

Levinas on the Ethics of the Other

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The traditional mainstream of political philosophy establishes its thoughts on the subjectivity of “I”, which also formats its ethics of justice and freedom on the ground of selfness for itself and by itself. Political philosophers also incline to generalize and neutralize in labelling persons into the abstract concepts which ignore their particularity and diversity; as a result, this led to devastating consequence politically for the other, and also jeopardized the “I”. Hence Emmanuel Levinas provides his solution to this dilemma in an attempt to put the ethics of justice on the ground of the other. Justice for the other is the starting point for the political ethics. The other is the absolute infinity which cannot be encompassed by any conceptual generalization. It is otherness of the other that actually constitutes the selfness of “I”. The freedom of the other guarantees the freedom of “I”. Human being is initially ethical being. Justice for the other is the real foundation in securing justice for “I”. This mutual horizon of the other and I has primitive implication for the genuine ethics.

Keywords: the other, I, justice, freedom, ethics

Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas is an influential French political philosopher. His ethical theory of the other is a very important teaching for promoting today’s world peace. In this paper, I will explicate his ethical thoughts of the other in the four parts: the other and desire, the other and the “I”, the other and ethics, and the other and justice. Then the ethical implication of Levinas’ “the other” will arise, and witness its own significance.

The Other and Desire

At first, Levinas makes a distinction between desire and need. What scholars usually regard as desire or appetite in the Plato’s philosophy, Levinas argues, is merely a need. Such kind of need originates from human inner element, the impulse or appetite. It is described in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (1998), where a charioteer governs two horses: The black horse symbols the impulse, but the white horse represents the restraint; what would happen depends on how the charioteer leads these two horses by its faculty of reason. No matter appetite or reason, they all come from interiority of the agent. That is the fundamental cause for their functions. Such kind of trend in thought prevails over the whole traditional western philosophy. The typical word is “I”, “Self”, etc. A need’s satisfaction means my fulfillment in an empty state. Self-satisfaction, and even self-sufficiency, such kind of

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words mainly appear in the traditional thought. All of these thinking patterns are dominated by the sole reason, the lonely “I”. They completely ignore the exteriority of themselves, that is, the exteriority of “I”, which is caused by that they misunderstand two terms: need and desire. Levinas points out that desire is not something from inner self, but from outside. The desire is aroused by the desirable, the absolutely other. No one can completely reach the other; it is the most height, the indefinite. Its height can impress us stunningly, which brings into light the lowest and the shortest “I”. Such kind of desire will never be satisfied, because the other is infinite. Therefore, the desire desires for the desirable endlessly, since the desired incessantly presents and expresses itself. Levinas points out that it is a metaphysical desire; “The metaphysical desire tends toward something else entirely, toward the absolutely other” (Levinas, 1969, p. 33). That absolute other entails these factors: remoteness and separation. Therefore, a distance eternally interposes between I and the other, which would not be traversed. That distance ensures freedom of the other, the strangers. They are separated from “I”, and unfamiliar with the “I”. The other has its distance and space, which let their presence become possible. The other’s indefinite presences and unlimited expressions speak their individuality to “I”, and also arouse the desire which pulls “I” to desire the other. Therefore, the other is the background for the desire of “I”, the same. The other presents itself, speaks itself, and expresses itself. The other does not need any representative to represent itself. The other can express their rights, their affections, and their peculiarities. That is, the other is autonomous, impenetrable, and cannot be encompassed by any other, any “I”. The other stands by itself, by its face and its imminent expression. The other is the center, not “I”. The other is the foreground for social community. The other is the earth of the blood. Without the other, “I” is emptied, and only holds up its self-sufficiency in vast abstract concepts. The other is the nutrition of any concept; however, once the concept can self-systemize and self-propagate, then it tries to kill the other and its individuality by their generality and their power in universal states and enormous institutions. Fortunately, there is a distance and a separation between the other and I, not to say a distance between the concept and the object. Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations* (1977) attempts to employ the concept to completely encompass the object with his term “transcendence”, which means consciousness of ownness can supplement what it cannot sense in a targeted object. Such kind of attempt in fact admits that the object, the other, cannot be completely encompassed or grasped, although Husserl himself does not realize it. There is a gap between the concept and the object. In another word, the other cannot be traversed or crossed. The other maintains its independence and its individuality. Thereafter Levinas further analyzes traditional thoughts on “I”, the same.

The Other and the “I”

Levinas points out that metaphysics as transcendence indicates the other cannot be transcended. The alterity or exteriority of the other stays there. That is, the other is other within its otherness which cannot be reduced as identical I. Otherness like ownness of “I” is a prior thing, which guarantees the other’s detachment. Therefore, the other cannot be totalized. The other stands by, and resists any attempt of unification or identification. Traditionally, identical I is the center. In Kant, self-unity of I is the basis of apperception in synthetic a priori in concepts. The “I” tries to reduce any object or exterior thing to its content; that is, to unify any object and absorb them, and at last, to possess them. Not only in thought, but also in reality, the “I” tries to possess them. Descartes in his *Meditations* (1993) merely admits there is an existence of “a thinking thing”, the mental I. But he never reflected or doubted without the other, how is the thinking possible in a solitary “I”. Levinas points out that it is not the “I”, but the other’s presence, face-to-face, that expresses itself to the “I”, which actually makes thinking possible. The other continues to appear and present to the “I”. The other is a master, and is a teacher. The “I”

should face to the other, and listen to the other, and also learn from the other. By this way, the recognition of the “I” becomes possible. That is to say, it is not the solitary “I”, its self-thinking or self-consciousness, which makes the “I” possible; but the other’s endless apparitions let the “I” think itself, understand itself, and conceptualize itself. The universality of the “I” is due to many individual existences of the other. The words “I am I”, are in fact “I am the other”. “The true life is absent” is because this fact of the other is ignored. As a result, it is “absent” in philosophical thinking and its theory, but humans struggle to live the true life daily. However, the other is the basic truth. Levinas points out that

The metaphysical other is other with an alterity that is not formal, is not the simple reverse of identity, and is not formed out of resistance to the same, but is prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same. (Levinas, 1969, p. 39)

Therefore, not only the central “I” should abdicate its throne to “the other” in epistemology, but also in ethics. Levinas states that

The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire—where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and “against all good sense”, the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other, or justice. (1969, p. 47)

Therefore, “the other” should enter into the center of the ethics, whose method should no longer be monologue, but conversation and face-to-face.

The Other and Neutralization

The element of reason penetrates the whole western philosophy, which is regarded as sovereign by itself. Levinas points out that it is such reason that is the source of suppression because the basic feature of reason is neutralization, conceptualization, or thematization. It asks the object to surrender to the subject. It demands the other to subject to the concept. But the universal concept never treats individual other as a particular individual, but a general one, a neutralized one. Individuals surrender to violence of neutral concepts. If labeled as an enemy, the individual will be demanded to be killed by another anonymous person; but there is no any consideration of him or her as a children’s father or mother, or a husband or a wife, or an elder parents’ son or daughter, etc. All such individual characters are gone under the universal concept: an enemy. No one goes to ask whose enemy he is, because every concept has been enrooted in the mind of citizens deeply; all of these political ideologies like state or nation have modified individual’s minds. Levinas points out that any one of the other, once he or she unfortunately is labeled as negative by a political ideology, then their life in fact has been killed, not only spiritually, but also in reality. This is the violence of neutralization, or conceptualization. This is self-arrogance of sovereign reason. Levinas points out that “The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism. Philosophy is an egology”. Then “As for man, it can be obtained by the terror that brings a free man under the domination of another” (1969, p. 44). This is the consequence of self-crazy reason. Reason brags about its sovereignty and its self-sufficiency, which actually led to Nietzsche’s lonely death in psyche craziness, and that is enough to reject Aristotle’s claim of self-sufficiency of reason: Theoretical life is the highest happiness. So-called sovereign reason further demands all others of various individuals, to surrender to the products of conceptualization: state or nation. In order to enforce or enrich the state, all citizens should sacrifice their living, or even their lives. Living individuals are governed by abstraction, or neutralization. Under such neutralization, freedom is no longer the other’s freedom, but prison. Levinas points out that freedom becomes freedom of neutralization, labelization, and finally becomes freedom

of the state or the nation; as a result, the other becomes slaves, and they are suppressed and possessed by the state or nation. Every war is against the other, the living humans, aroused by reason's neutralization. Reason's self-arrogance destines to state's tyranny over every human being. Levinas points out that "Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny" (1969, p. 47). Then, Levinas further says that consequently neutralization's freedom, essentially, freedom of tyranny of any form, quenches over obligation, at last, over justice.

Justice is not like Plato's justice as a task of reason over irrationality, and also is not like Aristotle's distribution of goods by reason's calculation, but a justice as "consideration of the other", by language, or more clearly, by face-to-face conversation. The reason is that the other as other is authority by itself, and will be never generalized or neutralized or conceptualized; the other will show itself by its presence and expression. Therefore, ethics should no longer be an ethics of self-demand in universal law like Kant, but treat the other as other, and take care of the other. Listen to the other, learn their teaching, and converse with the other.

The Other and Justice

Justice is a gesture to welcome the other, and is an attitude to consider the other, the other's face and teaching. In a word, justice is "for the other", not "for itself". Levinas elaborates his thinking of justice for the other firstly from the popular slogan "freedom". Modern people love freedom because it can be used to defend their positions. "This is my freedom", that's all, which is supreme without possibility of traversing it. "My" freedom is "for myself"; and finally, the highest ideology is "freedom is for freedom" itself. However, Levinas criticizes such idea that freedom is only judged by freedom itself and points out this kind of dogmas continuously prevails in "European thought" (1969, p. 83). He states that "Freedom is called in question only inasmuch as it somehow finds itself imposed upon itself"; therefore, "if I could have freely chosen my own existence everything would be justified" (1969, p. 83). Unfortunately, no one has such freedom to choose their existence. Heidegger regarded human being as "being thrown into this world", which adequately tells people that "freedom" cannot stand upon its own ground. Such ground in fact is built up not from "freedom" itself but from the other. However, the other is completely ignored and lost in people's domesticated, so-called civilized mind through modern liberal education—modern enlightenment, which in fact devastates people's primordial mind. Although political philosopher Leo Strauss (1978) calls for a return to classical education, such effort is still in vain. Why? Levinas sharply unveils what obstructs western thought—"for itself". That obstacle which confines modern people into their own solitary loneliness, their depression, and nihilism, is in fact originated from the root of western philosophy. Plato in his *Republic* (1991) claims that wisdom is good, and good in its own right, by itself and for itself. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2002) states that everything pursues what good for itself, and in his whole book tells people how to attain good for themselves. Although he knows such solid truth that human beings are social animals, and hence they need the other: parents, children, friends, and so on, he in fact does not grasp the indispensable and crucial importance of this simple truth. He ignores the other, though he claims human being needs community to survive and obtain happiness. The other is completely lost in people's only concern with their own affairs.

Levinas is like a medical doctor who grasps the disease and tries to cure it, and he points out that such tradition walks into the wrong direction, and offers his right prescription: the starting point is not for good itself, or for one's own self, but for the other: Human being at the beginning desires the other, such infinity and perfect

existence. Therefore, justice starts once human being welcomes the other and considers them. Human beings should not act like Aristotle's fixation on first principles only out of concern for themselves, nor like Kant's universal law for law itself (Kant, 1999), but should really bend down and interact with the other, with their languages. This is the genuine ethics. Levinas states that the primitive relation between human beings is moral bound, but not cognitive relation; "the Desire for exteriority has appeared to us to move not in objective cognition but in Discourse, which in turn has presented itself as justice, in the uprightness of the welcome made to the face" (1969, p. 82). Levinas further points out that Descartes infinite doubt only falls into unlimited abyss, or circularly self-confirmation: I think, and therefore I think, which in fact does not transmit any useful knowledge. However, such embarrassment can be relieved by the other. The other can affirm the "I"'s thinking and "I"'s existence. Levinas says, "It is not I, it is the other that can say yes. From him comes affirmation; he is at the commencement of experience" (1969, p. 93).

Accordingly, morality precedes truth and ethical inquiry antecedes epistemological acquisition, just as Levinas states such that "truth presupposes justice" (1969, p. 90). Therefore, "The other is metaphysical" (1969, p. 87). Plato's "Form" is not metaphysics, Aristotle's "substance" is not metaphysics, and Kant's "Law" is not metaphysics, but "the Other" is the true metaphysics. Human being should establish freedom not from themselves, but from the other. The true freedom resides in domain of the other. The other is the true refuge for "I"'s freedom, like Levinas points out that the other guarantees the "I"'s freedom: "The presence of the Other, a privileged heteronomy, does not clash with freedom but invests it" (1969, p. 88). Welcoming of the Other is the start to be free, to embrace freedom. Killing the other is to thwart and eradicate the "I"'s freedom, the "I"'s life. No one has such power, like Levinas points out that "The Other, whose exceptional presence is inscribed in the ethical impossibility of killing him in which I stand, marks the end of powers" (1969, p. 87).

Unfortunately, people do not know or want to face this truth as Levinas does. They struggle for powerful knowledge, but in the wrong direction. Finally, human society is armed with higher and higher technology which results in the speed of killing the other as extremely fast as a lightening, because people are educated into believe powerful technology is a guarantee to security for themselves. They are taught that the other is not the "I", but is a rival to the "I", even an enemy of the "I" like Hobbes exaggerated radically. Such oriented people believe that it would be complete freedom and peace if there do not exist the other, but only the unique "I". Such Hobbes' pattern of "I" does not want to live with the other on the earth. However, before such "I" was born, there were already the other; and after such "I" passed away, the other still continues to exist on the earth. Therefore, no complete safety exists for such kind of "I"; Hobbes's "I" would live in unrest completely. By the contrary, Levinas points out that human being should attain their freedom and safety in their welcoming of the other. The logic of "for itself" should abdicate its crown to "for the other", which is the ground of genuine ethics.

Different from antecedent philosophers' regarding ethics or justice as "for oneself", Levinas points out that the starting point is the other, not the "I", and he says that "Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent" (1969, p. 84). Therefore, "The knowing whose essence is critique cannot be reduced to objective cognition; it leads to the Other". Levinas further points out that "To posit knowing as the very existing of the creature... is to separate oneself from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self in the self", and he continues to assert that "Existence for itself is not the ultimate meaning of knowing, but rather the putting back into question of the self, the turning back to what is prior to oneself, in the presence of the Other"; therefore, "The essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and in inviting him to justice" (1969, p. 88). That is, the

reason is not sovereign faculty to know its own law or principles for its own purpose, but to direct itself into the other, to discourse with the other. The other as other is independent of us, an absolute existent, and is the infinite and perfect. The other is a heteronymous existence, and a privileged existence precedent to the "I"'s existence. Therefore, Levinas points out that "Metaphysics therefore does not consist in bending over the 'for itself' of the I to seek in it the solid ground for an absolute approach to being. It is not in the 'know thyself'" (1969, p. 88), but to welcome the other, to communicate with the other through language, but not by abstract conceptualization. The other is the master which teaches the "I" by speech. Through teaching and listening, the "I" approaches the other and considers the other. The principle is no longer abstract concept, but concrete expression. The tool is language. Absolute quietness means no existence. In the discourse of language, people approach justice by interacting with the other.

Conclusion

Levinas's ethical theory of the other opens a new way to understand what is a genuine ethics of justice. It is not one's own selfness or sovereign reason, but the other is the real foundation for the ethics. Therefore, the real ethics no longer suppresses the other into one's own subjectivity or neutralizes into abstract concepts, but regards the other as their own otherness and impenetrable individuality of living persons. Ethics is no longer a conceptual transcendence in metaphysical ontology, but face-to-face interactions with the other in various concrete contexts by languages or speeches.

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