

DECODING THE ETHICAL CURVATURE OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY A LEVINASIAN PROBLEMATIC

Abstract

Engaging with the thinking of Levinas is always an arduous task. However, an attempt is made to elucidate the major concern of his philosophy of ethics as an intersubjective thesis in two parts as an indicative and an imperative by way of following the logical, and not necessarily chronological, trajectory of his thinking from his critique of his masters to the self's unique ethical election to exist for-the- other, and its contemporary relevance for our time.

Key words: Self, other, Face, Responsibility, Asymmetry

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish French philosopher of the last century has carved himself an admirable niche by an explicit engagement with ethical concerns in the post-war era. His debates concerning the 'philosophy of the other' distinguished him starkly from his contemporaries. His early formal training in the tradition of Heidegger and Husserl combined with his personal experience of the harrowing atrocities at Auschwitz characterized his concerns which directly address the very edifice of western philosophical thinking. Levinas reiterates that despite the promises of the enlightenment project and phenomenological thinking, human beings have clearly been far from their true ethical sense. On the other hand, Levinas gives a new orientation to the western philosophical tradition, hitherto governed by the overarching presence of Being, by seeking an "otherwise than Being". He ushers in a radical shift in philosophical thinking by replacing the primordial question of 'to be or not to be' with what 'ought to be', which is the ethical question. (Levinas, Levinas Reader 8) The ethical question is about our compassion toward the other, as an infinite responsibility for other human beings. Thus, Levinasian thought has been transformative in envisioning

and refashioning our society grounded on ethical concerns/ ethical nexus of intersubjectivity.

Grappling with the unusual thinking of Levinas is always a daunting task; however, an attempt has been made to elucidate the intersubjectivity thesis in Levinas as a general philosophical project with a specific orientation to the epiphany of the face as the nexus of intersubjectivity. In order to address this issue the essay is divided into two parts. The first part deals with general project of Levinas' philosophy as a preparatory analysis and the second part deals with phenomenology of the face.

Preparatory Analysis Post-Phenomenological Project an Indicative

As we embark upon on philosophical probe into unfolding of the phenomenological experience of intersubjectivity in Levinas or rather specifically phenomenology of the face as the nexus of intersubjectivity demands us to have certain basic familiarity with larger framework of Levinas' phenomenological project at hand. Despite being a familiar philosophical theme that neatly cut across the phenomenological tradition care must be taken to note that Levinas rarely employs the term 'intersubjectivity' to explore the ethical meaning of the relationship between Self and Other. Nonetheless we shall use intersubjectivity throughout our analysis interchangeably with 'self and other' so far as it would enable us to philosophically best capture subtle philosophical nuances at stake.

In fact, in Levinas intersubjectivity gets a radical ethical turn as a phenomenology of the face. Such an ethical turn in phenomenology of intersubjectivity is significant for a number of reasons. Because 1) the thematic encounter between self and other is a traditional philosophical theme, and 2) Levinas decision to begin his phenomenological analysis with the encounter between the self and the other arguably necessitates that he deduce a resultant social order from this primitive encounter. Despite its familiar philosophical theme, Levinas work is extremely difficult to characterize. On the one hand, it is blatant repudiation of

entire western philosophical tradition to its ontological commitment in so far as that tradition entails an ontological commitment to the study of being at the expense of the marginalization of the other. On the other hand, Levinas' thought situates itself firmly in the philosophical conventions in so far as it takes the form of a traditional phenomenological mode of philosophizing. Thus, Levinas' phenomenological work addresses primarily an informed philosophical audience, one that is well versed in the ontological presuppositions of our tradition, and amenable to a phenomenological mode of philosophizing. What does exactly this philosophical setting characterize or point towards? Answering this question would take us to the very motivating concern of his philosophizing. In this regard, first of all, we need to answer the question regarding what is the aim of his philosophizing. What is the method of his enquiry? The basic purpose of his philosophy is to bring ethics to the centre of philosophy. In this regard, it is very much imperative to know what does he mean by the word ethics? His conception of ethics goes far beyond the traditional understanding of ethics as a branch discipline of conventional western philosophy (metaphysics). On the other hand, Levinas speaks about 'ethics before an ethics', namely the 'ethical'. The term he uses in the adjectival noun 'the ethical' refers to a domain from which nothing human may be excluded. It is to offer an analysis as well as an attempt to refashion respectful, rewarding encounter with the other as a unique possibility and to discern the sources of a just and humane society in this account. Thus the task Levinas sets before him is threefold; (1) to describe and defend subjectivity to show its self sufficiency. (2) to provide an account of alterity that does not reduce the other to the Self.

(3) It should provide some means of accounting the relation between 'Self' and 'Other' that does not abolish either of them. Towards this task, remaining within the phenomenological tradition, Levinas employs phenomenology as a method to highlight his ethical encounter with the other. Hence it is significant to know the way he transforms the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger to his own post phenomenological ethics (Davis 34-43).

Critique of His Masters Husserl and Heidegger

According to Levinas despite Husserl's ambition of giving a secure foundation to scientific knowledge, the major achievement of his work lies in the liberation of philosophy from the stranglehold of naturalistic epistemology. This he does by rethinking the notion of the phenomena as the available mode of presenting the essences. Two important strands emerge from Levinas's analysis on Husserlian phenomenology. Firstly, it provides a method for investigating the experience of the world freed from the search for objective essences hidden beneath phenomenal existence. Secondly, because of the capacity of consciousness for self-reflection Husserlian phenomenology represents what Levinas calls 'the authentic spiritual life' (Davis 11).

Although Levinas does not bother much about the problems when consciousness encounters a world potentially hostile to its intentions, he has his reservations. Firstly, he reproaches Husserl with his intellectualism (Davis 13). Consciousness, as Husserl describes it, is primarily reflective and contemplative. Secondly Levinas attacks Husserl for his inadequate treatment of the problem of other minds which the 'epoché' that reveals the transcendental ego can't philosophically demonstrate on its own. This dimension becomes the basis to later Levinas' position (Davis 14). Although we have seen the influence of Husserl on Levinas it was through the eyes of Heidegger Levinas interpreted Husserl. Heidegger gives to phenomenology an ontological turn, as he accords it a privileged role in the attempt to describe being (*Sein*). For Levinas the prominence of Heidegger's phenomenological ontology consists of two points (1) it dislodges the absolute primacy accorded to consciousness (Davis 15). According to Heidegger the world of the disinterested transcendental ego is not the basis but his main concern is rooted in deeper levels of being (*Sein*) which precedes all sorts of objectifying knowledge and representation. (e.g. hammering) (2) Heidegger assigns also a special place to 'facticity' and 'contingency'. Levinas finds in Heidegger a philosophy totally immersed in the world, in experience, facticity and desire that at the same time always already makes

room to pose the question of being. However, Heidegger does not escape Levinas' critique. According to Levinas, although Heidegger combines the concerns of ontology with the description of experience he does not escape from the totalitarian and 'egological' tendencies of the western tradition. On the one hand 'being' is seen as a whole encompassing horizon within which all beings come to pass (exist). Secondly although there is a fundamental passivity in Dasein due to its thrownness, but the world of Dasein is so protected against the intrusions of other humans, other histories or gods. If gods exist they are there for man. Other humans are there but not as disturbing forces that rob me of my central place. Levinas suggests that Heidegger's ontology is in some respects strictly classical in its account of the relationship between being (*Sein*) and beings {(Seiendes) (entities)}. In Levinas' opinion ontology the proper domain of phenomenology for Heidegger has to be replaced. On the other hand Levinas discovers in the ethical encounter of the self and the other a relationship that cannot be explained between being (*Sein*) and beings (entities). According to Levinas, both his masters Husserl and Heidegger have similar shortcomings. Both subsume the other under the authority of the same, which is understood as consciousness in Husserl and being in Heidegger. Heidegger maintains the supremacy of the Same over the Other. He does not destroy but epitomizes a whole current of western thought. Thus remaining within the phenomenological tradition Levinas tries to transcend and move away from the totalizing tradition (Davis 17).

From Totalizing Tradition to Post-Phenomenological Ethics

In order to facilitate his march towards what can be termed as 'Post-phenomenological ethics' Levinas makes a critical analysis of the traditional philosophy, in other words his post-phenomenological ethics

is built around a critique of western philosophical tradition. He further points out that the western philosophy has been a 'digestive philosophy' where the other is assimilated like food (Critchley 16). This is very vivid in his account of the critique of ontology, where he remarks blatantly that from platonic

theory of knowledge to Husserlian phenomenology philosophy has been a parade of ontological imperialism. Further Levinas would point out that the western philosophy in general has been a journey of 'returning', a journey of 'appropriation', a journey of 'imperialism' of the thinking ego whose only concern is to return to itself like that of the mythical figure of the Odysseus whose twenty years of adventurous voyage was only a journey primordially marked by a majestic returning home. Philosophically looking at this metaphor would be to throw open the totalizing tradition of the western philosophy under the guise of ontological imperialism or epistemological intellectualism which is rather worked on the assumption that truth lies at home and the process of finding it is a matter of appropriation and recognition. In this process of comprehension and understanding everything is reduced, appropriated and digested. In order to facilitate a new movement away from the totalizing tradition Levinas in his Magnus opus *Totality and infinity* replaces the traditional vocabularies with ontological undertones like 'totality, being, ontology etc with infinity, exteriority, metaphysics, proximity etc. so as to problematize the issue of otherness and its significance for philosophy. Thus leaving aside the mystical figure of Odysseus who stands for the totalizing ontological tradition of the western philosophy Levinas alludes to the Biblical figure of Abraham, who responded unconditionally to the voice of God, leaving aside his home land to an unknown land never to return home. Thus with his philosophy of post-phenomenological ethics he is inaugurating in a radical way a movement from 'know thyself' tradition to a tradition of 'respond and recognize the other' as the call of philosophy, whereby comprehension, assimilation and totalization are replaced by an exuberant exotic openness to the radical, non-assimilative, non-reducible absolute alterity/exteriority of the other. Thus, the task Levinas wants to achieve by way of his novel post-phenomenology of alterity is threefold; to safeguard the other from the aggressions of the Subject/self/Same; to look for the possibilities that conditions its appearance in our lives; to facilitate a meaningful encounter between the self and the other preserving both of its independence and alterity. The first step in this

challenging philosophical project is provided by an analysis of *ilya*.¹

Emancipating Human Subject from the Totalizing Impersonal Ilya

The first step towards post phenomenological ethics is provided by an escape or emancipation or liberation of human existence from what Levinas calls as anonymity of Ilya (Impersonal being devoid of anything or there is). In 'De Le'Vasion' an article published in 1935 although Levinas alludes to the concern of 'Being and Time' at renewing the ancient problem of being (*Sein*) as being, the relationship to being (*Sein*) is portrayed as entailing oppression and imprisonment. Rather than authenticity, the bond with being (*Sein*) is seen as unwanted an imprisonment, where self is trapped and it is longing for escape. Since being (*Sein*) encompasses everything there is, the failure of escape is inevitable. For Levinas conceives of being in a different way in order to facilitate the possibility of the self to escape or rather liberate itself from the clutches of Heideggerian ontology. What he calls as ontological imperialism. The first step is provided by what he calls the 'ilya' (impersonal being devoid of anything) (Davis 22). Heidegger had used the expression: 'Es gibt' (which means it gives) speaking of being. For Heidegger 'it' of 'it gives' has the dimensions of generosity and abundance. On the other hand Levinas uses the French expression 'Ilya' in its impersonal sense (like that of 'it is raining') in the place of 'Es gibt' (Davis 23). Levinas sees a fundamental calamity and evil in the notion of being (*Sein*) in its traditional sense of universal and all encompassing project which is an unfolding of domination that is aimed at reducing everything to the same, to a totality, to 'nothing, no-one, nobody'. In the 'ilya' there is ultimately only "being (*Sein*) without beings (*Seiendes*) (existence without existents)". Therefore he calls for a radical turn in philosophy that is to liberate philosophy from the calamity of what he calls as ontological imperialism.

¹ The word '*ilya*' is a French expression used by Levinas in his attempt to describe being (*Sein*) which is independent of beings (*Seiendes*). He uses this term for existence without existents; a faceless and horrifying presence which subsists after the absence of all beings (*Seiendes* or entities). For a detailed study see Levinas (1978) '*Existence Without Existents*' esp. pp. 51-60.

Hence, Levinas calls for a 'hypostasis' (Stand under) a movement from Heideggerian ontology of 'being without beings' to a being (from existence to existents), from the totalizing anonymity to independent particularity (Llewelyn 27). For Levinas in a world thus dominated, reduced and possessed by the clearing that being is there is no scope for anything outside the subject which he calls as the failure of phenomenology. Therefore he calls for a 'Phenomenology of alterity' which facilitates a unique encounter with the other without reducing it to the same or the totalizing anonymous 'ilya'. Hence the next task before Levinas would be to speak about the other without annulling its essential strangeness and alterity (Davis 25). In order to attain his project of discussing the other without reducing to the whole encompassing sameness, he uses certain key elements in his philosophy such as the notion of otherness, the face of the other etc.

Human Subjectivity as Embedded in the Idea of Infinity

The next step for Levinas is to establish or speak of a genuine relationship with the other without reducing it to the same. The first step towards this attempt Levinas finds in Descartes 'Third Meditation' where he is of the opinion that consciousness is not only or primarily conscious of itself but has the irreducible idea of the infinite. This insight from Descartes serves as an opening to Levinas regarding his development of the notion of infinity which escapes conscious subjects all attempts at all conscious appropriations; in other words consciousness which thinks more than that which it can think. For Descartes it is in this idea of infinity as God upon which the conscious subject is founded. What Levinas does is to give a new baptism to the formal structure as discovered by Descartes as the very structure of my relation to the other in the form of another human being. Thus Levinas transforms Descartes infinite God into his own unique other. This is very clearly expressed as he remarks: "The infinite is the absolute other" (Levinas, Collected Philosophical Papers 54). Thus, alluding to Descartes Third Meditation Levinas facilitates a unique encounter between the other and the same within my subjectivity without reducing it to the same to each other or to totality. This can be further explored when Levinas qualifies this infinity as

absolute other with the dimension of transcendence and exteriority (which is beyond the power of the subject). Thus Levinas calls our attention to a philosophy of the other where a unique encounter between the self and other is possible by preserving both of its independence and self sufficiency, without subsuming to each other (Peperzak 21-22).

Having traversed through the basic project of Levinas in our preparatory analysis it would be quite fitting for us to embark upon our enquiry into his philosophical insights on 'face as the curvature of intersubjectivity' as an answer to his threefold task we have mentioned already.

The Threefold Task of Philosophy

Heidegger would once say that every philosopher grapples himself with one unique question in philosophy and it was for Heidegger the very question concerning the reformulation of the question of Being. Levinas acknowledges his indebtedness to Heidegger however his very question revolves around the need to leave the climate of Heideggerian philosophy. Thus, Levinas asks: Is there an otherwise than being at all? Or, Is there anything that can transcend the very horizon of being? Methodologically Levinas follows the *via negativa* approach of the French thinkers this quite evident in his very critique of the western metaphysical tradition. Positively this can be seen as an answer to the threefold task that he sets before him in his philosophy. What has this threefold task to do with the intersubjectivity thesis in Levinas? What does it proffer phenomenologically?

If we have to preserve the other as the other it should not become in anyway the object of my knowledge or experience, because knowledge is always my knowledge, experience always my experience. Therefore the philosophy of the other and the same (philosophy of ethical intersubjectivity) must confront three fundamental problems: (1) it should describe and defend subjectivity to show its self sufficiency. (2) It should provide an account of alterity that does not reduce the other to the same. (3) It should provide some means of accounting the relation between 'same' and 'Other' that does not

abolish either of them. (Davis41). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes his peculiar intersubjective encounter between the self and the other under three headings: (a) interiority and economy, (b) exteriority and the face, and(c) beyond the face. Here Levinas follows a well-knit phenomenological path, in as much as he provides phenomenological account of human experience beginning with the human body, its needs, wants, desires and satisfactions and, and finally proceeding towards a social self immersed in social institutions. As an answer to the first task mentioned earlier Levinas gives a phenomenological account of interiority of the self that is an account of the self as independent and self-sufficient (sovereign self with characters of feeling at home and enjoying the world). In other words in order to elaborate the philosophy of the self and the other Levinas avoids speaking in terms of difference or opposition. Since both these notions ultimately view self and other from the stand point of totality. Thus his first attempt is to avoid all kinds of totalitarian tendencies which reduce the other and the same to a totality. In this regard he conceives the self in a peculiar way as neither opposed to nor different from the other rather separate from it. The self is separate and its identity is confirmed by its ability to recognize itself as the same even as it changes and it has its own occupations, its needs, enjoyment, which Levinas calls 'its economy'.(Davis 42) Thus, Levinas describes the self in its separateness and autonomy in the world. "In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone." (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority* 134)² However egoistical the self here is, it is not the transcendental ego of the Husserlian type. Just as it is separate from the world, the world is also separate and has its independent existence. Thus, for Levinas the human subject is not lost in the world, but celebrates life in the world. Hence Levinas lays the foundation where he recovers the autonomy of the subjectivity without reducing it to a totality.(Davis 43-44) Having provided an account of the self in describing and defending

²Here after cited as *Totality*.

subjectivity to show its self sufficiency; Levinas takes up his next phenomenological task i.e., how to provide an account of alterity that does not reduce the other to the same but to provide a phenomenological description of the relation between 'same' and 'Other' that does not abolish either of them. For this Levinas gives a detailed phenomenological account in *Totality and Infinity* under the title 'exteriority and the Face'. According to Levinas this separate existence of the self is possible only because the other also exists. The self exists separately because the other is irreconcilable with it, otherwise both will be part of a totality in which case there would be no real separation possible. It means although the self feels that its separation ensures its mastery and freedom in the world, but this separation depends on the very possibility of an encounter with the other that will put this mastery and freedom into question. What is particularly distinctive about Levinas is his attempt at accounting for such an encounter between the self and the other without compromising the essential irreducibility of any one of them to the other or to a third totality. Thus the relation to the other is called a "relation without a relation." (Levinas, *Totality* 80) There is a relation because an encounter does take place; but it is a relation without relation because that encounter does not bring about parity between the two. The other remains resolutely the other all throughout and even after the encounter. In order to illustrate such an encounter with the other, he takes recourse to three interrelated dimensions: desire, the face (*le visage*), and discourse. (Davis 45). In order to facilitate our specific task at hand we shall focus exclusively on face as the nexus of intersubjectivity.

Face as the ethical Curvature of Intersubjectivity

Of all Levinas' terms, '*Le visage*' (face) is perhaps the best known and the most mysterious. What does face mean in the ethical project of Levinas? Or how does it phenomenologically characterize the intersubjective thesis in Levinas? These are some of the pressing philosophical questions that fashion our enquiry. Levinas introduces this term specifically to describe the encounter between self and Other that facilitates and conditions ethical intersubjective thesis. The face for him is more than the mere appearance of

a person in terms of beauty rather it is an “epiphany”(Totality,171,212) or revelation. (Davis 45). Face albeit the most often understood naively as the most expressible part of the body for Levinas the notion of face characterizes the nexus of ethical encounter.

In Levinas' opinion the face is considered not as an object of my experience rather, both face and discourse are modes of contact with the other in which I receive more than I give. Indeed, in Levinas' account the face appears more like a source of language than something that can be seen. This is quite explicit when Levinas says “The face speaks... and the manifestation of the face is already discourse” (*Totality* 61-66). This characterizes the ethical turn in intersubjective thesis where the ethical moment is constituted by linguistic interpellation in its primordial sense in the very address the other makes to the self and the self makes to the other. (*Totality* 65-69). In this very address who speaks what is not important in rather the face entails a breach of the familiar to the production of new and surplus meanings. Thus Levinas would say face is a teaching because the face of the other teaches what I could have never discovered for myself. It epiphany of the face produces meaning from beyond my experience and resources. (Levinas, *Totality* 69-70) More importantly through discourse I find that what had seemed uniquely mine is revealed as shared with the Other; I am not the sole possessor of the world. Thus the idea of the infinite both puts into question the self's sovereign authority over the world and grounds the possibility of the self as separate. (Levinas, *Totality* 169-73)

In the preceding pages, we have already seen that if all knowledge presupposes the experience of something that can be neither given nor wholly integrated by consciousness as such, then there must be something other than Being. In other words according to Levinas in all our experience there is something, which goes beyond the realm of comprehension or consciousness. This something that is irreducible and eludes all kinds of appropriation and assimilation and comprehension by consciousness is what Levinas calls ‘Otherness of the Other’. Therefore, instead of seeing all realities as centered around the clutches of the “Same”, which realizes itself

by appropriating them, the irreducibility of all Otherness must be recognized. This recognition supplants the overt or hidden monism of Ontology by a pluralism whose basic ground model is the relation of the Same and the Other. (Peperzak 19). According to Levinas, this otherness of the other is concretized in the face of another human person. The word 'face' has a Hebrew origin (from the word 'panin') Which when used is a spiritual sense, means 'to show concern for the weak, destitute, etc.' (Bernasconi and Wood, *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* 173) Levinas uses this term to refer to the face of the Other, to the Other person and for him Face is a remarkable presentation of the alterity of the Other. The notion of 'face' is a very important concept in Levinas's thought, but it is also a very intricate concept that is articulated by Levinas in relation to many other main concepts in his later works. Throughout his deliberations, however, Levinas considers face not in a metaphorical way but in an ethical and transcendental way. In this sense, the notion of the face is seen as the manifestation of otherness of the other or absoluteness of the other, which is irreducible to all kinds of objectifications and totalizations from the same. Thus, the analysis of face is central to Levinas. "The way in which the Other presents himself exceeding the idea of the Other in me, we here name face" (Levinas, *Totality* 50). The Other presents himself through the face. "The true essence of man is presented in the face of man is presented in his face" (Levinas, *Totality* 290). What the 'face' expresses is not about a specific person, but about the relationship with this person. Therefore, the phrase, 'the face of the Other', indicates not the perception, description, or interpretation of the expression of the face of a person, but the condition for the experience of this face to appear. In other words, the face is an ethical sign that emphasizes the immaterial and non-objectified attribute of human being. Adrian Paperzak, makes it clear that when Levinas phenomenologically dwells on the importance of the face, he does not describe the complex figure ; rather , he tries to make us " experience" or "realize" what we see, feel, "Know" when another, by looking at me , "touches" me : autrui me vise; the other's visage looks at me, "regards" me. (22) The face other manifests the otherness of

the other as revealed in a dimension of “height” : he/she comes “from on high.” (Paperzak 19-21) Hence, Levinas in his analysis of the face shows how the otherness of the other is manifested. This can be further elaborated in the detailed exposition of the epiphany of the face in its four components, all of which have the quality of excessiveness: a) the absolute alterity of the Other, b) the passivity of the self to Other’s relation to, c) the Other’s command, d) my response to respond. (Mattathilanickal 57) Taking up this task would be an essay in itself. Albeit we would reflect on a more fundamental aspect of Levinasian ethics in relation to his intersubjective thesis i.e., Asymmetrical nature of Responsibility which in fact makes his ethics characteristically different from other phenomenologist.

The asymmetrical nature of the relationship is the decisively the most distinctive aspect of Levinas’s ethics. Pierre Hayat in his preface to *Alterity and Transcendence* clearly indicates that, “Levinas proposes to think the inter-subjective relation: not as a reciprocal but as a asymmetrical relation...” (XXI) The other, which Levinas characterizes by a biblical formula as the stranger, the widow or the orphan, does not share my powers or responsibilities. “My presence before the face is therefore an epiphany. It creates an asymmetrical indebtedness on my part towards the Other’s moral summons which is based not on a prior knowledge, but on the primacy of the other’s right to exist, and on the edict: ‘You shall not kill.’” (Levinas, Levinas Reader 12) One is responsible for the other not because he/she expects anything in return. As Bauman puts it, “I am ready to die for the Other” is a moral statement; “He should be ready to die for me” is, blatantly, not. (Davis 52) . Nevertheless, Levinas’s thesis of ethical inter-subjectivity is not without its own share of ambiguities and aporias.

How do I measure my responsibility for the other? Does my responsibility cease once I fulfil my duty towards the other? Or am I infinitely responsible for the other? The phenomenon of responsibility is that “responsibilities increase in the measure that they are assumed. The more responsibilities one takes on the more responsibilities one discovers oneself afflicted with: there is an infinity in the life of responsibility.” (Levinas, Collected

Philosophical Papers xxiii) Therefore, it is necessitated by the ushering of what he calls the “third party”. The “third party” in Levinas, broadens sociality, as he says, “Society inevitably involves the existence of a third party”. (Levinas, Collected Philosophical Papers 32) However, the arrival of ‘third party’ introduces a plethora of problems³ in Levinas which is a significant concern for contemporary Levinasian scholarship very specially in its attempt to radicalize Levinasian ethics in the socio-political context. The intersubjective thesis that we have attempted to traverse through is not an exhaustive treatment of Levinas for in many ways it is limited to Levinas’s expositions in *Totality and Infinity*. On the other hand the more radical understanding of self and other relationship is provided by Levinas second Magnum Opus *Otherwise than Beyond Essence* and his later writings where he radicalizes ethics in terms of notions such as ‘Proximity’, ‘Substitution’, ‘Hostage’ Diachrony etc.

Contemporary Relevance of Levinasian Ethics an Imperative Overtone

The development of modern science and communication has brought about tremendous progress, and today we live in a single globalized community but with multifaceted cultures. Though we have the possibility of instant communication, we are becoming more and more intolerant - in political, religious, cultural, economical term - day by day. Secularism has reached a state that the collective living has paved way for extreme individualism where one completely closes his/her door to others. Though we have all the techniques of communication, we remain ignorant to the reality of what is happening to our neighbor (even to our own families). Human beings, in their search for peace and prosperity have now ended up in suspicion and conflict. Fear conquers the heart of everyone and we are unaware and afraid of what will happen to us in the next moment when we are out there. This is the terrible state of affairs today. Is there a hope for better prospects in this

³ For details see Bernasconi, Robert. "The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30 (1999): 76-87. And also, Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 150-162.

situation? Is there anything concrete to change our attitude and improve this situation in our world? What are the fundamental steps one needs to take to improve our social, religious, political and economic living? How can it be made possible? The questions are endless, but what is needed is an answer. Here comes the importance of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas with its pristine call to be responsible for the other (for one's neighbour) whose face makes his/her epiphany to you with a command and plea. Levinas demands everyone to go beyond all thematizing and totalizing tendencies into the reality of one's humanity to find the real and ethical core of one's calling. Hence, concepts like election, responsibility and ethical primacy play a key and fundamental role in his philosophy rooted in the 'face of the other'.

Emmanuel Levinas, with his revolutionary 'Ethics of Responsibility to the other', has become one of the most profound, exacting and original philosophers of the twentieth century. His thought, with its ethical hyperbole and emphatic articulation of the singularity of otherness, has slowly, but importantly, widened its appeal, moving from phenomenology to deconstruction to religious studies, to now, any variety of radical (or even conservative) politics and theoretical engagements with alterity in postcolonial theory, Africa theory, philosophy of liberation and so on. An important question to be asked here would be: what does Levinas' thinking mean in the present context? In other words what are imperative overtones of Levinasian Ethics for our times?

Through his philosophy of the other Levinas has been influential in bringing back the ethical concern to the core of human relations. In our consumerist and egocentric society Levinas' philosophy has greater relevance. In this regard, Levinas' ethics constantly challenges our egocentrism and calls us to respond to the other in a most spiritual way. In other words, it calls the subject to respond to the other human being as being fully for the other. In this respect taken in its proper sense Levinas's philosophy encourages us to remodel and reshape our relationship with the other human beings in a responsible and peaceful way. Such an encounter acts as a true facilitating condition for any such encounter, which would ultimately guarantee a better

ethical co- existence. It also enables us to approach the other with compassion and love and mutual respect for one another. In this way, a proper understanding of Levinas philosophy can make us transformative thinkers to go beyond our own individualistic and consumerist tendencies towards the other human person. His philosophy can inspire and challenge us to transform our attitudes towards other religions, cultures and civilizations and to treat everyone justly as the only other. Thus, Levinas with his post phenomenological ethics can be called a transformational philosopher in its true sense who continues to challenge us to go out of ourselves to act justly towards fellow humans in an unconditional responsibility.

Conclusion

To a great extent, Levinas' philosophical commitment to the primacy of ethics is a response to intellectual and historical challenges to morality in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Looking at it from this perspective, we may tend to say that his thought is a contribution to moral philosophy, containing within it grounds of moral obligation and value, the nature of morality, its normative content, and so on. Keeping this view aside, it is more appropriate for us to take his philosophy as a great contribution to the understanding of human existence in the broadest sense. The Levinasian thought is a philosophy that is concerned with the existential situation of human beings. In fact, he is not the first one to make this claim, but the way in which he argues for this position is distinctive. He highlights the sociality of human beings, that we have direct, face-to-face relationships with others. As social beings, our relationships have an ethical character that is the most determinative feature of our existence with others in the world. Moreover, for him, ethics is neither a cognitive matter nor a theory, but it goes on in human interactions in the world (Morgan 236-238). Therefore, his ethical philosophy is very relevant for our times because it is in acknowledging and accepting the other as other and living with him/her/it together that we can build an authentic relationship and bring peace to our world.

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