to the other by affirming my own freedom as primary, I can never escape the fact that the other has demanded a response from me before I affirm my freedom not to respond to his demand. Ethical freedom is *une difficile liberté*, a heteronymous freedom obliged to the other. (Kearney 1984: 63)

Levinas’s ethics attempts to move away from the trap of egoism, which seems to be the central problem of Western philosophy. He wants philosophy to begin at the ethical relation between the I and the other. This ethical relation moves from the I toward the other without any return to the I, and this movement is done only for the other without any reciprocity. His ethical responsibility is prior to ontology, epistemology, and this is beyond our self-interest, or even self-preservation. In other words, ethical responsibility for the other stems from the love of the other without any interest. It is an ethics of disinterestedness. This disinterestedness does not mean indifference to the other, but it is always to awaken to the presence of the other. This wakefulness for the other is never approached as a response to my self-interest. It is a love for the other that never sleeps, or insomnia. Responsibility, for Levinas, is love without Eros, without any wish to be loved, and thus in a sense different from the one in which we usually employ the verb. He uses Pascal’s phrase: “love without concupiscence” (IB, 108).

The sovereign ego rooted in the Western tradition has to move out of the self and open itself to the other. Levinas seems to challenge any principle that puts everything as a *part* of the self, *within* the self, and *for* the self. It might not be exaggerated to say that to live as a human being, for him, is to love the other without concupiscence. The question may arise whether it is too much to be responsible for the other, substitute for the other, be a hostage of the other, be responsible even for the other's crime—infinite responsibility. But Levinas insists that all philosophical activities should be grounded in ethics, and this ethics should begin at the moment I encounter the other as a face-to-face relation. From then on I am responsible for her or him, and no one can replace me in this ethical responsibility. If someone considered his philosophy as a messianic prophecy, he even dares to say "that to be worthy of the messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning even without the promises of the Messiah" (EI, 114). For Levinas, ethics has to take priority over religion, culture, and institution.

IV

When Levinas affirms Dostoyevsky's Alyosha Karamazov: "We are all responsible for everyone else – but I am more responsible than all the others," this claim seems to be too demanding for a human life limited by many conditions, whether time, space, etc. So the question is: how does a finite being, such as a human being, handle infinite responsibility? How can I be responsible for another's crime? Or do we, as human beings, have to practice the virtue of the redeemer, about whom Dostoyevsky writes: "There is only one means of salvation. Make yourself responsible for all men's sins. As soon as you sincerely make yourself responsible for everything and for all men, you will see at once that you have found salvation" (Dostoyevsky 1999: 310). Do we have infinite responsibility to practice Levinas's ethics alone, regardless of others' behavior? Or do we have to do the duty of a God, as a Redeemer to be responsible for all men's sins? This seems to be the point William Desmond raises in his criticism to Levinas's concept of ethical responsibility:

This is a claim of hyperbolic responsibility, and some would criticize it as such. It may even ironically suggest an ethical hubris in which I place myself in the role of the absolute, substitute myself for God. Only God could be responsible thus, no mortal creature could. Yet Levinas wants to insist, and insist is the word, that human creatures are disturbed by this call of infinite responsibility." (Desmond 1994: 167)

As Desmond says, we have to accept a certain truth that as a human being, a mortal creature, we could not substitute ourselves for God to be responsible for all men's sins. A call for ethical responsibility is conditioned by our limited life, and in this real world we have to learn how to respond to the other's needs properly. Sometimes we could not give "to the other the bread out of one's own mouth and the coat from one's shoulders" (OB, 55). If we are supposed to know what the others want, dialogue is required. Levinas's ethics seems to be unwilling to wait for dialogue before determining its responsibility to the other. John Llewelyn describes Levinas's stance as "Responsibility for the other and responding to the other's command before responding to any question. Answerability prior to answer. Minding the other before having him or her in my mind" (Llewelyn 1995: 185).

For Llewelyn, Levinas's ethical responsibility is "prior to and requiring the spatial exteriority that according to the transcendental aesthetic of Kant is a form of sensibility. Ethical exteriority, the exteriority of Levinas's quasi-transcendental aesthetic of ethics, is the deformation of forms of sensibility" (Llewelyn 1995: 185). For Kant, transcendental aesthetic is prior to all human experiences; it does not even derive from human experience but rather conditions human experience. For Llewelyn, Levinas's ethical responsibility for the other seems to be prior to any knowledge, or any question. It requires that we are commanded by the face of the other at the moment of an encounter, and we have no way out of this responsibility. We are chosen to be responsible before any choice. Ethical responsibility here is prior to our freedom, and before we exercise our freedom we have to be responsible to the other, or to respond to the call of the other.

Levinas's position challenges Western ethical thinkers like Hobbes and Sartre, who see the other as my potential enemy, or as a limit to my freedom. It also challenges Kant, who posits human free will as a precondition of ethical values. Levinas turns Kant's idea of autonomy into heteronomy. Whereas Kant claims to attain the ethical universal principle that can be applicable to all rational beings, Levinas denies that any universal principle can be formulated into a moral law. According to Bernstein, "Ethics for Levinas is not 'grounded' in practical reason. It is beyond reason. For Levinas, to be ethical (moral) is not to be autonomous in Kant's sense, it is to be heteronomous – responsive and responsible to and for the other" (Bernstein 2002: 264). Levinas's ethics is very different from the tradition of Western thoughts. He seems to challenge these forms of ethics with claims from the Jewish tradition. As Catherine Chalier observes, "He

gives a new insight into the philosophical ideas about responsibility, freedom, and subjectivity thanks to his faithfulness to his Jewish heritage” (Chalier 1995: 10). Levinas seems to bring Western philosophy in line with Jewish theology. He seems to write philosophy with religion, specifically Judaism, always on his mind. Gary Gutting calls this “a religiously oriented ethics” (Gutting 2001: 363). Simon Critchley assesses this differently when he says:

So, if the ethical crisis of Europe is based in its unique attachment to a Greek heritage, then Levinas is suggesting that this heritage needs to be supplemented by a Biblical tradition, which would be rooted in the acknowledgement of peace as the responsibility to the other. It is never a question, for Levinas, of shifting from the paradigm of Athens to that of Jerusalem, but rather a recognizing that both are simultaneously necessary for the constitution of a just polity. (Critchley 2002: 25)

Levinas’s idea of responsibility is a radical turn away from the *for-the-self* to the *for-the-other*; to be responsible is also to be “responsible for the freedom of the others” (OB, 109), as well as to be “responsible for his responsibility” (EI, 96). I wonder whether being absolutely responsible for the other and in sense of “I am reality responsible for the other even when he or she commits crimes, even when others commit crimes” (EN, 107) is not too great a demand. For Levinas this is the Jewish conscience, which he thinks is the essence of human conscience (EN, 107). For me, to bring Greek philosophy together with the Jewish theological thought seems to be a difficult task. To supplement Greek philosophy with the Jewish tradition is difficult, and it is quite dramatic to reconcile two different traditions. Is it possible for one tradition to be supplemented by another tradition? Can Greek philosophy change its role from rationally oriented to religiously oriented? What Steiner says is relevant here: “The language at the roots of Levinas’ ethics is as much that of Biblical Hebrew as Ontological Greek” (Steiner 2001: 130). And he adds: “It is through the history of Judaism that Levinas learns to trust in an action to be undertaken without, or prior to, or beyond, understanding” (Steiner 2001: 133). The tension between these two traditions is expressed in Levinas’s works in terms such as ‘goodness’ or ‘holiness beyond being,’ ‘obedience before understanding,’ ‘responsibility before freedom,’ ‘heteronomy prior to autonomy,’ etc. He questions the European and Christian tradition, which expects a *happy end*, a world of equality where a better society is accomplished through a universal principle, a law. After Auschwitz, it is not enough simply to say that Western tradition and Christianity failed to prevent evils, they are therefore not

sufficient, and we have to find the new orientation in philosophy. I do not think that it is sufficient to blame Western tradition for Auschwitz, but it is quite correct to blame political leaders who exercised their power without heeding the teaching of that tradition.

In response to Levinas, we can turn to Derrida as he quotes James Joyce: “Are we Greeks? Are we Jews? But who, we? Are we (not a chronological, but a pre-logical question) first Jews or first Greeks? [...]. And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the *copula* in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of modern novelists: ‘Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet’?” (Derrida 1978: 192). In criticizing Western tradition, Levinas questions whether ethics is relevant to human daily life or merely serves the demand for a *happy end*. Gutting critically questions Levinas’s ethics along these very lines:

Whereas Levinas’s ethics of the other is readily extended to the transcendent religious realm, there remain serious questions about its applicability or even relevance to the humdrum world of everyday moral problems. Given that I recognize my absolute responsibility for the other, just what consequences does this have for my daily actions? Does it require a radical pacifism or a life of total self-sacrifice? Or is it somehow consistent with standard principles of individual morality and social justice? (Gutting 2001: 361)

Gutting’s criticism of Levinas’s ethics is valid, especially with regard to his idea of infinite responsibility, insofar as we as human beings must accept the limit of responsibility. But by no means do I support the idea of a “one-by-one” responsibility, whereby every person is responsible only for what she or he says and does. I truly agree with societies whose members are jointly responsible for what happens among them. But I could not follow Levinas to the extreme responsibility which requires that an individual be responsible for all the other’s deeds, even the other’s crimes, or the other’s freedom and responsibility. I have to respect the other’s freedom and responsibility, but it does not mean that I have to be *absolutely* responsible for the other. I do believe in the boundary between responsibility and freedom. I do not think that responsibility for the other is the only essential structure of subjectivity, or that the “for oneself” is always leading to selfishness or ethical egoism. For me, to be “for oneself” and to be “for the other” is correlated; in this process we cannot accept the first and ignore the second. To be either “for oneself” or “for the other” is equally insufficient; as human beings we need both. Putnam observes: “It is Aristotle who taught us that to love others one must be able to love oneself. The thought seems utterly alien

to Levinas, for whom, it seems, I can at best see myself as one loved by those whom I love. But I think Aristotle was right" (Putnam 2002: 57). I do not think that human life is either *for-the-self* or *for-the-other*; instead, humans are born to be both *for-the-self* and *for-the-other*. Aristotle is correct when he says, "So it is right for the good man to be self-loving, because then he will both be benefited himself by performing fine actions and also help others. But it is not right for the bad man, because he will injure both himself and his neighbours by giving way to base feeling" (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1168b12-15). For Aristotle, self-love is justifiable if it remains under the guidance of intelligence. If one performs actions for the sake of friends, or even sacrifices one's life for others and for one's country, then one acts virtuously. This seems to be the great paradox of human life: whether we do good *for-the-self* or *for-the-other*, our acts will always have an effect beyond the self and the other if we see the interconnection of all beings in the world.

The self could not live without the other, and the other could not live without the self, as the other's other; this interconnection extends to all beings in the world. Human beings should not strive for preservation of their own being, but care for all other beings because without other beings humans could not survive in the world. Neither *being-for-the-self* nor *being-for-the-other* is adequate for to be truly human; as human beings we need to understand the interconnection of all beings. If this form of understanding is realized, understanding will not lead to domination but on the contrary we will care for other beings, whether human or all other things in nature. *For-the-self* and *for-the-other* are inseparable. To emphasize only one side of will inevitably lead to decompose the content of human life. It seems to me that in his late works, Levinas begins to realize the limits of his teaching. In a later interview he admits:

If there were only the two of us in the world, you and I, then there would be no question, then my system would work perfectly. I am responsible for everything [...]. But we are not only two, we are at least three. Now we are a threesome; we are a humanity. The question then arises – the political question: who is the neighbor? [...]. When the third appears, the other's singularity is placed in question. I must look him in the face as well. One must, then, compare the incomparable. For me, this is the Greek moment in our civilization. We could not get by with the Bible alone; we must turn to the Greeks. The importance of knowing, the importance of comparing, stems from them; everything economic is posed by them, and we then come to something other than love." (IB, 133)

V

Levinas's ethics begins the moment I encounter the other's face. Ethics in this sense seems to apply only to personal affairs. But I do not live with only the single other; I live with people in a society where the other's other is always met by me. I need to know who is the first other, and then knowledge and moral guiding principles are required in practice. Levinas acknowledges this when he says: "But in the real world there are many others. When others enter, each of them external to myself, problems arise. Who is closest to me? Who is the Other? Perhaps something has already occurred between them. We must investigate carefully. Legal justice is required. There is a need for a state" (LR, 247). Levinas's ethics would be absolutely sufficient if we lived in the Garden of Eden, where there are only two, a me and a you, and I could not evade my responsibility for you. But as Richard Cohen says: "We do not live in the garden of Eden. More than ethics is required in order to be good, *justice* is also required" (Cohen 1986: 8). I wonder whether Levinas's ethics works appropriately even for just two persons or in the Garden of Eden. If Levinas realizes the limits to his ethics, why does he deny to move beyond this limit? In his interview with Philippe Nemo, he confesses: "My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning" (EI, 90). Ethics for Levinas, as Critchley says, is a critique (Critchley 2002: 15). If it is just a critique, especially of the Western tradition, what is supposed to be the guiding principle to do good when the third person appears? What is the criterion by which one can weigh between the two others whom we encounter? For Levinas, the question of justice that we have to weigh is the first violence. Levinas says, "Only justice can modify that, in that justice brings this being delivered over unto the neighbor under a measure, or tempers it by thinking it in relation to the third or fourth, who are my 'other' as well. Justice is already the first violence" (IB, 136). If justice is the first violence, how does society escape from this first violence? I do not find the way out of this violence in his ethics. Nonetheless, a just society needs this violence.

Levinas perhaps dares not to jump into this form of violence, but social problems always need to be weighed in order to be solved. Levinas once said: "I do not believe, however, that pure philosophy can be pure without going to the 'social problem' " (EI, 56). His ethics seems to keep the status of pure ethics for the I and the other without progressing to the problem in society where there are more than the I and the other. He seems to believe in the untransferability of ethics to politics. His ethics, then, is always before politics, and he still keeps the separation between ethics and politics. That is

why the task of constructing an ethical system is not one he offers to undertake. The fact that Levinas maintains the separation between ethics and politics presents an essential problem for Derrida, as John Caputo sees it:

The Levinasian notion of justice, in which the scarcity of our resources forces us to calculate and allocate among all the other Others, is very central to Derrida, whose sights are set on finding a way to open the doors of ethics to politics. The third one menaces the purity of the ethical twosome, imposing the demands of a justice for all, inscribing politics on the very face of ethics. (Caputo 2000: 285)

For Caputo, Derrida continues Levinas's ethics and transfers it into politics. "Derrida keeps posing a central and pressing question to Levinas, of how to translate his ethics of the Other into a politics, how to transport the ethics of hospitality into a politics of hospitality? How to let the beautiful ethical motifs of Levinas's ethics slip across its ethical borders into a political deed?" (Caputo 2000: 282) If we do not transfer ethics into politics, is it possible to achieve a peaceful and just society? Levinas is absolutely correct when he says: "Justice comes from love [...]. Love must always watch over justice" (EN, 108), and also: "Charity is impossible without justice, and that justice is warped without charity" (EN, 121). How could society achieve justice without laws? I think Caputo is right when he observes: "No vertical dimension, no heavenly peace, without horizontal dimension, without an earthly peace, which means without the law. No justice without law" (Caputo 2000: 293).

But I wonder why Levinas stops ethics at "ethical meaning," why he does not move into justice, especially since he sees that charity without justice is impossible. He is perhaps afraid to be trapped again in traditional philosophy from which he wants to depart. While Derrida is willing to transfer the "ethics of hospitality" to a "politics of hospitality," Levinas seems to be reluctant to get out of the Garden of Eden to see the third and speak about ethics for all rational beings. I think that Levinas's ethical responsibility is an infinite responsibility only for the other whom we encounter, and if his infinite responsibility is limited to the other, it is therefore not an infinite responsibility which embraces society. As he claims: "If there were no order of justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility" (IB, 167).

In our daily life in society, there is no place without laws or order of justice. Our responsibility, then, has its own limits; it is not infinite. The

world is outside the Garden of Eden. However, Levinas's account of the meaning of ethics is a valuable challenge to ethics in the Western tradition. He seems to bring together philosophy and religious ideas in a philosophical way. As Cohen puts it, "Unlike many thinkers, Levinas does not separate philosophy from religion or religion from philosophy. Neither does he bind them together, one at the expense of the other. To maintain their integrity Levinas will insist that philosophy rethink its origins" (Cohen 2001: 2). For Cohen, Levinas's ethics is the origin of philosophy. Levinas ultimately does not reject the necessity of philosophy in his works, even though philosophy for him comes after ethics. In my reading, Levinas's ethics is prior to philosophy as far as he understands ethics as ethical relation at the moment of an encounter between an I and the other as he says, "Of course, the whole perspective of ethics immediately emerges here; but we cannot say that it is already philosophy" (I, 165), and Levinas wants to change the traditional meaning of philosophy from the 'love of wisdom' to the "wisdom of love" (I, 166) and this love is love without concupiscence.

For Levinas, philosophy has to give service to the love without concupiscence for the other. This is a different perspective of the Western tradition and the meaning of philosophy and ethics. This seems to be a new invention of the meaning of these Greek terms of both philosophy and ethics. His refusal to move ethics to accomplish universal principle because his ethics demands only from himself not from the other on the basis of asymmetrical relation in which there is no reciprocity, or without expecting from the other in return. His ethics denies the possibility to assimilate the other into generality, and this form of ethics is at the personal encounter between the I and the other. This is why I could not speak for the other, or impose the law onto the other. But for Levinas, as soon as the third person appears on the stage, ethics and justice, asymmetry and equality come into play in the scene. Then for his ethics, Greek philosophy is indispensable.

The act of reading Levinas's works always leaves an opening for readers to find their own horizon, and it is hard to claim whether I understand him correctly. As Davis says: "Part of the difficulty of the notion lies in the resulting tension between what we think we understand and the repeated insistence that we have still not yet got the point" (Davis 1996: 132). However, my reading always ends with an appreciation of his ideas and at the same time finds some difficulties such as an *infinite responsibility* for the other which is responsible even for the other's responsibility and freedom. I agree with Caputo when he says: "Our love of Levinas does not prevent, but even require, a certain contradiction of him" (Caputo 2000: 296).

Levinas seems to be a pioneer for the Western tradition in his thoughts about ethics, and his works leave many questions. As Davis regrets: “He leaves too many questions unanswered and the status of his own discourse remains unclear; he suits too many by giving too little. More positively, his work is perhaps one of the boldest modern attempts to derail philosophy so that it can explore new territories” (Davis 1996: 144).

Levinas does not only leave many uneasy questions in general, but he also challenges readers to dispense with ontological questions such as “What does Levinas mean by this concept or that concept?” into “How do I respond to this and that?” There occurs a change of perspective from a general question to the particular response from the I. However, Levinas seems to propose another form of ethics which differs from traditional ethics. Putnam calls Levinas a “moral perfectionist” (Putnam 2002: 36), accepting the two kinds of moral philosophers according to Stanley Cavell’s distinction between “legislator” and “moral perfectionist.” Legislators are thinkers like John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas; examples of moral perfectionist are Cavell and Levinas. Whereas legislators seek moral laws applicable for the people in a society, moral perfectionists seek something prior to moral principle and laws. To attain a peaceful society, we cannot rely only on the legislator or the moral perfectionist, we actually need both the legislator and the moral perfectionist, or as Critchley says: “We need both Levinasians and Habermasians, both Cavellians and Rawlsians” (Critchley 2002: 28). Levinas’s moral perfectionist ideas might not suffice for society, for which more than Levinas’s ethics is required.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are in use throughout this article referring to works by Levinas.

- CP *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993.
- EI *Ethics and Infinity*, translated by Richard A. Cohen, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985.

- EN *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.
- GT *God, Death, and Time*, translated by Bettina Bergo, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- IB *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, Jill Robbins, ed., Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- LR *The Levinas Reader*, Seán Hand, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- OB *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991.
- TTO "The Trace of the Other," in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 345-359.

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