

EMMANUEL LEVINAS' CONCEPT OF INTER-SUBJECTIVITY AS INFINITE RESPONSIBILITY

¹George Kithinji Bauni, ²Nyambedha J. Apiyo, ³Fredrick W. Nafula

Department of Philosophy: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT: Inter-subjectivity *as such* is at the core of what makes us human. However, this exclusive human potential can either be positive or negative. It is negative when it becomes a tool for the preservation of the “Same” or the “Totality” and the alienation of the “Other”. This alienation has led to stigmatization, isolation, injustices and violence against those perceived to be outside the “in-group. Among the many theories of inter-subjectivity that have been espoused by different thinkers, Levinas’ theory of inter-subjectivity stands out as the only theory that reclaims the “Other” from the maze of totalizing systems that have no regard to the alterity and dignity of the “Other”. Indeed, Levinas’ ethical phenomenology is a sort of Copernican revolution as far as ontology is concerned in the sense that he gives primacy to “Other” over the “totality” and demands infinite responsibility for the former.

I. INTRODUCTION

Levinas’ critique of Husserl’s phenomenology and the transmutation of his concept of intentionality became the substratum of his ethical thinking. In addition, his critique of the traditional Western metaphysics’ ontological categories, Martin Heidegger’s account of facticity and Martin Buber’s reciprocal *I-Thou* relationship crystallized into his ethical theory. Moreover, Levinas was also influenced by Plato’s idea of the primacy of “the Good” and Rene Descartes’ idea of infinity and also his personal experience of Nazism and the horror of the Holocaust. However, his ethical phenomenology is ultimately dominated by one theme, namely, the relationship between the Self and the “Other”. Consequently, his ethics is an investigation into the nature of the ethical, whereby, he analyses the possibility of a respectful, rewarding and humane inter-subjective encounter anchored in the Self’s infinite responsibility for the “Other”. Therefore, the aim of this discussion is to elaborate on the key aspects of Levinas’ concept of inter-subjectivity as infinite responsibility.

1.1 Levinas’ Critique of Western Philosophy

Levinas’ critique of metaphysics that is embraced by the Western philosophical tradition is anchored in phenomenology as understood by Husserl. It is a “critique different from that of Heidegger because whereas Heidegger’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition or onto-theology is principally pursued from the question of being, Levinas approaches his critique from an epistemological vantage point.”¹ He views the “Western philosophical tradition as a repetition of leading the other person and God back to what he refers to as the ‘Same’.”² First, Levinas is critical of the tendency in Western metaphysics of making a distinction between knowledge and being. This is because for him, “this coincidence and unity of thought and being is the primary starting point for all knowledge in Western metaphysics.”³ This is clear from his assertion that:

The dignity of being the ultimate and royal discourse belongs to Western philosophy because of the strict coincidence of thought, in which philosophy resides, and the idea of reality in which this thought thinks. For thought, this coinciding means not having to think beyond what belongs to ‘being’s move’ or at least not beyond what modifies a previous belongingness to ‘being’s move’, such as formal or ideal notions. For the being of reality, this coinciding means: to illuminate thought and the conceived by showing itself.

¹ Shannon, Nason, “*Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas’ Critique of the Tradition*” accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

² Nason, “*Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas’ Critique of the Tradition*” accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

³ Nason, “*Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas’ Critique of the Tradition*” accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

To show oneself, to be illumined, is just what having meaning is, what having intelligibility par excellence is; the intelligibility underlying every modification of meaning.⁴

Thus, from the aforesaid, it is apparent Levinas' take on the Western metaphysical tradition is that it has "led to the reducibility of thought to being, where thought and knowledge, both actual and potential is conditioned and governed by 'Being' itself."⁵

The other problem that Levinas finds with the Western metaphysical tradition and which is related to the first, is that it posits the idea of a strict relationship between knowledge and comprehension. This is tantamount to saying that "everything intelligible is subject to the movement of the comprehensive function of the intellect, ordered to the intelligible conditions of being itself."⁶ It is not surprising therefore, that Levinas stresses on the fact that "the philosophical discourse of the West claims the amplitude of an all-encompassing structure or of ultimate comprehension. It compels every other discourse to justify itself before philosophy."⁷ Furthermore, Levinas claims that in such a scenario, even the "Absolute Being is sought so that it can undergo philosophical inquiry and analysis based on the deep and comprehensive structure of the law of being."⁸

Levinas is also critical of the Western philosophical tradition because for him, in the Western ontological categories everything can be comprehended as intelligible or meaningful not in isolation but only as a part of a neutral and all-encompassing system.⁹ This is evident in his claim that "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being."¹⁰ Furthermore, Levinas asserts that "the ontological event that dominates the philosophical tradition from Parmenides to Heidegger consists in suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness by transmuting them into the same."¹¹ This means that Western philosophy or metaphysics has given primacy to the "Same" at the expense of the "Other", whereby the latter is reduced to the "Same", thus becoming a theme or an object.

It is this complete interrelated description of everything that is, and placing it under one system that defines everything and from which all existents derive their value and intelligibility, that Levinas refers to as the "Totality" or the "Same".¹² In a nutshell, according to Levinas, Western philosophy since "Plato has attempted to reduce all otherness or alterity to the 'Same', that is, an attempt by the subjective ego to grasp or appropriate that which is different and make it fit into preconceived ontological categories and this is a gross perversion of the uniqueness of the 'Other'."¹³

It is in response to the predominance of this "Totality" which obliterates all otherness in the Western philosophical tradition that Levinas' thought took a new direction in which "beings are preserved in their specificity and isolation and not subsumed under the general category of 'Being'."¹⁴ In this new paradigm, "the central focus is no longer on the relationship between Being and beings, but on the question: what is there other than 'Being' (the One, the Same, Totality? or what is there apart from everything?"¹⁵ Levinas calls "this something-outside-everything, transcendence, exteriority, infinity, the 'Other', alterity, discourse and most crucially, ethics."¹⁶

The paradox in Levinas' explication of what lies beyond "Being" or outside "Totality" is that he makes a return to Western metaphysics. He returns to Plato's *Republic* wherein "Socrates describes the 'Good' which is not

⁴ Emmanuel, Levinas, "God and Philosophy", in *The Levinas Reader*, Sean Hand (trans.), Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989.

⁵ Nason, "Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas' Critique of the Tradition" accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

⁶ Nason, "Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas' Critique of the Tradition" accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

⁷ Cf. Levinas, "God and Philosophy", in the *Levinas Reader*, 167.

⁸ Shannon, Nason, "Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas' Critique of the Tradition" accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.

⁹ Emmanuel, Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.), (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press), 1969, 43.

¹⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

¹¹ Simon, Critchley, "Introduction", in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 16.

¹² Cf. Gona, Asaro, "Emmanuel Levinas' Ethics of Responsibility as Paramount to a Complete Same-Other Relationship", A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Philosophy: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Catholic University of Eastern Africa in August, 2022, 20.

¹³ William, P. Simmons, "An-archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas' Political Thought", A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Political Science, Louisiana State University, 1996, 14.

¹⁴ Colin, Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 34

¹⁵ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 34.

¹⁶ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 34-35.

essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.”¹⁷ Levinas understands this assertion by Socrates to mean that ethical questions are separate from ontological concerns and that since the ‘Good’ transcends essence, it does not belong to being or totality and therefore, there is a clear distinction between ethics and ontology.¹⁸ Indeed, Levinas defines ethics as the putting into question of one’s spontaneity by the presence of the “Other” and emphasizes that ethics precedes ontology as is explicit in his statement that:

A calling into question of the same-which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same-is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology.¹⁹

This assertion makes it clear that ethics for Levinas is also a critique because “it is the critical putting into question of the liberty, spontaneity and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. Ethics is thus the location of a point of otherness or exteriority that cannot be reduced to the same.”²⁰ Again, the passage above, in a sense, contains in embryo what is put forward in *Totality and Infinity*.²¹

The magnitude of Levinas’ criticism and the subsequent provision of an antidote to the tyranny or imperialism of the “Same” as found in the Western philosophical tradition is aptly captured by Jacques Derrida who calls the work of Levinas a “thought for which the entirety of Greek logos has already erupted, and is now quiet topsoil deposited not over bedrock, but around a more ancient volcano.”²² This statement is clearly an acknowledgement of the tremors that the philosophy of Levinas visited on Western philosophy. Nevertheless, Derrida has issues with Levinas’ critique of Western philosophical tradition in that he “failed to establish transcendence beyond totality because a philosophy which seeks to think otherwise than totality cannot rely on the dominant logos of the tradition.”²³ He argues that Levinas, though desiring to “replace ontology with ethics relies on terms which are permeated with ontological connotations such as being, truth, objectivity and infinite.”²⁴

1.2 The Paradigm Shift: Levinas’ Notion of the “Other”

In his introduction to Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*, Wild observes that:

Totalitarian thinking accepts vision other than language as its model. It aims to gain an all-inclusive, panoramic view of things, including the other, in a neutral, impersonal light like the Hegelian *Geist* (Spirit), or the Heideggerian Being. It sees the dangers of an uncontrolled, individual freedom and puts itself forth as the only rational answer to anarchy. To be free is the same as to be rational and to be rational is to give oneself over to the total system that is developing in world history. Since the essential self is also rational, the development of this system will coincide with the interests of the self. All otherness will be absorbed in this total system of harmony and order.²⁵

This observation by Wild aptly captures and reiterates what Levinas thought about the Western metaphysical tradition and thus “whether the traditional theories were truly rational or not, they were one-sidedly egocentric and reductive and did a lot of injustice to the ‘Other’.”²⁶ Consequently, for Levinas, reconciling the “Same” and the “Other” in a rational system of thought is not possible because the two are totally independent or distinct existences. Subsequently, Levinas came up with a new paradigm asserting that:

Instead of building great systems in which singular diversities of things and persons are passed over and diluted, this way of thinking prefers to start with the careful analysis of the peculiar features of each being in its otherness, and then to clarify its relations with other things in the light of its peculiar and distinctive features. This other-oriented mode of speaking and thinking will pay less attention to things

¹⁷ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 35. Cf. Plato, “Republic”, in *Plato: Complete Works*, John M. Cooper (ed.), (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 7. 509b.

¹⁸ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 35.

¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 43.

²⁰ Simon, Critchley, “Introduction”, in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Simon Critchley and Bernard Bernasconi (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.

²¹ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 34.

²² Jacques, Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Alan Bass (trans), (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 82.

²³ Simmons, “*Anarchy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’ Political Thought*”, 16.

²⁴ Simmons, “*Anarchy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’ Political Thought*”, 16.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 15.

²⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 13.

as they appear to the separated self, and the search of what they are in themselves in their radical otherness.²⁷

It is important to note here that although Levinas' ethical phenomenology reclaims the place of the "Other" from the maze of the "Same", it does not necessarily mean that his "thought privileges the 'Other' at the expense of the 'Same' because to do this would end up reproducing the totality-thinking which he is trying to dispense with."²⁸ In other words, this would ultimately lead to the invasion of the "Same" by the "Other". This is explicit in his observation that:

The intended transcendence would be thus reabsorbed into the unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other. Irreversibility does not only mean that the same goes unto the other differently than the other unto the same. That eventuality does not enter into account: the radical separation between the same and the other means precisely that it is impossible to place oneself outside of the correlation between the same and the other so as to record the correspondence or non-correspondence of this going with this return. Otherwise the same and the other would be reunited under one gaze, and the absolute distance that separates them, filled in.²⁹

Conversely, what Levinas aims at is coming up with a "philosophy in which both the 'Same' and the 'Other' are preserved as independent and self-sufficient, but in some sense in relation with one another."³⁰ It is noteworthy that such a project is made difficult by the fact that it is in "the nature of *relation* to bring the 'Other' into the Self's sphere of familiarity, thus making it intelligible from the perspective of the Self and reducing its true otherness."³¹ However, Levinas is categorical that the "Other" remains essentially unintelligible when viewed from the viewpoint of the Self and for him, it is this lack of understanding of the "Other" by the Self that is key if the radical otherness of the 'Other' is to be left intact.³² In order for Levinas to avoid a pitfall whereby the alterity of the "Other" would be diminished, he had to describe and defend subjectivity, give an account which does not reduce the 'Other' to the 'Same' and account for the relation between 'Same' and 'Other' that does not abolish either."³³

In his description of the Self, Levinas keeps away from thinking of the "Same" or the Self and the "Other" in terms of what differentiates them because to do this would give room for the conception of the "Same" and the "Other" as two sides of the same coin. Further, this would mean that the two are defined in relation to one another and thus are parts of the same totality.³⁴ This is clear from Levinas' assertion that "if the 'same' would establish its identity by simple opposition to the 'Other', it would already be part of a totality encompassing the 'Same' and the 'Other'."³⁵ As a consequence, he "describes the Self as neither different from nor opposed to the 'Other', but separate from it.

Levinas' position is that the Self is the site where the 'Same' identifies itself as such."³⁶ Besides, although the Self is constantly changing or undergoing some alteration and finds itself unlike what it was before, it is nevertheless "characterized by its capacity to survive change and to identify itself as the 'Same' even as it becomes different."³⁷ In this regard, Levinas argues that:

The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it... The I is identical in its alterations. It represents them to itself and thinks them. The universal identity in which the heterogenous can be embraced as the ossature of a subject, of the first person... The I is identical in its alterations in yet another sense. The I that thinks hearkens to itself thinking or takes fright before its depths and is to itself another. It thus discovers the famous naivete of its thought, which thinks 'straight on' as one follows one's nose.³⁸

Levinas' insistence in the averment above, is that "the Self can discover its self-other but never "Other" and that the other within the "same" prompts a re-identification and forms part of the identity which constitutes the same."³⁹

²⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 16.

²⁸ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

²⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 35-36.

³⁰ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

³¹ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

³² Cf. Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

³³ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

³⁴ Cf. Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 41.

³⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38.

³⁶ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 42.

³⁷ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 42.

³⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 36.

³⁹ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 42.

It is noteworthy that in this instance, Levinas is referring to the other that the Subject encounters in its dealing with the world such as the good soup one eats, the air one breaths, the spectacles one wears, the work one does, the ideas one has, the stars that one beholds, and so forth. The other that is spoken about here is the one that the Self can appropriate to satisfy its needs or what Levinas refers to as enjoyment. Hence “in food, for example, the energy to be found is something outside the Self and is transformed into the Self’s energy and this transmutation of the other into the ‘Same’ is according to Levinas, the essence of enjoyment.”⁴⁰

Levinas describes the relation of the Self to this other as follows:

But the true and primordial relation between them, and that in which the I is revealed precisely as preeminently the same, is produced as a sojourn in the world. The way of the I against the ‘other’ of the world consists in *sojourning, in identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself* [*chez soi*]. In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless autochthonous. It is the very reversion of this alteration...it is enough to walk, to do [*faire*], in order to grasp anything, to take. In a sense everything is in the site, in the last analysis everything is at my disposal, even the stars, if I but reckon them, calculate the intermediaries or the means. The site, a medium [*Le lieu, milieu*] affords means. Everything is here, everything belongs to me; everything is caught up in advance with the primordial occupying of a site, everything is comprehended. The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, the other relative to me, is the way of the same.⁴¹

In the scenario described above then, the Self finds itself existing “in a world of alien things and elements which are other than, but not negations of itself.”⁴² It is a world in which the Self takes precedence over the various objects around it and learns to manipulate and control them to its advantage. This means that these objects are at the disposal of the Self; meaning that one can play with them, live on them and enjoy them at one’s pleasure.⁴³ This primary relation between the Self and the world is therefore biased and egocentric. This means that “there is a strong tendency in all human individuals and groups to maintain this egocentric attitude and to think of other individuals either as extensions of the self, or as alien objects to be manipulated for the advantage of the individual or social self. According to Levinas, neither of these egocentric views does justice to our original experience of the other person.”⁴⁴ This is the reason why he proposes a different phenomenology of the “Other” whereby a distinction is clearly made between other and “Other” (*l’Autre*, or its personalized form *Autrui*) or where the “Same” produced as an egoism can enter into a relationship with an “Other” without immediately divesting it of its alterity.

As we have explained above, the things in the world which we inhabit are other in relation to us but the otherness of the Self and the world inhabited is only formal because in this world the otherness falls under the power and control of the Self.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, for Levinas, the “metaphysical ‘Other’ is other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the ‘Same’, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the ‘Same’.”⁴⁶ He describes this “Other” thus:

The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the I... I, you-these are not individuals of a common concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [*l’Etranger*], the stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez soi*]. But Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no power. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site. But I who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other. The conjunction *and* here designates neither addition nor power of one term over the other.⁴⁷

The distinction between other and “Other” made in the above assertion is central and thus indispensable to Levinas’ ethical phenomenology. The distinction is monumental because:

The former may be incorporated into the “same” whereas the latter never can be; the former confirms totality, the latter reveals infinity. The other may initially appear alien to the empirical self, but it does not fundamentally challenge its supremacy; the ‘Other’ is utterly resistant to the transcendental Ego and cannot be assimilated into the world the Ego creates for itself.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 43.

⁴¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 37-38.

⁴² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 12.

⁴³ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 12.

⁴⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 12.

⁴⁵ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38.

⁴⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38-39.

⁴⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 12.

⁴⁸ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 43.

1.3 Levinas' Notion of the Face of the "Other" and the Face to Face Ethical Encounter

We have already explicated Levinas' central argument that instead of all realities being seen or perceived as "unfolding or surrounding elements of one basic and central instance called the 'Same', which realizes itself by appropriating them, the irreducibility of all Otherness must be recognized."⁴⁹ It is this recognition that displaces the veiled "monism of ontology by a pluralism whose basic ground model is the relation of the 'Same' and the 'Other'."⁵⁰ According to Levinas, this "relation whose terms do not form a totality can be produced within the general economy of being only as proceeding from the *I* to the other, as a face to face."⁵¹ Accordingly, the otherness of the "Other" is concretized in the face of another human.

When Levinas speaks of "face" he does not simply refer to the narrow or the common linguistic meaning whereby the word refers to the countenance that we behold when we encounter another human being or "the face that constitutes the central zone of the body where our eyes and our mouth are located and the play of features takes place and which cannot be hidden or protected except by use of visible or invisible masks."⁵² On the contrary, he uses the term in the emphatic sense which comes forth when the face "is understood not simply as something present but as the other's corporeal self-presence, performed by the gaze or appeal we are exposed to."⁵³ In fact, Levinas does not give a definition but only a figurative description of the "face" and in this regard contends that:

The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense, it cannot be comprehended, that is encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched-for in visual or tactile sensation, the identity of the *I* envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content... The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence.⁵⁴

What is expressed above simply means that the face is the way the other presents himself or herself to me that exceeds the idea of the other in me. Hence, "another comes to the fore as *Other* if and only if his or her 'appearance' breaks, pierces, destroys the horizon of my egocentric monism, that is, when the other's invasion of my world destroys the empire in which all phenomena are, from the outset, *a priori*, condemned to function as moments of my universe."⁵⁵ Levinas, then, is of the position that the "face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp."⁵⁶ As a result, "the expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power. The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge."⁵⁷

The core emphasis by Levinas is that "the other person as he or she comes before me in a face to face encounter is not an alter ego, another self with different properties and accidents but in all respects like me."⁵⁸ Indeed, the other is not a mere object to be subsumed under one of my categories and given a place in my world.⁵⁹ Therefore, although the Self encounters the "Other", and beholds his or her countenance nude and bare, "there is still a sense of distance and even absence in his questioning glance."⁶⁰ For this reason, that the "Other" is a stranger and one is not sure what the "Other's" strangeness may conceal. For this reason "the 'Other' transcends the limits of (self-) consciousness and its horizon; the look and the voice that surprise me are 'too much' for my capacity of assimilation."⁶¹ In this sense, the "Other" comes to me as a total stranger and from a dimension that surpasses me; he is infinite or an enigma."⁶² Furthermore:

The "Other" resists the attempt by the Self to "monopolize the world because the "Other's" greatness does not fit in any enclosure-not even that of theoretical comprehension. This resistance to all

⁴⁹ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993), 19.

⁵⁰ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19.

⁵¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 39.

⁵² Waldenfels "Levinas and the face of the other", in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 64.

⁵³ Waldenfels "Levinas and the face of the other", in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 64.

⁵⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

⁵⁵ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19-20.

⁵⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

⁵⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 198.

⁵⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 13.

⁵⁹ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 13.

⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 13.

⁶¹ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19.

⁶² Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19-20.

comprehension is founded on the fact that the mere fact of another's existence is a 'surplus' that cannot be reduced to becoming a part or movement of the same.⁶³

The question that then arises in this regard is: How can this distance that separates the Self from the "Other" be bridged? Levinas answer to this apparent paradox is that the only way this distance can be surmounted is through discourse or language. This is because "the questioning glance of the other is seeking for a meaningful response and if communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given."⁶⁴ Simply put, the face of the 'Other' demands a discourse or communication. He expresses this clearly by in his observation that:

The incomprehensible nature of the presence of the other which we spoke of above, is not to be described negatively. Better than comprehension, discourse relates with what remains essentially transcendent...Language is a relation between separated terms. To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme. The word that bears on the other as a theme seems to contain the other. But already it is said to the other who as an interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the said. Words are said be it only by the silence kept, whose weight acknowledges this evasion of the other. The knowledge that absorbs the other is forthwith situated within the discourse I address to him. Speaking rather than 'letting be' solicits the other. Speech cuts across vision...In discourse, the divergence that inevitably opens between the other as my theme and the other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed for a moment to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor. The formal structure of language thereby announces the ethical inviolability of the other and without any odor the 'numinous,' his 'holiness.'⁶⁵

Let us underscore the fact that the aforementioned discourse, language or communication does not entail circulation of words, gestures and things but a giving of the Self to the "Other".

The giving that is referred to above, "is a giving which exceeds or goes beyond pure exchange and presupposes more, that is, the face "expresses itself".⁶⁶ In this case, "the face is not the site from which a sender delivers certain messages by means of linguistic tools."⁶⁷ Conversely, in this discourse "we assist the birth of the "Other" out of the Word and the birth of the Word out of the "Other". The Logos does not just become flesh, it becomes face."⁶⁸ Moreover, Levinas maintains that:

The event proper to expression consists in bearing witness to oneself, and guaranteeing this witness. This attestation of oneself is possible only as a face, that is, as speech. It produces the commencement of intelligibility, initially itself, principally, royal sovereignty, which commands unconditionally. The principle is possible only as command. A search for the influence that the expression would have undergone or unconscious source from which it would emanate would presuppose an inquiry that would refer to new testimonies, and consequently to an original sincerity of an expression...If at the bottom of speech there did not subsist this originality of expression, this break with every influence, this dominant position of the speaker foreign to all compromise and all contamination, this straightforwardness of the face to face, speech would not surpass the plane of activity, of which it is evidently not a species-even though language can be integrated in a system of acts and serve as an instrument. But language is possible only when speaking precisely renounces this function of being action and returns to its essence of being expression.⁶⁹

With these words, Levinas is simply insisting that the linguistic intercourse he is talking about is not the everyday interlocation whereby somebody speaks to the other about something or somebody, because that would simply remain an activity or action. Hence he "is not concerned with the said but the saying."⁷⁰ Actually, he avoids "any established linguistic system until reaching the point where the speaking face functions as the primordial signifier. In this case, the "Other" is the giver of a sense which precedes my giving of meaning to his existence; meaning that we learn from the other what we cannot learn by ourselves."⁷¹

Levinas also emphasizes that the relation to the face is straightaway ethical in that "the face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying: 'thou shall not kill'."⁷² This means that "the way the

⁶³ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19-20.

⁶⁴ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 19-20.

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

⁶⁶ Cf. Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other", in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 68.

⁶⁷ Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other", in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 68.

⁶⁸ Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other", in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 68.

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201-202.

⁷⁰ Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other", in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 68.

⁷¹ Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other", in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 68.

⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations With Philipe Nemo*, Richard A. Cohen (trans.), (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 87. It is noteworthy that Levinas does not tell us that we should

other imposes its enigmatic irreducibility and non-relativity or absoluteness is through a command or prohibition: you are not allowed to kill me; you must accord me a place under the sun and everything that is necessary to live a truly human life.”⁷³ If the Self has to give space to the “Other” to live without any attempt at appropriation or monopolization, it obliges the former to avoid activities that may hurt the latter and also calls the former to responsibility. Thus, the injunction given by the face of the “Other” becomes both a command and a norm. This is tantamount to saying that the “immediate encounter or experience of the face of the human ‘Other’ contains the root of all possible ethics because the ‘Other’s’ existence reveals to the Self the foundation and the prime sense of its obligations.”⁷⁴

Levinas states that this obligation of the Self to the “Other” is born of the fact that “the face in its nakedness as a face presents to the Self the destitution of a poor one and a stranger.”⁷⁵ At the same time, the poor one, the stranger presents himself as an equal who joins the Self for service while commanding the Self as a master; a command that paradoxically also commands the Self to command because the I is also a master itself.⁷⁶

It is important to mention here that equating the face to the destitution of the poor one or a stranger does not mean “that the face is something we can see or touch, while moving within open horizons, passing through changing perspectives, transforming it into a content we embrace or manipulate.”⁷⁷ This is explicit in Levinas’ assertion that “the presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of a third party (that is the whole of humanity which looks at us) and a command that commands commanding.”⁷⁸ This command by the “Other” does not divest the Self of its freedom but rather enhances and “gives proper foundation to freedom in the sense that whereas the transcendental Ego would like to be the sole source of its own knowledge, actions and meanings, the encounter with the ‘Other’ shows such freedom to be egoistical, arbitrary and unjustified.”⁷⁹

According to Levinas, then, freedom is granted through the agency of the ‘Other’ and without the ‘Other’ freedom is without purpose or foundation and in this connection observes that:

The face in which the other-the absolutely-other-presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace. The relation with the other-the absolutely other- who has no frontier with the same is not exposed to the allergy that afflicts the same in a totality.⁸⁰

Besides, in the face to face, “the ‘Other’ gives one’s freedom meaning because one is confronted with real choices between responsibility and obligation towards the ‘Other’, or hatred and violent repudiation.”⁸¹ In other words, the ‘Other’ does not only make the Self realize that it shares the world and that the world is not its unique possession (a realization it does not like) but also puts the Self into question by revealing that its powers and freedom is limited.⁸² Therefore, “the face does not annihilate the Self; on the contrary, it is the condition of its separateness. It instigates dialogue, teaching and hence reason, society and ethics.”⁸³

1.4 The “Third Other” or “Third Party” in Levinas’ Concept of Responsibility

In the preceding discussion, we have given an elaborate exposition of the relationship between the Subject and the “Other” and the consequent obligation of responsibility to the “Other” ensuing from such a relationship.

not kill the “Other”; he tells us rather that the ‘Other’ cannot be killed. This means Levinas makes a distinction between the “Other” and others. Others can be killed notwithstanding the fact that murder is the most banal incident of human history. Thus, for Levinas, even with the extermination of human beings like it happened during the Holocaust, the “Other” remains inviolate and inviolable. Hence, Levinas apparently does not necessarily denounce violence as wrong but rather attempts to show that it always fails and can never succeed in its true aims; meaning that when I kill, I am trying to kill the “Other”, that which is utterly beyond my powers; I may succeed in killing the “Other” or even numerable others but the “Other” survives. Violence, then, always ends in failure. Cf. Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 51.

⁷³ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁷⁴ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

⁷⁶ Cf. Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁷⁷ Waldenfels, “Levinas and the Face of the Other”, in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 67.

⁷⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

⁷⁹ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁸⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 203.

⁸¹ Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, 22.

⁸² Cf. Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 48.

⁸³ Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 49.

However, Levinas also asserts that a Subject's relation extends beyond a single "Other" to the other "Other" or the "third party". In *Otherwise than Being*, he observes that:

If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would not have been any problem in even the most general sense of the term. A question would not have been born, nor consciousness, nor self-consciousness. The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when the third party enters.⁸⁴

It can be inferred from this observation that the solid relationship between the Self and the "Other" is interrupted by the appearance of the third party. This is because the third party that appears demands responsibility from the Subject in the same manner as the "Other" does. Nevertheless, Levinas cures this apparent disturbance by his argument that the "Other" appearing in the epiphany of the face is not particular or privatized but universal and therefore, that the third party's appearance is concomitant with the appearance of the "Other".⁸⁵

Levinas also argues that the 'Other' does not pursue covert affection but places itself in the full light of revelation.⁸⁶ For example, the ability to speak presupposes a belonging to a language community. Consequently, in the manifestation or epiphany of the "Other", the third party also gazes at the Self, and this is well expressed in Levinas' assertion that:

Language as the presence of the face does not invite complicity with the preferred being, the self-sufficient "I-Thou" forgetful of the universe; in its frankness it refuses the clandestinity of love, where it loses its frankness and meaning and turns into laughter or cooing. The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other-language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.⁸⁷

The meaning of this affirmation is that when the Self encounters the naked face of the "Other", it simultaneously encounters the third party that calls the Self with humility and with as much imperative as does the "Other" standing before him or her. In this sense, "the epiphany of the face opens up to humanity in that the presence of the face or the infinity of the other is a destituteness or a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity that looks at us)."⁸⁸ As a consequence, Levinas considered the relation between the Self and the "Other" as social relation or sociality; meaning that the otherness of the "Other" has a fundamentally social extension and his or her alterity contains an immediate reference to all the others.

In spite of the fact that Levinas presents the "Other" as other, perfect and to some degree distant to the Self, he affirms that "the third party is the free being whom the Self can harm by exerting coercion on his or her freedom."⁸⁹ The third party is apparently more vulnerable than the "Other" and because of this susceptibility to harm, it intrudes on the relation between the Self and the "Other".⁹⁰ Moreover, Levinas argues that since "with the presence of the third party, the Subject is faced with the possibility of choice, the Subject needs to do some *calculus*, to compare and judge in order to determine for itself who is in more need than the other."⁹¹ This is because the responsibility for the "Other" now encompasses the third "Other". The impact of the entry of the third party is that it entails a passage to justice, which in turn calls into place the political state with its juridical institutions and bill of rights. In this regard, Levinas states that:

It is the moment of justice. The love of one's fellowman, and his original right, as unique and incomparable, for which I am answerable, tend of their own accord to make appeal to a reason capable of comparing incomparable, a wisdom of love. A measure superimposes itself on the 'extravagant generosity of the 'for the other', on its infinity. Here, the right of the unique, the original right of man, calls for judgement and, hence, objectivity, objectification, thematization, synthesis. It takes institutions to arbitrate and a political authority to support all this.⁹²

⁸⁴ Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.), (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 157.

⁸⁵ Cf. Ramona, Rat, *Un-Common Sociality: Thinking Sociality with Levinas*, Södertörn Philosophical Studies, 2016, 171.

⁸⁶ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212.

⁸⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.

⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Ego and the Totality", in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Alphonso Lingis (trans.), Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987, 37.

⁹⁰ Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195.

⁹¹ Mkhwanazi, "To be Human is to be Responsible for the 'Other'", 133-149.

⁹² Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (trans.), (New York: Columbia University Press), 195.

Nonetheless, the system of justice and the political authority necessitated by the appearance of the third party does not abrogate the Self's obligation toward the "Other" because "the reference to the face of the other preserves the ethics of the state."⁹³

Levinas further contends that the presence of the third party not only limits the radical responsibility for one another but calls for the installation of an equitable system in "which justice meets the needs of the third party because of the potential conflict between the rights of the "Other" and the third other or others."⁹⁴ Accordingly, the obligation of responsibility takes a new turn in that instead of only paying attention to the uniqueness of the "Other", the Self must compare the different others so that responsibility can be just and equitable. This is explicit in Levinas' statement that:

But the order of justice of individuals responsible for one another does not arise in order to restore that reciprocity between the I and its other; it arises from the fact of the third who, next to the one who is an other than me, is "another other" to me. The I, precisely as responsible for the other and the third, cannot remain indifferent to their interactions, and in the charity for the one cannot withdraw its love to the other. The self, the I, cannot limit itself to the incomparable uniqueness of each other, which is expressed in the face of the other... This is the hour of inevitable justice –required, however, by charity itself. The hour of justice, of the comparison between incomparables who are grouped by human species and genus. And the hour of institutions empowered to judge, of states within which institutions are consolidated, of universal law which is always a *dura lex*, and of citizens equal before the law.⁹⁵

It is clear from the assertion above that according to Levinas, the incomparable uniqueness of the third party can only be appreciated by the organization of a system of equality. It is responsibility in the third person. Nonetheless, Levinas is apparently aware of the fact that since a system can ignore the concrete face of the "Other", it can lead to perversion of responsibility. In order to take care of such an eventuality, he maintains that "the possibility that responsibility is perverted by the organization does not imply every system as such should be condemned. On the contrary, the totalizing elements must be constantly questioned and criticized by the original goodness."⁹⁶

1.5 Levinas' Notion of Infinite Responsibility

Levinas' primary focus in *Totality and Infinity* is the establishment and elaboration of the otherness of the other person as moral height and destitution, that is, ethical alterity.⁹⁷ Inversely, in *Otherwise than Being*, which is a sequel to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas focuses on ethical subjectivity. He "elaborates this ethics of alterity like ethics itself by turning back to the moral sensibility of the subject awakened by the 'Other', to its unique temporal and moral de-phasing, a fissured self, traumatized, held hostage by the other."⁹⁸ Richard Cohen argues that in *Otherwise than Being*:

The moral subject rises in subjection, 'despite itself,' introjected deeper than its own synthetic activities, suffering an immemorial past never contracted in the present, the trace of a diachrony, to the point of obsession, substitution for the other, turning the self inside out, hostage to and for the other, for the other's needs, for the other's life, to be sure, but also for the other's responsibility, even for the other's evil, in an an-archic moral inspiration expiating even for the other's persecution. I am my brother's keeper all the way.⁹⁹

The implication of Cohen's contention is that in *Otherwise than Being*, the encounter with and/or existence of the "Other" does not only reveal to the Self the foundation and prime sense of its obligations but also calls it "to a responsibility that goes beyond what the Self may or may not have done to the "Other" or whatever acts the Self may or may not have committed, as if it were devoted to the "Other" before being committed to itself."¹⁰⁰ It means that the "Other" is summoning the Self to a responsibility that has no boundaries whatsoever; in other words, the Self is being summoned to infinite responsibility.¹⁰¹

⁹³ Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 195

⁹⁴ Luc, Anckaert, "Ethics of Responsibility and Ambiguity of Politics in Levinas' Philosophy", *Problemos* 97 (2020), 61-74.

⁹⁵ Emmanuel, Levinas, "The Other, Utopia and Justice", in *Is it Righteous to be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, Jill Robbins (ed.), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 205-206.

⁹⁶ Anckaert, "Ethics of Responsibility and Ambiguity of Politics in Levinas' Philosophy", 61-74.

⁹⁷ Cf. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, xii.

⁹⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, xii.

⁹⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, xii.

¹⁰⁰ Robert, Bernasconi, "The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 30.1 (January, 1999), 76-87.

¹⁰¹ The term infinite is "derived etymologically from the Latin, *infinitus*, which is a combination of *in* (meaning: not) and *finitus* (meaning: end, boundary, limit, termination, etc.). In general, the word signifies the quality or condition arising from not having some sort of end or limit. The term infinite therefore, can refer to an

Levinas' averment is that this is a responsibility that unites the past and present in that it encompasses not only the faults and misfortunes of the "Other" but also the freedom of the "Other". This is clear from Levinas' assertion that:

But the relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every re-presentable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary and every day event of my responsibility for the faults or misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another, in the astonishing human fraternity in which fraternity, conceived with Cain's sober coldness, would not by itself explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for.¹⁰²

Surprisingly, Levinas is of the position that the unlimited responsibility of the Self to the "Other" neither begins in the former's commitment nor voluntariness and instead emphasizes that:

The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory, 'an 'ulterior to every accomplishment,' from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the an-archival, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question 'Where' no longer holds.¹⁰³

Based on the above emphasis, unlimited responsibility as an order that the Self receives does not originate with the Self but precedes it in the sense that it originates from a time preceding the Self's freedom, that is, before the Self's beginning.¹⁰⁴

Levinas also insists that the aforementioned unlimited responsibility is "pre-original and refers to a past that is irrecoverable and pre-ontological. This implies that for as long as one *is* one ought to be responsible for another."¹⁰⁵ This also indicates that infinite responsibility belongs to the very nature of subjectivity: "I am responsible for the 'Other' because my existence as individuated Subject is entirely bound up with my relation to the 'Other' or to him or her."¹⁰⁶ Here, Levinas makes an inherent relatedness between "responsibility" and the "Other" in a way that translates into a declaration that the sole measure of being human is one's responsibility for the "Other".¹⁰⁷ According to Levinas, this responsibility is the indispensable, original and elemental structure of subjectivity.

In order to explain what necessitates this ethical or gratuitous infinite responsibility, Levinas argues that "at the heart of subjectivity is not a 'for itself', but what he calls 'the one-for-the-other'.¹⁰⁸ This is what is referred to as the doctrine of "substitution". In his description of this doctrine of substitution, Levinas states that:

The self is on the hither side of the rest; it is the impossibility to come back from all things and concern oneself only with oneself. It is to hold on to oneself while gnawing away at oneself. Responsibility in obsession is a responsibility of the ego for what the ego has not wished, that is, for the others. This anarchy in the recurrence to oneself is beyond the normal play of action and passion in which the identity of a being is maintained, in which it is. It is on the hither side of the limits of identity. This passivity undergone in proximity by the force of an alterity in me is the passivity of a recurrence to oneself which is not the alienation of an identity betrayed. What can it be but a substitution of me for others? It is, however, not an alienation, because the other is the same in my substitution for the other through responsibility, for which, I am summoned as someone irreplaceable. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired.¹⁰⁹

It can be deduced from the above that substitution is neither a swapping of places nor an absorption of the identity of the Subject into the "Other" but rather a Subject's kenosis, so to say, so that it creates room for the "Other". As Levinas puts it: "as a substitution of one for another, as me, a man, I am not a transubstantiation, a changing of

unlimited extent of time, space, quantity of mass, quantity of power, essence and substance. On the other hand, the term responsibility is derived from the Latin "word *responsus* which means 'to respond'. The word therefore, refers to the fact of responding to, being accountable to or answerable to. From this etymological definition of the two terms, the phrase "infinite responsibility" refers the act of endless, boundless or limitless accountability or answerability. Cf. Leo, Sweeney, *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992), 3.

¹⁰² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10.

¹⁰³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10.

¹⁰⁴ Mkhwanazi, "To be Human is to be Responsible for the Other", 133-149.

¹⁰⁵ Mkhwanazi, "To be Human is to be Responsible for the Other", 133-149.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 80.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Mkhwanazi, "To be Human is to be Responsible for the "Other", 133-149.

¹⁰⁸ Robert, Bernasconi, "What is the question to which 'substitution is the answer", in *the Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 114.

one substance into another, I do not shut myself up in another identity, I do not rest in a new avatar.”¹¹⁰ Substitution therefore, simply means “one-in-the-place-of-another, being-in-one’s-skin or having-the-other-in-one’s skin”¹¹¹ Hence, in substitution, the Subject is obliged to assume the role of shielding the “Other” from external hazards. In Levinas’ opinion, “substitution is indispensable to the comprehension of subjectivity because it is the process by which the Subject empties itself of its being so that it can make space for the other.”¹¹²

Levinas’ also affirms that the taking of the “Other’s” place includes not only bearing the faults of the “Other” or being answerable for the misdeeds and mistakes of the “Other” but also expiation and persecution for the sins of others. In this connection, he alludes to the fact that:

Every accusation and persecution, as all interpersonal praise, recompense, and punishment presuppose the subjectivity of the ego, substitution, the possibility of putting oneself in place of the other, which refers to the transference from “by the other” into a “for the other” and in persecution from the outrage inflicted by the other to the expiation for his fault by me. But the absolute accusation, prior to freedom, constitutes freedom which, allied to the Good, situates beyond and outside of all essence.¹¹³

Levinas maintains that the responsibility that the Subject takes for the actions of the persecutor that is mentioned in the above assertion, forms the basis of the Subject’s goodness and “this goodness is not the result of a moral choice; it describes an obligation arising from the fact that, in my condition as a Subject, I am given over to the ‘Other’.”¹¹⁴ Consequently, all moral qualities derive from this basic ethical thesis: “It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in this world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity-even the little there is, even the simple ‘After you, sir’.”¹¹⁵

It is also worthy of note that since Levinas is categorical that the inter-subjective relation is a non-symmetrical one, the responsibility for the “Other” is not a two-way traffic or a give and take affair. Thus, the Subject’s responsibility for the “Other” is not dependent on the latter’s reciprocity. Indeed, Levinas insists that responsibility is the Subject’s affair and in this regard emphasizes that:

I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is his affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjection to the Other; and I am ‘subject’ essentially in this sense. It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: ‘*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.*’

This is not owing to such or such guilt which is really mine, or the offences that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.

This affirmation by Levinas is not far-etched because in ordinary circumstances people abhor relationships that have strings attached. As a matter of fact, in many instances some people do not assist the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the victim of injustice, victims of accidents, *et cetera*, expecting any kind of reciprocity. Although sometimes people give help with utilitarian intentions, it is not something that is ethically acceptable. Similarly, our responsibility for the mistakes and misdeeds of others may not necessarily demand reciprocity as is evident in instances where soldiers are sent for peace-keeping missions. They are entrusted with the responsibility of quelling conflicts that they never took any part in igniting and protecting victims who they have never met and to whom they are not related in any conventional way. In this way, they take responsibility for the other’s mistakes of commission or omission.

Actually, in ordinary circumstances, whether with full knowledge or voluntariness on the Subject’s part, we bear responsibility even for our persecutors. This is particularly true in our criminal or civil justice system where through our taxes, we pay for the upkeep of criminals of all sorts who are locked up in our prisons. Similarly, in the Prisoners of War camps, soldiers are required to guard and provide food and shelter for the enemy soldiers who may have been responsible for massacring their friends or colleague soldiers.

Conclusion

Levinas’ ethical phenomenology does not propose an ethical code but rather seeks to give an explanation of the existential preconditions for the possibility of morality. Therefore, Levinas is neither interested in establishing norms for guiding moral behaviour nor in examining the nature of ethical language or the conditions of how to live well. Contrariwise, his analysis of the non-symmetrical relationship between the Self and the “Other” ultimately leads to the conclusion that the Self is not only called to a responsibility for the “Other” but that this responsibility is infinite. Notwithstanding the fact that the theory has its gaps and flaws, many scholars today view

¹¹⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 14.

¹¹¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 14, 114-115.

¹¹² Mkhwanazi, “*To be Human is to be Responsible for the Other*”, 133-149.

¹¹³ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117-118.

¹¹⁴ Davies, *Levinas: An Introduction*, 81.

¹¹⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

it as a paradigm that can be used in solving problems that arise from the alienation of the “Other” in diverse fields such as politics, medical field, penal code, *et cetera*.

Bibliography

- [1] Critchley, Simon and Bernard Bernasconi (Eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- [2] Davies, Colins. *Levinas: An Introduction*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996.
- [3] Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Alan Bass (Trans), Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982.
- [4] Levinas, Emmanuel. *The Levinas Reader*. Sean Hand (Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1989.
- [5] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Michael B. Smith (Trans.). New York: Althlone Press, 1999.
- [6]*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- [7] Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Richard A Cohen (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- [8]*Basic Philosophical Writings*. Peperzak, S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Eds.). Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- [9]*Collected Philosophical Papers*. Alphonso Lingis (Trans.). Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.
- [10]*Discovering Existence with Husserl*. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Eds.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998.
- [11]*Entre Nous: On Thinking of the other*. Michael B. Smith (Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.
- [12]*Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*. Richard A. Cohen (Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- [13]*Is it Righteous to be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Jill Robbins (Eds.). Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- [14]*Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- [15]*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis (Trans.). The Hague: Nijhoff Publishers, 1981.
- [16]*Outside the Subject*. Michael B. Smith (Trans.). Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery (Eds.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1973.
- [17] Peperzak, Adriaan. *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1993.
- [18] Sweeney, Leo. *Divine Infinity in Greek and Medieval Thought*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1992.

Journals and Articles

- [1] Anckaert, Luc. “*Ethics of Responsibility and Ambiguity of Politics in Levinas’ Philosophy*”. *Problemos* 97 (2020), 61-74.
- [2] Asaro, Gona. “*Emmanuel Levinas’ Ethics of Responsibility as Paramount to a Complete Same-Other Relationship*”. A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Philosophy: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Catholic University of Eastern Africa in August, 2022, 20.
- [3] Bernasconi, Robert. “*The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political*”. *Journal of British Society for Phenomenology*, 30.1 (January, 1999), 76-87.
- [4] Mkhwanazi, Ezekiel. “*To be Human is to be Responsible for the Other*”. *Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology: University of South Africa* (March, 2022), 133-149.
- [5] Ramona, Rat. *Un-Common Sociality: Thinking Sociality with Levinas*. *Sodertorn Philosophical Studies*, 2016, 171.
- [6] Simmons, P. William. “*An-archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas’ Political Thought*”. A Doctoral Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Political Science, Louisiana State University, 1996.
- [7] Shannon, Nason. “*Levinas and the Philosophical Discourse of the West: Some Questions Regarding Levinas’ Critique of the Tradition*”, accessed at <https://www.academia.edu/9699052/>, on 25th April, 2024.