Humanitarian Ethics in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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Abstract

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There have always been debates regarding the issues related to ethics. It is the central concern of philosophy to explore the ultimate source of knowledge and reality. But the question of right and wrong remains a mystery. The concept of ethics has been defined in various ways by the philosophers and social scientists. In alignment with the theme of ethics, this paper tries to explore the development of ethical philosophy in Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy which is an approach towards the humanitarian ethics at large. This paper also tries to explore the importance of the understanding of ethical relation which is the starting point of the human interaction and the sociality through Levinisian ethics. Levinas’ approaches the basic problem of ethics from our every day experiences and gradually he approaches the importance of the other person in our relationships. The central issue of the paper would be to find out a space for spirituality in Levinisian ethics.

Keywords: (Face-to-face, Responsibility, transcendence, spirituality).
From the very beginning, the subject matter of ethics clustered round some crucial issues like, ‘right and wrong’, ‘good and bad’, ‘justice’, ‘ought’, ‘duty’, ‘responsibility’ so on and so forth. But there is only one being for which ethics is an issue. It is popularly known as the human or more philosophically speaking; it is the ‘I’ or the subject. The modern insight, that every object supposes a subject, and that subjectivity is “a movement of developing itself…surpassing itself, reflecting itself,” is certainly true of Levinas. It suggests that both empirical as well as rational behaviors are based on the dimensions of epistemological projects concerning modes of knowing and one of the most important fact of ethics and the ethical norms is that, it must be without practical force in the real world for the reason that, the language of ought and should in action would not be required. We can only be obligated to do that which the regulatory, practical social forces in our lives do not already guarantee, or at least make likely, that we will do. To the extent that our responsibility must always be negotiated within the realm of pragmatic necessity, such that we are likely to project our own most interests into the ideal realm of duty and to intervene on behalf of others so as to defend principles that align with our interests.

The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas has had a definitive if late influence on continental ethics and on the ‘theological turn’ in current French philosophy. Other than being a creative, fresh and influential metaphysics of ethics, it is a positive philosophy born out of the horror of the World War II, where Levinas lost his family and served as a prisoner of war in Germany for
a long period of time. Establishment of the supremacy of ethics over ontology is the peculiarity in Levinas. One of the most significant aspects of this ethical project is the bringing of a new horizon for subjectivity. Unlike the traditional and modern approach to subjectivity, Levinas tries to give a new meaning and horizon for being a subject which rests on the obligation to and for the other with a base in the same tradition of philosophy. He himself holds in one of his interviews about his methodology as,

I know empiricism in its traditional form. But I've never studied analytic philosophy with its linguistic empiricism. My method is phenomenological; it consists in restoring that which is given, which bears a name, which is objective, to its background of intention, not only that intention which is directed towards the object, but to everything which calls it to concreteness, to the horizon. I've often said that it is research into the staging [mise en scène] of that which is the object; the object which, left to itself, is clarified, as much as it closes off the gaze - as if the giving was like an eyelid which lowers itself - is an object appears, and consequently as if the objective is always abstract. Concreteness is the ensemble of what is lived, if intentionality, which is not entirely heuristic; it includes the axiological and the affective. Consequently meaning is given in this concreteness, and there can be surprises here over the general role of thematization.¹

Levinas’s work and a growing body of literature from across the disciplines have treated Levinas’s ethics as the turning towards the religious philosophy. He is a strong critique of Western philosophy at large. He holds that, Western rationalist modality of ‘being’ and

‘thinking’ of which psychoanalysis is to some extent, a part. In the psychoanalytic context, such a modality is manifested for example, in the tendency to look at affects and thoughts, sexual desire and pleasure, religious convictions and spiritual yearnings, and anything private and personal about the self as part of the “economy of rationalism.” Levinas holds that, the aim of his work at its start in the fifties was to go beyond the domination of the totalitarian tradition which prevailed then in Western Europe.

Levinas intentionally attempted to capture the thread of the western thought which was held captive throughout the history of western philosophy right from the times of Plato and Aristotle. He himself in the later writings holds that,

My teaching remains, in the final account, quite classical; it repeats, as in Plato, that consciousness founds the Good but that the Good calls to consciousness. Levinas claims that, It is not that the self is just a being endowed with certain qualities called moral, which it would bear as attributes. It is the infinite passivity or passion or patience of the me—its self—the exceptional uniqueness to which it is reduced that is that incessant event of substitution, the fact for being of emptying itself of its being.²

Rationality in its application has been treated as the basis for all the domains of human knowledge throughout the ages. If we try to investigate the areas of our thought and understanding we would not able to find the areas or domain in which reason is absent. We have to admit the fact that science and scientific facts are also based on the solid foundation supported by reason which in the long run becomes an ideology for the same domain or area. This is

precisely for the reason that Levinas in his outline of the essay *Ideology and Idealism* holds that;
“Ideology usurps the appearances of science.”

If the relationship with the other involves more than relationships with mystery, it is because one has accosted the other in everyday life where the solitude and fundamental alterity of the other are already veiled by decency. One is for the other what the other is for oneself; there is no exceptional place for the subject. The other is known through sympathy, as another (my)self, as the alter ego. In his account of the ethical subject, the subject responding to the other is obligated to the other, and so, is not determined by the free choice of his/her actions. Rather, in this typical formulation of ethical subjectivity we cannot free ourselves from our obligation

III

There is no doubt that Levinas is the philosopher of ethics, and the sole moralist of contemporary trend of western philosophy. His ideas are challenging, for the attempt he had made in the field of ethical philosophy. For him social life is the common platform for the flourishing of the particularity of the ‘self’ or the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’. Let me at the same time clear the technical use of the terms ‘I’ and the ‘Other’ in Levinisian philosophical framework. For Levinas, ‘I’ is the ‘self’ or the ‘subject’ and for him this ‘I’ reveals that, ‘*a subject is a subject to itself*’ and has been conceived as the basis or unity among the diversities of the phenomena. However, this expression is more appropriately understood as a ‘colloquial umbrella term’ that includes a wide

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range of related concepts like ‘consciousness’ or ‘ego’ and very often it relates with some moral agent.

With the term ‘Other’, Levinas has something more to say. Anything which is ‘not I’ is the ‘other’. The concept of the Other (Autrui), in Levinas is not an ontological entity. It is not an entity to be known by the subject as the object of knowledge because my approach to the Other is always beyond my comprehension about the Other. It is always exterior to the field of my freedom, my power or my property. The Other - is thus like the suspension, of the eternal and irreversible return of the identical to itself and of the intangible nature of its logical and ontological privilege. According to Levinas, the absolutely Other, the transcendent, is a being that is other by itself, without its otherness depending on its being distinguished from the I, though nevertheless it is not identical with this I. As not depending on any distinction from the same, the difference between the ‘I’ and the absolutely Other is not a difference that follows after an antecedent sameness or commonality. The absolutely Other is a being that stands beyond every attribute, which would precisely have as its effect to qualify.

Levinas’s first and foremost claim is “Ethics is the first philosophy” by introducing some new concepts in philosophy which was never happened before him in the history of philosophical development. For Levinas, ethics is face to face encounter and the experience of the other is

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4 In the phenomenological ethical realm, the Other for Levinas is ‘human other’. He denotes three sense of the term Other in his philosophy. Autre: anything which is other; any exterior reality – table, chair, ‘other’. Autrui: human other with whom I have an ethical relation : ‘The Other’ Le tiers – all the others that make up society and the condition for politics and the law.
special dimensions of ethical responsibility. In Levinas, ethics is not about the experience of value or set of certain imperatives but a recognition of and exposition of the alterity. Defining ethics, Levinas writes,

A calling into question of the same - which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same 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 passions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics...... And as a critique precedes dogmatism, metaphysics precedes ontology.⁵

Levinas’s exposition of the alterity is differing from the moral psychology and it is attached to some fundamental ethical conditions of human subjectivity. It is the acceptance or the recognition that ‘the other is in no way another I, participating with me in a common existence. But throughout the history we have been thought to treat the other as an alter ego. What is suspended in Levinisian ‘same-other’ relation is its (other’s) ideal priority, which otherwise wipes out all otherness by murder or by all-encompassing and totalizing thought; war and politics which pass themselves off as the relation of the Same to the Other. It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty, that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification. ‘Ethics as first philosophy’ is a clear and powerful summary of Levinas's methodical and yet radical move away from Hussel's transcendental idealism and

Heidegger’s hermeneutics towards the ethical question of the meaning of being, presented in the face-to-face relation. Beginning with the phenomenological legacy which reveals knowledge as built on an intentionality in contact with concrete reality, Levinas quickly brings us to the point where we must recognize the closed and circular nature of this self-conscious awareness.

Intentionality reduces wisdom to a notion of increasing self-consciousness, in which anything that is non-identical is absorbed by the identical. In this way, self-consciousness affirms itself as absolute being. But for Levinas the non-intentional subsists in duration itself, which cannot be controlled by will. This non-intentionality is an unhappy consciousness that exists without aims. As a result of this kind of passive conscience, one affirms one's being by having to respond to one's right to be. This response means that responsibility for the Other exists before any self-consciousness, so that from the beginning of any face to face, the question of being involves the right to be. This is what Levinas means when he mentions the face of the Other: I do not grasp the other in order to dominate; I respond, instead, to the face's epiphany. He holds that, the face of the other is, “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face”.⁶ The face of the Other transcends the distinction between form and content and calls in question because it reveals the idea of infinity to the separated being. The revelation of the face of the Other is a hint that there is infinity which is always separated from the totalization of my thought about it. The face is the trace or the way by which the Otherness of the Other is introduced to the self. It also reveals that, it is the situation which the ‘I’ can never avoid. Either it is interested or not, the ‘I’ is bound to

⁶ TI, p. 50.
respond. This relation of the response is the foundation of the ethical relation and it demands the freedom of the self to responsibility. Levinas explains that the face of the Other speaks to the self and this is where the language originates. Language begins with the presence of the face, with expression. Language is a system of interaction whereby meaning is derived from the face of the Other.

As such, what is produced in a concrete form is the idea of infinity rather than totality. The relation (same-other) is metaphysical, and precedes any ontological plan. Prior to a state of mind in which one finds oneself, therefore, the infinite vigilance we display with regard to the other, suspending all notion of totality, is that which founds and justifies being as the very being of being.

Levinas, in order to establish the primacy of ethics, tried to focus on the point where ethics originates. In our commonsensical understanding of ethics, we know ethics originates from our basic level of living. It occurs always in relation to the other person. If there is only one person, then there will be no need of ethics. Ethics is an important issue for us because it relates one to the other. For him, the other is one who exists independently of me, always exterior to my thoughts and representations about it. The aim of his philosophical project is not to construct an ethics as a universal system, or set of principles guided and justified by reason; rather, his work opens the question of the ethical as the pertaining to its inherent meaning that is to give an ethics as ethics without ontology. Others presence is not the limitation of my freedom rather it is the awakening of my responsibility.

We are all responsible for everyone else - but I am more responsible than all the other.

One of the most frequently quoted lines from the ethical philosophy of Levinas. He
holds, I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face.  

IV

The exposition of the ethical signification of transcendence and of the Infinite beyond being can be worked out beginning with the proximity of the neighbor and my responsibility for the other. Until then a passive subjectivity might seem something constructed and abstract. He claims that, the history of philosophy not only confined philosophy under the single umbrella of universality thesis of reason, but also, destroyed the idea of ‘transcendence’ and ‘reason’. In Levinas words,

In thinking infinity the I from the first thinks more than it thinks. Infinity does not enter into the idea of infinity, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely, Other. The transcendence of infinity with respect to the ego is separated from it and thinks it constitute the first mark of its infinitude.

Meaning hereby by thinking of the idea of the infinite we cannot bring the infinite to our thought. Because in Levinas’ analysis, we can never get an access to the Infinite because it is the Other. For instance, ‘I’ have an idea of infinity which is a thought, that cannot contains more than that

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can be thought and attempt to think about that which cannot be thought is ‘violence’ or ‘murder’ according to Levinas.

The receptivity of finite knowledge is an assembling of a dispersed given in the simultaneity of presence, in immanence. The passivity 'more passive still than any passivity' consisted in undergoing - or more exactly in having already undergone, in a non-representable past which was never present - a trauma that could not be assumed; it consisted in being struck by the 'in' of infinity which devastates presence and awakens subjectivity to the proximity of the other. The non-contained, which breaks the container or the forms of consciousness, thus transcends the essence or the 'move' of knowable being which carries on its being in presence; it transcends the interestedness and simultaneity of a representable or historically re-constitutable temporality; it transcends immanence.

For Levinas, the effort of comprehension of the ‘Other’ and the ‘Other’s resistance’, which comes across as an ‘invocation’, ‘prayer’, ‘expression’ and ‘speech’ or language, already means that the ‘I’ has taken account of the Other and accepted the Other’s Otherness/ alterity. The implication of this relation to the ‘Otherness’ of the ‘Other, is the first attempt where Levinas’ philosophy intends to move towards a kind of transcendental philosophy. He holds that,
Speech delineates an original relation. It is a question of perceiving the function of language not as subordinate to the \textit{consciousness} that one has of the presence of the Other… but rather as the condition of any conscious grasp.\(^9\)

Language and the reason fail to provide us an understanding of this ‘alterity’. This relation between same and the Other exceeds any kind of language because to speak about the Other in terms of language is to comprehend (like the entities we deal) and understand the ‘Other’ as a being (entity). For the first time, Levinas calls this ‘original’ relation with the Other as ‘religion’, and remarks that since this original encounter and birth of sociality is not an exercise of power, he doesn’t want to call it ‘politics’. He calls it ‘religion’ not in the typical religious sense, but merely as ‘transcendence’ – a relation that goes beyond comprehension. It is from this insight that he would develop the notion of ‘infinity’. Instead of the political significance of sociality’s first moment, Levinas draws its ethical significance as,

If the word \textit{religion} should, however, announce that the relation with human beings, irreducible to comprehension, is itself thereby distanced from the exercise of power, whereas it rejoins the Infinite in human faces, then we accept the ethical resonance of that word and all of its Kantian echoes.\(^\text{10}\)

Here, ‘Kantian echoes’ would mean Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative of respect for human in all persons including one’s own self. Levinas’ implication of the word


\(^{10}\) \textit{BPW}, p. 8.
‘religion’ as ‘ethical relation’, gives a new meaning to the relation between ‘same’ and the ‘other’ which excludes totality.\textsuperscript{11} For him, ‘ethics leads to religion’ and ‘religion is transcendence’. So, Levinas holds that Heidegger’s project of liberating human beings from static categories is doomed to failure if it still essentializes and reifies comprehension. For Levinas,

In order to say what is human nature, it is not so much a matter of opposing one essence to another. It is above all a matter of finding a place where the human no longer……offer itself to our powers.\textsuperscript{12}

It is the situation where the desire for the infinite originates, in not taking the hold of the ‘I’ and giving a space for the Other to reveal its meaning. The Other’s being or essence is outside our power and comprehension; he/she is accessible to us only as a ‘face’. Even if I master and enslave the Other, I cannot possess him/her. Here, my project of comprehension fails and still when I locate the understanding of the face in the history, surroundings and habits, I violate his/her alterity. It is murder of the Other as Other, in the sense that I totalize him/her through the process of comprehension. I \textit{can} kill him/her like animals and trees. But then ‘I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face because face always exceeds reason. It is the question to the freedom of the ‘I’. Levinas holds,

\textsuperscript{11} TI, P. 40.

\textsuperscript{12} BPW, P. 8.
The temptation of total negation, measuring the infinity of this attempt and its impossibility – this is the presence of the face. To be in relation with other (autrui) face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse.\textsuperscript{13}

Ethical philosophy of Levinas profoundly based on the principle of responsibility which transcends the very idea of it. He holds, “We are all responsible for everyone else - but I am more responsible than all the other.” One of the most frequently quoted lines from the ethical philosophy of Levinas. The other's freedom can neither constitute a structure along with my freedom, nor enter into a synthesis with it. Responsibility for the neighbor is precisely what goes beyond the legal and obliges beyond contracts; it comes to me from what is prior to my freedom, from a non-present, an immemorial. It is Pre-reflective, non-intentional consciousness that would never be able to return to a moral realization of this passivity. The first approach to the relationship with infinite has been maintained through the relation of separateness or otherness in Levinas. He holds, the idea of infinity implies the separation of the same with regard to Other.\textsuperscript{14}

By ‘same’, Levinas means, subjective thoughts which includes the intentional acts of consciousness and objects of those thoughts. In other words, same is the encounter of the human person and encounter happens in sensibility. For Levinas, ethical situation begins from sensibility and real situation which leads to beyond understanding and being. Levinas instead of holding any mystical possession or religious experience brings forth the idea of God in an ethical way. For him, the infinitude of God is unthematizable for the reason that, it maintains

\textsuperscript{13} BPW, p. 9.

\textsuperscript{14} TI, p. 53.
separateness. Levinas at the same time claims that, this transcendence has an ethical content which can be maintained through the ethical relation. Apart from this ethical significance, transcendence has only the negative access.

The search for radical otherness requires living a radical experience which takes place in the face of the Other. So the self is separated from the Other; this is an enjoying and nourishing self – nourishing itself through possession of its objects. But on the other hand, separation represents the very nature of the Other and difference between the same and the Other in the gives us the glimpse of the infinity in the face of the Other. Hence, sensibility becomes an important phenomenon to understand the nature of the relation between same and the Other. We start from sensibility for the reason that, we live our life not from the functions of things as Heideggerian ready to hand things, *(Being and Time)* but by nourishment – they become part of us. Something that resists and questions this spontaneous enjoyment of the separated being is the Other (person); the face. Enjoyment separates me from what will nourish me; the Other; for instance, I can represent a bread but that will not feed me. The Other always ‘exceeds’ the idea and representation about it because it is not the object of enjoyment nor the category of understanding. The Other is simply the exterior who questions the freedom of the ‘I’ where the ‘I’ has no power over it.

V

For the whole philosophical tradition of the West (to some extent east), all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic exposition of being, knowing. In starting with sensibility interpreted not as a knowing but as proximity, in seeking in language contact and sensibility, behind the circulation of information it becomes, we have trained to describe subjectivity as
irreducible to consciousness and thematization. Proximity appears as the relationship with the other, who cannot be resolved into 'images' and 'ideas' or be exposed in a theme. It is the relationship with, which is not disproportionate in the thematization, and incomparable with it, that which does not derive its identity from the reason or the logos, and blocks all thematization.

As per human life is concern, it is not only to live but we want to live a meaningful life. We cannot imagine a world where there is no other. But of course, at the same time the language which we use as a mode of communication sometimes leads us towards ambiguities. It is perhaps due to the fact that nature itself is so complex and we being finite not able to discover its true nature. As phenomenological existentialism maintains, human beings are thrown into the world of possibilities which itself gives a meaning to life. Language as a discourse relates others to the self. As self-conscious beings, we more or less manage to deal with the situations around and behave accordingly. Human beings are by nature social, which continuously tries to know and develop our thinking and social situations according to the laws of the society. Culture or society is formed with having some goals and achieving those goals requires the development in every aspect of society i.e. the language, education, socio-economic development etc. Sophisticated language requires more and more rules. Some set of these rules developed by culture to achieve certain goal in society. But the natural rules are not changeable like the conventional or cultural rules. Language as the conventional institution used in the society to fulfill its own aims and objectives. In other words, development of language opens a new space to the development of philosophy and of human society at large. Levinas is also not an exception to the usefulness of language in the development of human society. For him, language is the very basis of the communication between the same and the other. It is through the language that the bond between
the same and the other is maintained. But at the same time he mentions that the language has an ethical implication. It is transcendence.

Levinas holds that there is always an ethical obligation in the calling of the other. Levinas derives the dimension of the height from this. This *height* or the *highness* according to Levinas is the characteristics of the Other. It represents the divinity of exteriority. Levinas writes,

(T)he relation between me and the other commences in the *inequality* of terms, transcendent to one another, where….the alterity of the Other does not result from its identity, but constitutes it: the other is the Other. The *Other qua Other* is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement - glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.15

He further approaches the relation between same and the other as,

The overflowing of exteriority, non adequate to vision which still measures it, precisely constitutes the dimension of *height* or the divinity of exteriority.16 The distance of this exteriority, immediately extends to *height*.17

Levinas also represents God through the analysis of the Other. For Levinas,

15 TI, p. 251. [Italics mine]

16 TI, p. 296-97. [italics mine]

17 TI, p. 297. [italics mine]
Ethics interrupts the desire for God and thereby maintains transcendence. Transcendence is not given in any positive sense, not even in the immediate appearance of a face, but refers to an ethical trace we attribute to “Il,” (He)….. Transcendence is never given.\(^\text{18}\)

The development of the idea of infinity in Levinas is first revealed first and foremost through the face to face relation where the shows himself only through trace. God he argues,

(I)s, not analogous with an idea subject to criteria or subject to the demand that it shows itself to be true or false….rational theology, fundamentally ontological, strives to take account of transcendence in the domain of being by expressing it with adverbs of height applied to the verb being; God is said to exist eminently or per excellence.\(^\text{19}\)

For Levinas, the infinite is always exterior to the intentional consciousness. Levinas here diverted from the Husserlian phenomenological analysis of the acts of consciousness. Levinas holds that, the ‘Otherness’ of the ‘Other’ is essence of the ethical relation. Ethics for him is transcendence. It is only through maintaining ethical relation the transcendence of the infinite can be revealed to us. \textit{Via-negativa} in Levinas lies in the use of the terms such as ‘Other’, ‘alterity’ or ‘otherness’, ‘trace’, ‘ethics as transcendence’, ‘responsibility’, ‘face’, ‘Illeity’, ‘non-thematization’, and ‘God as infinity’. He describes God, as that which exceeds the powers of our ‘cognition’ and ‘representation’ about it. God is inaccessible and un-comprehendible because he


\(^{19}\) BPW, p. 130.
is transcendence. Philosophy, in most of its manifestations, is unable to account for this type of alterity.

One of the important shifts in Levinas’ early and later writings is the shift from philosophical to the theological interpretations; though the central theme remains ethics. Levinas associates the word ‘God’ to the word ‘transcendence’ or ‘infinity’. Transcendence, however, should not be read as the ‘more than’ or other-worldly behind-there somewhere but as the ‘more than’ of relation. Relation is driven by what exceeds relation, which Levinas calls “metaphysical desire”20. Levinas holds that there is still something which is not confine to the ‘totalistic ideology’ of our thought and he introduces the concept of the Other as the foundation of Infinity. For him, there is a sure duality: the same and the Other, especially in Totality and Infinity. The duality of the same and the Other has been further developed by giving a theological twist to the relation. Levinas develops the idea of ‘God’ in the essay, “God and philosophy” (1975) which later appeared as a text OF God Who Comes to The Mind. It is in this text, Levinas holds,

(T)his transcendence has an ethical meaning. The argument is that, the structure of transcendence is exemplified not by religious experience but by the ethical meaning.21

Levinas further explains,

20 TI, p. 33.

21 BPW, p. 129. Robert Bernasconi, wrote the introductory section of the “God and Philosophy” in Basic Philosophical writings, originally written by Emmanuel Levinas which appeared later in the text God who comes to the mind, Collected Philosophical Papers and A Levinas Reader.
The direct comprehension of God is impossible… A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice… Ethics is the spiritual optics… There can be no “knowledge” of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God.\textsuperscript{22}

His aim in \emph{Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence} is also to show, the move from the negation of knowledge of transcendence leads to moral practice or ethics. Levinas is not inspired by the traditional application of the negative method as silence or negating the use of language, instead his use of the negative method is ethical. In his analysis, \textit{via-negativa} could be seen in various ways (as discussed earlier). First and foremost is the use of the term ‘face’ as the ‘trace’ of the ‘infinite’. Similarly the expression, ‘most high’ or ‘height’ is a significant ‘metaphor’ that Levinas uses to produce the separateness as the relation between the same and the Other. Another significant move that Levinas made can be highlighted in terms of language and discourse. For him, (N)on-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the Other.\textsuperscript{23}

For him, the glory of the infinity lies not in its question of existence rather it lies how to approach it in terms of ethics because the detachment of the infinite from the finite lies beyond experience and cannot thematize in language. It can be witnessed and glorified in giving oneself to the Other. For Levinas the face represents the trace of the infinite which can be a face of the

\textsuperscript{22} TI, p. 78.

neighbor. The alterity of the face to face can be maintained through the ‘ethical relation’, in understanding the pain and suffering of the Other person and it happens when the ‘I’ substitutes oneself for the Other. Thus, in Levinas, the ethical relation of responsibility appears in a radically different way; as ‘substitution’. In Levinas, the real meaning of being a responsible one, is to become ‘subjection to the Other’, for Levinas holds,

The self is a sub-jectum; it is under the weight of the universe ... The unity of the universe is not what my gaze embraces in its unity of apperception, but what is incumbent upon me from all sides, regards me...is my affair.\(^{24}\)

Levinas claims that, to be ethical has to be one degree of responsibility more than the Other can have for me. Substitution is the answer to the asymmetry one to the Other one always and already given the charge to rule over me. The attitude of vigilance towards the Other is not only a patient waiting of being exposed to the Other’s unknowability, but it signifies a stance of humility or an ideal of holiness in which the self becomes “an Other” or in more manageable terms, the humble self gives truth a voice. Such a voice might also be articulated (but not always) by way of silence. As a result, we might hear transcendece (deeper, non-intentional or passive communication) in the depths of the Other’s silence.

The ‘God’ as ‘Other’ for Levinas is as real as the ‘deep mystical experience’ for the mystics. It is through the face of the other that the revelation of the Other is possible. The glory of the infinite according to Levinas has been revealed through the faces of the ‘stranger’, ‘widow’, ‘orphan’ for

\(^{24}\) OTB, p. 116.
whom I am responsible. This ‘I’ or the subject is initially and originally rooted in this responsibility. He holds,

To be an I means then not to be able to escape responsibility, as though the whole edifice creation rested on my solders. But the responsibility that empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism, even the egoism of salvation, does not transform it into a moment of the universal order; it confirms the uniqueness of the I. The uniqueness of the I is the fact that no one can answer for me…. The I before the Other (*Autrui*) is infinitely responsible.\(^{25}\)

Levinas tries to give a new form of religion based on the idea of ethics, where the new framework of transcendence as human responsibility, which involves a common face to face relation and allows further exploration into the scope for language, communication and justice. Through all the illustrations of the ethical terms Levinas intends to show that the ethical relation always maintains an exteriority with the Other. This relation of exteriority was fully developed in the idea of the infinite which for him is always exterior to our imagination, representation and the knowledge about it. So also the Other, who is coming from the ‘height’ up and above my understanding about him and represents the trace of the infinite or God. So, ultimately the ethical relation leads to the idea of transcendence in Levinas. Through the ethical relation, of infinite responsibility, Levinas tries to give a glimpse of infinite. Because for him there is no way through which we can attain the truth of the infinite, the relation is established by maintaining a relationship of responsiveness towards the Other who may the face of my neighbor or any face

\(^{25}\) CPP, p. 55.
who is exterior to me. This constitutes a distinctive feature of Levinas’ writings on philosophy of
religion and theology.

VI

In conclusion, we can remind ourselves of our initial remark that the central concern of Levinas’
 writings is the egocentrism of western subjectivity, which provides the indubitable foundation to
the west’s intellectual culture. Levinas thinks that the historical tragedies of the twentieth
century, the wars, the holocaust and other mass murders, were not accidental aberrations but
something against which the calculative logic of the western civilization and its theoretical
culture did not insulate history. These failures were neither failures of persons nor unavoidable
exigencies but failures of thought. Against this background, Levinas establishes subjectivity as
the face-to-face encounter and the anterior exposure of the self to the other. Whenever egocentric
reason approaches persons and things, it inevitably reduces them to a moment of the ego and the
same, and the result is not only intellectual reduction of reality to ontological totalizations, but
also political reduction of persons and communities into totalized labels without a face.
Levinas’s thought is an alternative to the ontology of the same, and thus an alternative of peace
and not war.

Levinas nevertheless causes us to question the common perception of postmodern thought as
irreligious and immoral, unconcerned about God and about the neighbor. Levinas’ insistence on
the importance of ethical considerations goes back to a date well before such concerns were
fashionable; and he was delivering Talmudic lectures to Jewish audiences at a time when it was
an academic heresy to speak about religion. The time thus seems right to turn in this thought,
subjectivity as the sure foundation of intellectual life is not abandoned, and to that extent the Cartesian project is still intact. But Levinas attempts a major revision by replacing Descartes’ epistemological cogito with the ethical subjectivity of response-ability towards the other. In this attempt, just as Descartes draws what is exterior to the self from the certainty of the foundation of the self, Levinas draws reason and law, universality and institutions, politics and ethics, sciences and the arts, meaning and discourse, language and speech itself from the primordial human ethical orientation. In this, Levinas maintains his ultimate pluralism and the sanctity of the other person.

Levinas’ aim throughout his writings was to find the meaning of ethics rather than construction of it as an integrated system. Theoretically, we can construct ethics as set of rules and principles, but his intention was to make it a practical affair. For him, ethics originates from our sociality and its applicability and its sustainability lies in the sense of responsiveness and communicability. His views on religion and discourse arise from the sociality we maintain with the Other people around us. He writes,

Religion is the excellence proper to sociality with the Absolute, or, if you will, in the positive sense of the expression, Peace with the other…The relation to God is already ethics…the proximity to God, devotion itself, is devotion to the other man.²⁶

This Ethics according to Levinas is the Other than Being; it is Otherwise than Being and Beyond Essence. In my understanding of Levinas wirings, he tried to give a pluralistic viewpoint. In his

ethical philosophy, he intended to focus on interpersonal relation between same and the Other and at the same time tried to show how sociality is possible within the system by maintaining the relation of responsibility. This ‘He-ness’ or ‘He’ is the Other who never shows itself in the midst of the things which can be showed off. In a way Levinas wanted to show the significance of the ‘karma-marga’, in his analysis of ‘ethics as responsibility’.

Through his philosophical or religious writings Levinas never claimed himself to be a consistent theologian nor an ethicist, because his writings deal mostly with deconstruction of the history of philosophy. Throughout the paper my focus was to show why his entire philosophy leads towards a humanitarian ethics in the first place and secondly, I have tried to show Levinisian ethics as a type of spiritualism. Without ever mentioning his philosophy as spiritualism, Levinas’ treatment of several and religious themes clearly places him within the spiritualistic theme. His excessive use of rhapsodic and mystical language is itself a proof of his interest towards spirituality.
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