

E. Levinas' Ethics of Responsibility-for-the-other and its Implications for Ecological Thinking

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to extend the ethics of Levinas to human ecological thinking. During the first part of the paper, Levinas' ethical subject is given a thorough examination; the subject, as conceived by Levinas, is not the egocentric subject in traditional philosophy, rather an ethical subject based on "the other". The second part delves into Levinas' "responsibility for the other". Levinas asserts that the unintergratable alterity, infinity, and transcendence of the other gives us a unescapable and infinite responsibility for the other. The responsibility for the other will appear when we encounter face to face with the other. The third part interprets how Levinas' ethical thinking enlightens our ecological thinking. When facing nature, all things in the Universe are endowed with infinity and transcendence, while they also summon our infinite responsibility to protect nature.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, subjectivity, responsibility for the other, ecological thinking

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) has been acclaimed as “one of the most significant ethical thinkers of the twentieth century” (Kearney & Rainwater, 1996, p. 122; Hardy, 2002, p.459), as “the greatest moral philosopher of this century” (Bauman, 1992, p. 41). Furthermore, attention to Levinas’ thought has not been confined to the philosophy arena. Levinas’ thought has attracted our attention and Levinas’ influence is beginning to be felt in our environment and nature. Within recent years, a number of attempts have been made to read the works of Levinas through an “environment” lens (Llewelyn, 1991; Hardy, 2002; Adams, 2007; Llewelyn, 2010; Diehm, 2012; Casey, 2012).

This paper addressed my desire to find the implications for ecological thinking through the postphenomenological thought of Levinas. Its intent was to describe Levinas’ event of the pre-cognitive face-to-face encounter with the radical alterity of the other as ethical, an appeal that commands a responsible response to the otherness of the other. According to Levinas, we can find the notion of the face, even though it may be a privileged location for encountering the other, is not limited to the face. Humans, the earth, animals, plants: all life is the face, as there is a frailty, vulnerability there which commands us all with the sheer otherness of the non-human world. We can say that Levinas’ ethics of responsibility for the other served as a bridge linking phenomenology and environmental ethics.

Rethinking subjectivity

After working for more than 20 years on Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, a critical turn in Levinas’ own thought came in 1951 with the publication of his essay, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in which he critiques Heidegger and ultimately rejects the traditional Western appeal to ontology as first philosophy. Levinas’ argument rests primarily on the charge that Western ontology in general, and Heidegger’s ontology in particular, is ultimately and inescapably egoistic in its conception of the subject as a being whose main concern is its own being. Levinas counters with an argument for ethics as first philosophy and with a concomitant reconceptualization of subjectivity as “pre-ontological” intersubjectivity — a position that grounds all of his later work (Chinnery, 2000, p.67-68).

Levinas acknowledges that Western philosophical thought has been dominated by the reduction of subjectivity to consciousness, a critique rendered against the Enlightenment model of autonomy (egocentric subjectivity) that is reductive of the other (Levinas 1974/1981, p.103). Ethics redefines subjectivity from autonomous freedom (self-preservation preserved when subjects are free, equal and relate reciprocally) to a responsibility for the other (when I substitute myself for the other). For Levinas, the ego in consciousness reflecting on itself “escapes its own critical eye” and thus is always limited (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.92, p.102). Levinas rejects “the idea of a subject who would be a substantial or mastering center of meaning, an idealist, self-sufficient *cogito*”; and, in contrast to the Western emphasis on presence and sovereign autonomy, he offers a conception of subjectivity wherein agency is seen as a radical kind of passivity (cite in Chinnery, 2000, p.68).

For Levinas, consciousness, knowing oneself by oneself, is not all there is to the notion of subjectivity. Consciousness does not exhaust the notion of subjectivity even though they have long been treated as equivalent concepts (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.102; Levinas, 1996, p.82-83). “The oneself has not issued from its own initiative” as it is responsibility, a relationship with the other, with alterity itself that is constitutive of subjectivity (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.105; Lingis, 1981, p.xiii).

Responsibility to the other constitutes a true subject as “It is as responsible that one is incarnated” (Levinas, 1974/1981; Lingis, 1981, p.xiii). Subjectivity is responsibility for-the-other, not a feature or an attribute of subjectivity. Levinas provides a description of the context in which the stakes of ethics are established, a context crucially defined not only by the presence of the other but by “finding oneself addressed” and “appealed to”¹ (Levinas, 1974/1981, p. xxii).

Levinas’ departure resides in the claim that ethics begins not with the claim of myself as an autonomous being, but with a sense of myself and an obligation as in relation to an Other, a being who is not myself (the “same”) and who sets limits, and puts into critical question my capacity for free action (Matthews, 1996, p.160)². In the words of Levinas,

A calling into question of the Same — which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same — is brought about by the other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics. The strangeness of the other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, of the other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. (Levinas, 1961/1991, p.43).

For Levinas, to be a self or a subject is to be subjected to this ethical summons of the other, to be called to respond with our unique singularity to the unique singularity of the other. From this perspective, subjectivity is this responsive and responsible interrelating (Adams, 2007, p.34).

I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility (Levinas, 1985, p. 95).

For Levinas, subjectivity is “the restlessness of the same disturbed by the other” or, it can be seen as alterity escaping the cognitive powers of the knowing subject (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.25). Therefore, the ethical is a location of alterity or “exteriority” that defies and cannot be reduced to the same. Indeed, Levinas posits that our subjectivity is nothing other than this pre-ontological relation to alterity: “my ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness...” (Levinas and Kearney, 1986, p.24).

The subject is possible only with its recognition and response to the other, a

¹ The relationship with alterity is finding oneself under a bond, commanded, contested, having to answer to another for what one does and for what one is. It is also finding oneself addressed, appealed to, having to answer for the wants of another and supply for his distress. Alterity is not only remote like a height and a majesty that commands, but also like a nakedness and a destitution that calls for solicitude (Levinas, 1974/1981, p.xxii, Lingis, 1981, p.xxii).

² Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other (Levinas, 1961/1991, p.42).

recognition that carries responsibility, a response toward what is irreducibly other (as independent from me). For Levinas, the subject arises in response to the other's call, it is my experience of a demand that I cannot avoid. In fact, it is impossible not to hear the other's call.

Responsibility for the other

For Levinas, ethics arise first and foremost out of our fundamental responsibility for the other. The central task of Levinas' work, in his words, is the attempt to describe a relation with the other person that cannot be reduced to comprehension. Ethics is not a matter of knowledge; no amount of knowledge of the other will help one to become ethical in relation to the other (Casey, 2012, p.189).

For Levinas, the relationship with the other is irreducible to comprehension, knowledge or thematization, precisely because it is a relationship with the other, he finds this in what he famously calls the "face-to-face" relation (Critchley, 2002, p.8). For Levinas, the other is best understood as the face. The use of the term "face" acquires a special meaning in Levinas' philosophy and clarifies his concerns about responsibility, relationship, and alterity.

According to Levinas, both self and other are absolutely unique, singular, and irreplaceable. Writing of this radical other, Levinas begins to convey what he means by the face: "The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face... The face of the other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure..." (1961/1991, p.50-51). Who the other is, and what his or her expression means, is infinitely beyond any conceptual representation or knowledge that can be constituted by my ego. In conversing face-to-face, the other necessarily transcends my egoic presumptions, resists being incorporated into my same old way of being and thinking (Adams, 2007, p.33). In order to preserve the other as other, it must not become an object of knowledge or experience, because knowledge and experience are always *my* knowledge and experience; encountering the other in these ways diminishes its alterity (Davis, 1996, p.41).

By expressing this radical alterity the other confronts me with meaning beyond my autonomous capacity to construct it, calls me to become open in conversation with a mystery beyond myself, and thereby offers me a (potential) teaching (Adams, 2007, p.33). In the words of Levinas,

The relation with the other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching... Teaching is not reducible to maieutics [drawing out something I already know, as Plato would have it]; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. (Levinas, 1961/1991, p. 51)

Levinas teaches that it is my unique responsibility to welcome this ultimately incomprehensible yet ultimately significant other: "My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me" (Levinas, 1985, p.100; Adams, 2007, p.34). Levinas famously quotes *The Brothers Karamazov*: "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (Levinas, 1982/1985, p.98; Standish, 2001, p.342). Before the other I am individuated in my obligation—this is not something I can pass up or pass on—and before the other my obligation is absolute (Standish, 2001, p.342).

Moreover, Levinas explains, "in its expression, in its mortality, the face before

me summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the other, pure otherness, separated, in some way, from any whole, were my business” (Levinas, 1984, p.83). Levinas clearly makes much of proximity as a condition for my ethical responsibility to the other with whom I am face-to-face. Therefore, We incur an unpayable debt to the other, which is etched in the structure of alterity, and through which we are granted our very right to be. It is “a responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself” (Levinas, 1989, p.83).

Once we have adopted the concept of Levinas, we should be nurtured with the face of “infinity” and “transcendence” in the domain of ethics and even the domain of human beings. Could it be possible to apply the notion of face and other to animals other than human beings? Levinas has not mentioned anything for his concern of the nature, but he did show his concern about the ethical responsibilities of animals. As he says, “One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal. It is via the face that one understands, for example, a dog... The phenomenon of the face is not in its purest form in the dog ... But it also has a face” (Levinas, in Bernasconi & Wood, 1988, p. 169).

If the concept of face can be applicable to animals, it should be applicable to the world of nature. According to biologist John Llewelyn, the face stands for any member of the “fourfold” world. It is not a sheer matter of the “face-to-face” relation of human beings (Llewelyn, 1991, p.256). The face could be a kitten, a puppy, a flower on roadside, or a piece of rock deep in the mountain. Scholar Will Adams furthered the philosophy of Levinas through applying his notion ecology. First of all, Adams suggested some common examples of interrelating with nature, lived experiences that are consonant with Levinas’ approach. Vividly recall our experience of a glorious sunset, an awesome thunder-and-lightening storm (and perhaps destructive floods that followed), a mountain-top vista, a rattle-snake’s rattling, a deer bounding gracefully, the sweet song of a thrush, or some similar encounter (Adams, 2007, p. 38).

We inadvertently, under certain circumstances, take everything in the world of nature as “others”. In addition, the analysis of Adams(2007) appears to show that the phenomenology of Levinas on “others” is feasible in the world of nature. Then how should we get started? Levinas has given us the best answer: “thou shalt not kill” (Levinas, 1982/1985, p.87). The prohibition and its ontological reversal is described by Levinas as follows:

Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity. The prohibition against killing does not render murder impossible, even if the authority of the prohibition is maintained in the bad conscience about the accomplished evil (Levinas, 1982/1985, p.87).

The face, even though it may be a privileged location for encountering the other, is not limited to the face. Because it is not the individual of a genus who approaches, saying can, for Levinas, break through the limits of language and culture (Horowitz, 2000, p.305). Levinas’ writings provide a way in which the unbridgeable gap between human beings and other animals can act as the very source of ethical relevance.

Moreover, Levinas has said, “The human face is the face of the world itself” (Levinas 1996, p.73). Humans, the earth, animals, plants: all life is the face, as there is

a frailty, vulnerability there which commands us all with the sheer otherness of the non-human world. It is the radical alterity and absence of reciprocity of the nonhuman that make an even stronger case for Levinasian ethics in regard to the non-human world.

Even though we cannot take good care of nature and the earth, we can at least cause no damage and pollute the environment as we do now. Further, we should accept and respect the idea of the other, which is congruent with the notion of diversity in the environmental education and perpetual development education. The phenomenology of Levinas paved the best of the way for ecological phenomenology, which also served as a bridge linking phenomenology and environmental ethics.

The notion of ethics spelled out by Levinas reminds us that highlighting the existence of the other is not only the process for accomplishing the existence of self. More importantly, it is “face” that summons the ethics of human beings to the extent that conversion back to the ecological lifeworld is the responsibility of human beings. At the same time, the concept of “other” also constructs a vital part of the ecological lifeworld so that we can escape from the isolated self and approach the ecological lifeworld.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that Levinas’ ethical philosophy is grounded in a responsibility for the other, Levinas admits that the ethical extends beyond beings to other life forms (Atterton, 2012, p.39). It would seem, therefore, that Levinas’ ethics of responsibility for the other served as a bridge linking phenomenology and environmental ethics, we believe that his provocative work has much to offer environmental thought today.

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