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Article

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EMMANUEL LEVINAS' NOTION OF THE OTHER: A CALL TO UPHOLD HUMAN DIGINTY

Henry Obinze Ebo

Directorate for General Studies

University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Umuagwo, Owerri

Abstract

A conception of substantive human rights is grounded in the conception of dignity and personhood that emphasizes individual responsibilities. However with the prevalent turn of events, it becomes exigent to investigate into the authenticity of this claim. The question of human rights and dignity and philosophy of care for others is one among global issues today both in the academia and social restructuring policies. This was provoked by the devastating experiences of slavery, colonialism, First and Second World Wars and continuous ill treatments of the human person. Measures have been taken and thoughts have been developed on the human person's rights and dignity and philosophy of care for the 'Other' by philosophers and others alike. Responding to these, Emmanuel Levinas, shocked by the reality of his experience and witness of the inhuman treatment of the Jews in the Nazi camps of Adolf Hitler developed his philosophy of the "Other" which is conveyed in his notion of "face-face" Ethics of responsibility for 'Other'. For Levinas, Ethics and Philosophy begin with the 'Other' and that underscores the meaning of his Ethics of the face. The face of the 'Other' is me and to ignore the face of the 'Other' is to ignore the Absolute Divine law. The 'Other' is the supreme moral obligation and hence I am responsible. Expository and evaluative methods guided the study for proper finding. The finding of the study revealed that various acts of inhumanity prevailed among us due to lack of care for the 'Other'. Thus the essay purposefully shoulders the task of undertaking a profound reflection over the rhetoric of human respect in the society and the massacre of people by people. Levinas, who during his life experienced two world wars, discussed the notion of substitution in the ethical theory of the I-other relation, was unavoidably influenced by the many horrors of war he came face to face with.

Keywords: Human Dignity, Substantive Human Rights, Ethics of Responsibility, The Other (Otherness), Face-to-Face Ethics, Philosophy of Care.

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Introduction

The actions of some men to others in our world today can be described as man's inhumanity to man, even though it is believed that the human person is endowed with dignity and inalienable rights. The tragedy of war, the killing of innocent people, the alarming rate of kidnapping and other similar crimes against humanity are constant reminder of the denial of the 'other' by the perpetrators and collaborators in these crimes. The situation today therefore calls for Levinas' Philosophy of Substitution as a possible solution to restore the dignity of man. From the above, it is crystal clear that it has become pressing, worrisome and pertinent to address the issue of human existence and its dignity, revitalizing the understanding of human nature in our contemporary world and by seeing the face of the other as a call to responsibility, I am responsible for the other in as much as we need one another to progress and create a great future. From the situation we see today there is need to focus on the existential experiences of the human person, to look into the joys and sorrows, the worth and worthlessness, the greatness and pettiness, the dignity and indignity of the human person. There is need to do a critical investigation into the ontological standing of the human person in the country. The situation we experience today raises a lot of disturbing question deriving from people's existential situation in the world. The essay purposefully shoulders the task of undertaking a profound reflection over the rhetoric of human respect in the society and the massacre of people by people. Levinas, who during his life experienced two world wars , discussed the notion of substitution in the ethical theory of the I-other relation, was unavoidably influenced by the many horrors of war he came face to face with. In this milieu he tries to give answers to an alternative way of relating with the other ethically. His postulation of substitution in the 'I-Other' relation is today necessary and still very relevant in our society because there are still many tribal, religious and ethnic conflicts happening today. Often the needs of the other are neglected because we are not from the same tribe, religion, culture, etc.

Conceptual Clarification

Other and Other: There are two ways in which the word 'other' is used in Levinas' works. For the sake of clarity, this paper differentiates them in this ways, 'other' and 'Other' except in the case of direct quotation/citation. The former represents anything else while the later expresses the absolute, infinite being which is different from anything else. Ideally, it refers to God, but ethically, it extends to a concrete human person.

Face: Human face for Levinas does not mean a physical or aesthetic object. Rather the face is seen as a living presence of another person; the experience is a social and ethical one rather than intellectual, aesthetic or merely physical. The face is the mirror that enables me to understand my existence and see my conditions of existence and human reality

Dignity: The word dignity comes from the Latin *dignitas*, derived from *dignus*, meaning "worthy," "deserving," or "fit." Dignity refers to the intrinsic worth, value, or nobility of a person that calls for respect, recognition, and ethical regard. It denotes a status of honour or esteem that is not merely conferred by social position, achievement, or power, but is often understood especially in moral and philosophical contexts as something inherent.

Human Dignity: Human Dignity is the idea that every human being possesses an inherent and inalienable worth simply by virtue of being human. This dignity does not depend on age, gender, social status, race, health, intelligence, usefulness, or moral behaviour. It is universal, equal, and cannot be lost or taken away.

Levinas' Idea of Substitution

In the works: *Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas, in his philosophy tries to describe the possibility of the 'face-to-face' relationship with another. His idea was to reject Western philosophical method and the notion that the 'Other' has *quiddity* ('that-ness' or 'what-ness'). In so doing he amended what he refers to as the racist tendencies of Western thought.¹

Face-to-Face Encounter: The best way of encountering the Other is not so much noticing the colour of his/her eyes. When we observe the colour of the eyes, it is not a social relationship with the Other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what exactly is the face cannot be reduced to that. The face is exposed, menaced as if it is inviting us to an act of violence.² It is the same face-to-face encounter that Sartre called 'the look' but it was seen by him in a negative and pessimistic perspective. It is also the same encounter that Karl Jasper would argue that if seen positively, should enhance the transcendence of human condition. At the same time, the face of the Other is what prohibits me from killing the Other.³ The face is a signification; it is a signification without background. The face is the mirror that enables me to understand my existence and see my conditions of existence and human reality. According to Levinas, the Other in the decency of his/her face, is not the character within a circumstance. This by implication means that it is not the same as our understanding of what a personality means in general.

Ethics as the First Philosophy: Ethics as the first philosophy summarizes the idea and effort of Emmanuel Levinas to move away from Husserl's transcendental idealism which focuses on analyzing events as they appear to the consciousness. It was also his break up from Heidegger's ontology which reduces the 'Other' to the same towards the understanding and meaning of being as presented in the 'face-to-face' relation.⁴ The term 'Being' for him (as well as Being, beings and *Da-sein*) is tainted by its association to Darwin, Hobbes, Heidegger and the ontological tradition that for Levinas, too effortlessly slithered into bed with Hitler and the Nazis. Thus he says: To affirm the priority of being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy: it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the being of existents, which is impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowledge) subordinates justice to freedom.⁵ For Levinas ethics precedes ontology, because he understands ontology in the very specific sense of 'being a dynamic struggle for life', that is, *conatus essendi*, attempt at being. In this sense, ethics as 'face-to-face' (including being responsible 'by-and-for-the-Other') precedes the axiological ontology of self-interest. Therefore, the pre-original covenant of 'fraternity' precedes every contract. In other words, if by ethics, we understand a doctrine about the moral principles, norms, obligations and interactions that rule human behaviour, we are very far from the idea of ethics according to Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas himself made it clear in his book *Totality and Infinity* that ethics is a calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the 'Other'.⁶ The moral ought

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, Hague: Duquesne University Press, 1961, 69.

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans., Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007, 86,

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans., Richard A. Cohen, p. 86.

⁴ Seán Hand, "Ethics as First Philosophy" ed., Seán Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, Malden: Blackwell, 2006, p. 75.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, p.45.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis p.43

for Levinas is not found in the laws of the cosmos or in reason (as in Kant) or in universal desire for pleasure (as utilitarian argues) but in the concrete encounter with the 'Other'.

Ethics and the 'Face': Levinas' ethics is not founded on epistemology. On the other hand, it is not based on abstract reasoning as in Kant. It is rather based on a phenomenological approach, that is, upon the concrete request of the other person. In meeting the 'Other' 'face-to-face' he or she addresses the 'I', drawing it out of itself, and at the same time resisting its power and thematization. In Buber's account, this type of relationship is seen as an equal, symmetrical and reciprocal relationship whereas in Levinas' account, it is asymmetrical. The 'Other' is seen as being above the self. The face in Levinas' ethics is seen as a stranger who puts the self into question. He is not an *alter ego*, not 'same' as self, not to be comprehended or to be taken as subject to the 'I', "the other's 'face' commands me not to subsume him. The command stemming from the 'face,' that is never a sole object of vision, is "Thou shall not kill." The 'Other' is never a pure phenomenon, but rather a call, an authoritatively speaking voice that asks for an exit out of the self. The 'face' manifests itself in its 'nakedness'. The fact that it turns to me and calls me into responsibility shows its 'nakedness'. This 'nakedness' of the 'face' is concrete through its glance and word. The eyes are the pre-eminent facial zone from which appears the other's unmediated presence. They are the most unprotected and uncovered part of the 'face'. For this reason, the glance is the most direct, unmediated and personal presentation of the other, by the 'Other' itself. In this glance, the 'Other' shows his totally independent manner of being which comes from within. In this way Levinas speaks of an 'absolute,' 'pure,' and heteronomous experience. In the face's glance I experience a totally absolute fact that I cannot avoid. The 'Other' looks me straight in the eyes: via the glance we stand 'eye-to-eye' with one another in a totally immediate manner.⁷

The Face as Ethical Appeal: The approach of Emmanuel Levinas towards ethical experience, as he would say, is basically a phenomenological approach. It is an approach that attempts to describe the ethical relationship with the other person, who, at the first time his is experienced, summons one into a relationship of responsibility to and for him. In this summoning one might avoid one's responsibility towards the other, but one cannot escape being summoned because the 'Other' who appears 'face-to-face' with you calls your attention while you are un-asked.⁸ Nevertheless, Levinas distinguishes a relation oriented towards knowing the 'Other' from the ethical one of being summoned to responsibility. Once the 'Other' appears 'face to face', one experiences the shift from the self towards the 'Other'. But this can only happen when the 'Other' is recognized as a stranger who discloses his or her phenomenality defects in his or her 'face', in the sense that the recognizer now finds himself invited to ethical responsibility.

The Level of Responsibility

According to Levinas, to overcome too much emphasis on myself, I enter into relationship with the 'Other'. And to broaden this relationship with the 'Other' is responsibility. In other words, for me to be really free, I must be responsible. My responsibility is my freedom. The 'face' breaks through itself in order to show itself out of itself. Concretely speaking, this self-expression takes place in the word and glance of the face. The 'Other' is the one who looks me straight in the eye and addresses me.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, p.39.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006, 90.

Called away from Oneself into Responsibility: Since the 'Other' enters into my world from elsewhere, it appears as a stranger. It is also small and vulnerable. The most eminent and at the same time most painful form of this strangeness as destitution is mortality, of which physical suffering is its frightening anticipation.⁹ It is precisely this assailability that Levinas calls the 'face' in the strict sense of the term. The skin of the face is the most naked, the most exposed part of the body of the 'Other'. Thus the face reveals the essential poverty of the 'Other', namely, its exposure to all sorts of threatening forces. It is this essential vulnerability that calls me into responsibility. The appearance of the 'Other' challenges me to grasp the 'Other' and to reduce him or her in one way or the other to myself. But at the moment I am tempted, however, to grasp and to manipulate the Other's weakness, I realize that what I am able to do is actually what I should not do. I feel myself shocked and radically called into question. The 'face' of the 'Other' is, through its vulnerable appearance itself, that which I out of attempt-at-being can kill but at the same time his first wordless word resounds: "Thou shall not kill."¹⁰

Goodness Full of Desire Completes Self-Liberation: Responsibility is to acknowledge the 'Other' as my teacher and master, without being the slave of the 'Other'. This acknowledgment precisely takes place through language that is through addressing and responding. Respect and acknowledgment must be concretized in a tangible form of caring for the 'Other' and his or her well-being. Hence the word of our responsibility becomes flesh. This leads Levinas to describe responsibility as "goodness full of longing and as infinite responsibility."¹¹ This goodness is the goodness full of desire which is neither mundane lustful passion nor simple need. This desire fulfills us as it grows deeper. Desire does not seek its end. It is a journey without an end. The implication is that responsibility for the 'Other' is not limited. It is a principle without limit (even though there can be limits for practical reasons, namely on the basis of 'the third party' which we will discuss below). In this responsibility one cannot say that it is enough. This is because it is not directed towards the satisfaction of oneself or towards reward, compensation or recompense. It is on this ground that it acquires an eye to and attention for the alterity of the 'Other' and it can likewise acknowledge and do justice to the 'Other' as fully 'Other'.¹² In this way we can say that goodness full of desire completes one's freedom since it is an infinite responsibility (desire) for the 'Other'. A responsible man is a free man.

Levinas' Notion of Substitution

Substitution should not be understood as the active and intentional idea of a magnanimous 'I' that offers itself, for example, to take up the suffering of the Other's place. The phenomenology of Levinas consists precisely in reaching beyond the countenance of the face. It is a trans-phenomenology which proceeds from the appearance of the other, which in and through the face addresses an appeal to me, as an appeal for responsibility to the

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis p. 79

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans., Alphonso Lingis, p. 87.

¹¹ Roger Burggraeve, "No One Can Save Oneself, Nor by Oneself Alone: An Ethics of Liberation in the Footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas," *The Awakening to the Other: A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed., Roger Burggraeve, p.16.

¹² Roger Burggraeve, "No One Can Save Oneself, Nor by Oneself Alone: An Ethics of Liberation in the Footsteps of Emmanuel Levinas," *The Awakening to the Other: A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed., Roger Burggraeve, p.17

Other.¹³ Levinas' notion substitution is set to challenge politics, ethnic discrimination and religious conflicts that continue to destabilize the unity of the people. Levinas' notion substitution challenges our ethical understanding of the relationship with the other in our society, in the treatment of the other not as a commodity for my own selfish consumption but as a human person that requires my attention. In this section we will discuss Levinas' understanding of the Other, with idea of social justice, justice for me, my freedom and responsibility towards the Other, to substituting his needs by meeting the Other in his/her present situation.

Substitution and Responsibility for the Other

According to Levinas the notion of substitution is tied to the notion of responsibility. To substitute oneself does not amount to putting oneself in place of the Other man or woman in order to feel what he/she feels, it does not involve becoming the Other nor, if he/she is destitute and desperate, the courage of such a trial. Rather, substitution entails bringing comfort by associating ourselves with the essential weakness and finitude of the Other; it is to bear his/her weight while sacrificing one's interestedness and complacency-in-Being, which then turn into responsibility for the Other.¹⁴

This means that in my substitution of the Other, I am responsible for his/her needs in the present circumstance. It is not to take the place of the Other in the society, rather it is for us to relate with them by sharing in their suffering and making them feel that they are important to us. They are not to be regarded as an object, instead we must see them as subjects in concrete reality standing before our very eyes. The face of the Other, that element of the other that is the ground of interpersonal contact, indicates an immediacy with the Other person that Levinas calls proximity. Proximity is felt as immediate contact. Levinas writes: The radical passivity of Levinas' self [...] emerges only with the advent of the Other, with the face of the other drawing near me; This nearness the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him. It is a structure that in no wise resembles the intentional relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object—to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me.¹⁵

The proximity of the Other demands a response; thus, Levinas claims that proximity is responsibility, or the ability to respond. Proximity must then be thought of as a weight upon me that comes from the outside. But unlike Sartre who finds an antagonism in this entry of the Other from the outside, Levinas finds the possibility of ethics, or the ground upon which ethics first shows itself. Not only does the possibility of ethics show itself here, the self now takes on a different characteristic. Furthermore, he added that, the tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility as well. Thus, responsibility is the link between the subject and the Other person, or, in more general terms, the source of the moral ought and the appearance of the Other person as person and not as thing are one and the same. There is no authentic socialization apart from ethics, and there is no ethics apart from socialization. To say that responsibility is foundational for ethics and interpersonal relations is to say then not only that responsibility is what relates one subject to another, but it is to

¹³ Roger Burggraeve, *Affected by the Face of the Other. The Levinasian Movement from the Exteriority to the Interiority of the Infinite*, Belgium: Louvain University, 294.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be?* ed., Jill Robbins, trans., Maureen Gedney, California: Stanford University Press, 2001, 228.

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen, p.97.

go on to say that the meaning of the Otherness of the Other person is given in substitution and responsibility, and not in my interpretation of the Other person.

Conclusion

Having looked at the situation of our society, in our search for a true and lasting relation with the Other, we have posited Levinas' ethics of the I-Other relation which is seen in the notion of freedom for the Other and substitution and responsibility for the Other. In our encounter with the Other, how do we treat them? This is one of the basic questions that Levinas' ethics has helped to give an answer to. The challenge before us today with the 'I-Other' relation is to place the human person in his/her own proper position in our contemporary society. In this critical moment in our society Levinas speaks to us. It is a call to reflection about how we live, express our love and demonstrate our care towards other. Levinas calls us to begin learning again a new ethics of relation. He wants us to be conscious and recognize the other whose face summons us to action. Levinas tells us to develop in us the desire for the wellbeing of the Other and if need be substitute in meaningful accompaniment, solidarity and commensuration. In emphasizing the importance of face Levinas holds that face_of the Other is how the Other reveals itself. The face of the Other is the exteriority of his being. Face to face is an ethical relationship, and calls the freedom of self-responsibility. Looking at the tragedies befalling us one can say that Levinas' ethics of I-Other relation comes to show us that the time has come for us to go beyond our ethnic groups in responding to our fellow human being. This means that, when I see or encounter the Other, I respond to him/her because the Being before me is a rational human being, that is, a subject like me and not an object or a thing. It means also that I will be ready always to support the Other in his/her situation and not to take the place of the Other, but to stretch out or to reach out a friendly hand to the Other in order to lift up the Other in that particular situation. For Levinas, we do not respond to the Other for us to gain something from them, rather it is an inherent command in us that pushes us to respond. As soon as the Other approaches or calls, we become free, responsible and obliged to answer.

It is obvious that the 'face-to-face' relationship which Levinas exalted as the queen of all relationships is the most enriching and calm. What raises the stakes is the presence of the third party whom both I and the 'Other' are also responsible for. 'The third', the neighbour and the one far off, introduce the notion of justice and in turn politics. It is a call to shun violence, conflicts, greed, etc, and to embrace intersubjective relationship among ourselves. It is a call to challenge our cultural ethos by looking at the Other as an ethical and moral being that deserves to live with me in the society to build a better and just society. Finally, for there to be an ethical relation and solidarity with the Other, we need to sacrifice our selfish interest by considering the Other as a master, by putting his/her interests and needs first. It is only when we raise the Other above ourselves that he/she will no longer be seen as a rival or threat whose power must be brought down, but rather as a dignified person who has an unconditional right to recognition and respectful treatment as an Other.

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