

Humanism in the Levinas's Ethics of Responsibility

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Abstract

This essay argues that Levinas's responsibility defends and promotes humanism of the Other by prioritizing the Other. He passionately and enthusiastically develops and justifies this claim in his corpus. His claim that ethics is first philosophy is important for understanding his responsibility construct. By this construct, he is searching for a possibility for upholding humanism. Still more important, his formulation of ethics is a novelty because he does not begin by creating theories as in the deontology and consequentialism. Levinas's ethics can be described as phenomenological because ethics begins with the face-to-face encounter between two persons: The Subject/I and the Other. The visage that appears is a metaphor for the total expression of the circumstances of the "Other" who is himself different from the Subject/I. Levinas is so obsessed with the aphorism: "the face of the Other is a face in need." For him, therefore, satisfying the needs of the Other is only by bearing responsibility. Levinas's responsibility motivates, promotes and defends humanism. Welfare of the human Otherness is the meeting point of responsibility whether religiously or ethically conceived.

Key words: Humanism, Responsibility, Other, Wellbeing, Ethics, Values

1. Introduction

The transition from responsibility to Humanism in Levinas's ethics is provoking and inspiring. Humanism, a noun, is derived from the adjective human. Human, *humanus* in Latin is connected to the word humanist, rendered in French as *humaniste*, and *umanista* in Italian as coined by an Italian poet, Lodovico Ariosto (1474-1533). (Humanist Online Etymological Dictionary). Humanism is a view that expresses and explains concern for human welfare.

Selfless actions aimed at ameliorating the suffering and improving the welfare and the human dignity can be described as humanitarian. Accordingly, humanitarianism is the notion that all human beings have dignity and deserves to be respected. One of the humanitarian views is the new humanism which claims that everything (including God) aims at human welfare. This theory places the human being in the center of action as the primary beneficiary of benevolence. Other theorists have forwarded various postulations which could essentially be understood as versions of the concept of humanitarianism. For example, Levinas claims that "humanism is the worldview founded on the belief in the irreducible dignity of humans, a belief in the efficacy and worth of human freedom and hence also human responsibility – from different angles" (Levinas, *Humanism* ix). Levinas notion of humanism envelops three principal demands of humanity, namely, dignity, freedom and responsibility. Undoubtedly, it could be said that the motivational force for Levinas's defense of human dignity is the experience of inhuman maltreatment of the Jewry during the holocaust. In addition, he believes and upholds that it is people's duty to be sensitive to, be interested in, and consequently make the human condition better and improve their welfare. The Levinas's claim that ethics is first philosophy is important for understanding his ethics. By this claim, he implies that the primary object of philosophy is the human being, hence, his welfare. Ethics has this preoccupation, thus, his ethics searches for the best way to uphold human welfare. Still more important, his formulation of ethics is a novelty because he does not begin by formulating theories as in the deontology and consequentialism. Because of this, Levinas's ethics could be described as phenomenological, because he begins his ethics with the face-to-face encounter between two persons: The Subject/I and the Other. "The epiphany of the face is ethical" (Levinas, *Totality* 199). The "face" *visage* is not the looks or the contour lines on the human face. Rather, the face is a metaphor for the total expression of the circumstances of the entire person of the "Other" who is himself different from the Subject/I. "The face is a living presence; it is expression.... The face

speaks. The manifestation of the face is already a discourse” (Levinas, *Totality* 66). The facial expression of the entire Other has compelled Levinas to come up with the aphorism 'that the face of the Other is a face in need.' For him, therefore, attending to the Other's need is by assuming responsibility for such an Other.

Responsibility has nuanced connotations as a concept and in different philosophical literature. It is banal to conceive and construe responsibility as accountability, answerability, duty etc. In moral discourses, one can think responsibility as moral responsibility. In this perspective, moral responsibility must have a moral agency whose answerability could be prospective or retrospective. These conceptions return responsibility to the Western philosophical ethical theories. However, Levinas's conception of ethics being phenomenological takes a different trajectory. It is a theoretical but confrontational because responsibility must be executed on behalf of a concrete person, the Other on his epiphany at an ethical scene. This is quite in tune with Levinas's claim that ethics commences at the epiphany of the Other in the presence of the I.

This essay argues for Levinas's humanism of the Other through the Other's priority in his notion of responsibility. For, besides the plethora of Biblical and religious parallels, assumptions and images employed to bear out this ethics, humanitarian values and their motives aimed at human welfare in the society sync with the role of ethics in the same human society. Specifically, Levinasian responsibility defends and promotes humanism of the Other by prioritizing the Other over the ego, a position he passionately and enthusiastically develops and defends in his corpus. To defend these claims, this essay proceeds in five sections beginning with the introduction. The second section explicates the Levinas's conception of responsibility. The third section presents some religious parallels of humanism and responsibility. The fourth section discusses the transition of responsibility from religion to ethics. The fifth section concludes that Levinas's responsibility, regardless of its ideal or real reading motivates humanism and that welfare of the human Otherness is the meeting point of responsibility whether religiously or ethically conceived.

2. Levinas's notion of responsibility

Responsibility as already mentioned above suggests nuanced connotations. In Levinas's ethical literature, responsibility is “the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity” (Levinas, *Ethics* 95). By subjectivity, we are to understand an individual as the subject of moral actions. Therefore, Levinas could be understood to mean that all humans must take responsibility for Others as moral beings that we are. In other words, everyone is obliged to assume responsibility for the Other. The one that takes responsibility is the I (the subject) whereas the beneficiary of the responsibility is the Other (Levinas uses capital “O” for the human Others to distinguish it from non-human others). His notion of responsibility becomes clearer when a recourse is made to who a moral subject/I is. For Levinas, “the word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 114). “Answering” precisely connotes assuming responsibility. Differently put, it is the I/subject, that is essentially constituted and naturally assigned and laden with the task of responding. Construing responsibility in this light, Levinas claims that taking responsibility for an Other is not an accident of our being rather, it is a call that precedes human essence.

Responsibility is not hypothetical. Appropriately understood, responsibility implies rendering services to Others without a return to the self. It means gratuitous self-giving to Others – time, resources and other concrete things to better the Others' human condition. In his words, “responsibility for others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting which the limits of identity cannot retain” (ibid. 114). In what follows, Levinas deepens the entailment of responsibility and describes it as an “obsession” for, an individual is constantly compelled to fulfill for the Other what he does not wish, that which he did not do, and that which he is not guilty of. The compelling force for responsibility comes from the essence of the ego's being. It is this vital force, however, that intuitively in the consciousness of the moral subject that he, the ego exist through the Other and meant to respond to the Other, a relationship that neither implies alienation nor absorption (ibid. 114).

Responsibility connotes transcendence which essentially is an event of, and in being. It is being that a being transcends to another being. In this sense, to respond to an Other *ipso facto* means to transcend oneself (this is one of the several senses that Levinas employs the concept). What then is, and how should one read Levinas here? “Transcendence is passing over to being's *other*, otherwise than being. Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*” (Levinas, *Otherwise* 3). The

being that transcends is that which Levinas calls the subject (I). He, it is, that assumes responsibility for the Other, - the benefactor. On the other hand, the "being's *other*" is that which is taken responsibility of. He is the Other, the beneficiary of actions of benevolence. As shown, responsibility connotes and involves a transcendence from the I to the Other, the I takes responsibility of the Other. This sort of responsibility, Levinas claims should be absolute, infinite, unconditional and asymmetrical (Levinas, *Totality* 215; *Otherwise* 55; *Ethics* 98). How the Subject is to fulfil responsibility here described is Levinas's construct.

Responsibility in the Levinasian construct entails assuming it absolutely, infinitely, unconditionally and asymmetrically. To assume responsibility, he constructs the "I" and endows him with the necessary capacities for fulfilling responsibility. The Other also fits into the assumption as one who is completely dependent on the I. Adahada notes that "the Levinasian I is a *superman*, and he characterizes him with superlative features. In his construct, he is always present, ready and always endowed with the resources and the means with which to respond to the Other's needs. He has at all times the practical responses and the necessary things to take care of the Other" (The Levinasian I 114). Recapitulating the definition of the I, as one who must answer for everything for everyone, the I must necessarily respond to the essential destitution of the Other as a natural call. Similarly, the Other is assumed to be one that is abjectly poor, completely incapacitated, lacking everything at all times. He is seen as a destitute that can only be assisted by one other than he, the Subject (ibid. 114). The depth of the destitution of the Other as Levinas wants to understand is one that needs the basic necessities of life: clothing food and shelter. In his defense of the Other, Levinas advocated feeding the Other with the food from one's mouth and clothing him with the coat from one's shoulders (Levinas, *Otherwise* 55). This advocacy could not but make much sense in European winter where food, clothing and shelter synonymous to survival.

Levinas's responsibility construct and explication cannot be understood otherwise than ethical. In common *parlance*, one takes responsibility for one's deeds either prospectively or retrogressively. However, in Levinas's notion of responsibility, one answers for what he did not do or what does not concern him rather he acts to alleviate the burden of the Other. This construal is essentially what underpins responsibility as ethical. The following section demonstrates and argues that religion and its values have provided immense influence for Levinas's theory, and this is justified by the plethora of scriptural parallels.

3. Humanism and responsibility: some religious parallels

Levinas translates religious views to Humanism through the notion of responsibility. He does this by theorizing responsibility as absolute, infinite, unconditional and asymmetrical. By this construct, Levinas concedes to being a religious thinker or at least shows religious influences in his thought. However, he translates these religious influences on his ethics which leaves some implications for Humanism. The notion of the "Other", the object of responsibility has a Biblical origin in Prophet Jeremiah's Temple sermon, (Jeremiah 7: 6). Scripturally, the Other is imaged in the widow, orphan, and the stranger and by extension, the poor and the innocent. Based on the patristic culture of the Jews, persons in these categories are deprived of paternal protection and are considered helpless. In addition, the poor lacks the means and capacity of livelihood and so cannot provide their needs, therefore, they need assistance that must come from the I. By constructing responsibility in this way, Levinas not only imply humanism, but delve into its core values. Furthermore, Levinas's view of responsibility entails nuanced religious cum theological values some of which this essay describes as hospitality, charity and solidarity. Again, these values express humanism and are also scriptural. Similarly, Jesus conditioned the eschatological judgement on them because He recognized imports of humanism in them (Matthew 25: 35-37) and meant for upholding their wellbeing. The needy referred to in this pericope are the Levinasian Other. For Levinas, the loving actions on behalf of them express responsibility. Does a cursory inquiry into these descriptions of responsibility not reveal humanitarian concerns? Is a belief in the dignity of the human person not invariably a belief in an Ultimate Being, the creator of man? God is interested in the wellbeing of His creatures. Therefore, concern for the wellbeing of these creatures is an expression of Humanism. As all metaphysicians insistently demonstrated and argued that God is a Being to which none can compare (Peperzak, *To the Other* 35), it generates the conclusion that: God is the first the humanist

and the foremost author of humanitarian values. These scriptural and religious prescriptions and values are parallel to Levinas's conception of responsibility. It is on the basis of this that Levinas defends the priority of the Other as the thrust of his ethics of responsibility. For this defense implies his priority of the Other and humanism.

God is not postulated by Levinas, rather, faith in God and Divine values are what Levinas professes and promotes. God is a harmonized community of persons. In other words, He is a God that is conscious of the Otherness. The God of Levinas's responsibility is heteronomous. A God of Others revealed in alterity of persons, Levinas demonstrates this as follows "revelation is discourse; in order to welcome revelation a being apt for this role of interlocutor, a separated being, is required" (Levinas, *Totality* 77). Levinas means that an I is a necessary precondition in revealing God to the Other via their benevolence. This bears out the implications of responsibility as *prima facie* meeting with the Other. Levinas defends that God comes to me through the Other and vice versa. For this reason, "ethics is the spiritual optics" (Ibid., 78). One must ascertain and infer one's relationship with God through relationship with fellow humans. Similarly, Peperzak adds up to Levinasian ethical vision as he supports that "our language about or to God should be in agreement with the relation of me to the Other, who is the only "place" where God is revealed. Only from this perspective can one approach God prudently and respectfully" (Peperzak, *To the Other* 35).

God is not an Other like the human Other. In trying to make a divide between the Otherness of God and the human Otherness, one invokes language and the notion of the trace. The human use of language in relation to God leads to anthropomorphism and this brings about challenges which Peperzak describes as an enigma and observes: "The strange way by which this enigma touches us via the human Other is the reason why our attempts to talk about God are necessarily full of uncertainty and guesses, unable as we are to capture God by thetic and dogmatic discourse. By following certain suggestions, philosophical thinking can try to name God as the one who has left a trace in the Other who knocks at my door" (Ibid., 35). The challenges here bother on I - Other relationship. However, this difficulty is resolved by Levinas's notion of the trace - an invisible seal of God's presence in all human Otherness. "The trace is not just like a sign like any other. But it does also function as a sign" (Levinas, *Humanism* 41). The trace signifies without showing the imprints on phenomenon but compels it to a relationship. It upholds humanism and offers moral subjects the opportunity to respond to humanistic values. The notion of the trace is a justification for ethical relationship. Defending this relation, Levinas argues "if the significance of the trace consists in signifying without making appear, if it establishes relation with illeity— a relation, personal and ethical, a relation, obligation that does not unveil – if, consequently, the trace does not belong to phenomenology, to comprehension of *appearance* and *dissimulation*, it could at least be approached by another path by situating that significance from the phenomenology it interrupts" (ibid., 41). Levinas is in a way saying that humans have natural but suprasensible seal that compels us to relationship with human Others. It must be understood that the compulsion to this relationship underscores humanitarian endeavors. The Divine seal in the human Other draws us to relation with them and this relation must be ethical and could be expressed in several perspective. The expression of this compelling innate human humane inclination is the preoccupation of Levinas's notion of responsibility. What then does the call to responsibility entail or what does the notion of language and trace forbid?

Levinas's discourse on language and the trace emanate from the *visage* and that poses a dilemma. In other words, the appearance of the face could either begin Levinas's ethics or violence. The face is a symbolic expression humane values, but its flipside prohibits vices and violence. This means that one that approaches the Other with violence is unethical and inhuman. To this fact, Dianne Perpich affirms the challenges of true experience of responsibility and makes a case for the dilemma of violence and virtues, "surely, it is a banal fact of human existence that we do not always encounter one another in ways that manifest ethical respect or responsibility. Does the torturer fail to encounter face? Does she encounter it but fails to recognize it? Do the faces of the homeless remain hidden" (*Ethics* 51)? A flipside of this interrogations shows the dilemma inherent in the daily experience of responsibility. The implications of Perpich's observations return us to Levinas's call for responsibility. This call coheres values such as charity, hospitability and solidarity that entail humanism. The ability of an individual to fulfil these virtues is in Levinas's construal justice because from his definition if I, he claims that everyone is naturally called to fulfil them. Justice, Levinas claims, is a route to God and must be preserved from egoism "the work of justice – the uprightness of

the face to face is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced - and – “vision” here coincides with this work of justice” (*Totality* 78). Here, Levinas seems to state his concerns *via negativa* that deflating one's concerns creates an opening for taking in Other's concerns. As Levinas's ethics searches for and justifies how we can be human, he finds a result in humanitarian concerns. This is the nexus, the link between religion and Levinas's ethics of responsibility.

4. Responsibility: transition from religion to ethics

Religion is derived from the Latin *religio* which means, what attaches or retains, moral bond, anxiety, anxiety of self-consciousness, scruple. *Religio*, according to Cicero is derived from *relegere* which means to read again, to re-examine carefully, to gather. Furthermore, Lucretius, Lactantius and Tertullianus derive its origin from *religare* which means to connect specifically referring to the bond of piety that binds to God (What is religion?). From the above, religion could be understood as a set of beliefs, feelings, dogmas and practices that define, bind, connect and regulate the relations between human being and the Divine (ibid). It is true that this self-binding of humans to the Sacred is not without some benefits. Furthermore, religion informs us that God created us for Himself to know, love and serve Him in one another and to be rewarded with eternal life in the afterlife. Saint Augustine in his Confessions acknowledged this truth by his submission that God created humans for Himself and that explains why humans are restless until they find their rest in God. Similarly, Levinas defines religion philosophically as “the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality” (Levinas, *Totality* 40). Knowing, loving and serving God in the Other accurately fit into the Levinasian responsibility. When these attributes are altruistic it adds up to Levinasian vision of religion. Furthermore, Peperzak inquires “is he not the one who chose me before any engagement on my part and ordered me to welcome the unexpected visitor as guest” (*To the Other* 35)? The one that chose is God. The foregone explains human election and his response-ability to his human Other. How then does this seemingly religious command translate and/or connect to ethics?

The background to Levinas's ethics is his concern for humanism. Let humanism be recaptured as concern and advocacy for human welfare. *Ab initio* Levinas contested with severe criticisms, the preoccupation of Western philosophy that concerns itself with nature and being and accuses it of not addressing the human condition adequately. In thinking philosophy, Levinas seeks to deconstruct Western idealism to revert attention to human being in general and human Other in particular to defend his welfare. This motive informs his method of ethics which he broadly conceive as first philosophy as distinct from the Western classification of ethics as a branch of philosophy. Ethics became first philosophy because it addresses concrete human problems, here and now. In addressing human problems, the point of departure is the concrete human being, the subject and the Other as they appear before each other as *visage*, in the face-to-face encounter. The face for Levinas means the “the way which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*” (Levinas, *Totality* 50). His ethics begins on the notion of the face as an absolute Otherness rather than theories. He warns “the face resists possession, resists my powers” (ibid. 197). Absolute Otherness abates all sorts of erotic abuses or hypothetical appropriation of the Other by the I.

Absolute Otherness with asymmetry synchronizes to absolve the Other from assimilation. Furthermore, absoluteness spells out the distinction between human Otherness and other elementals. Bread, meat, clothes, cars, houses etc. can be eaten and absorbed, possessed, owned and controlled but this is not the case with human Other (ibid. 33). The relationship between the I and the Other is what Levinas describes invoking metaphysics of desire “the metaphysics of desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*” (ibid. 33). Simply, it means that the human Other cannot be assimilated. Elsewhere, he claims that this relation must not be toxic but healthy “the relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation” (ibid. 51). *Desire* and *need* are technical terms used to distinguish relationship between human Other and nonhuman other respectively. For, because the human Other is absolute, cannot be assimilated, it enjoys the relationship described by *desire*. On the other hand, nonhumans can be assimilated, possessed, owned and controlled. This is explained by *need*. Therefore, whereas desire is insatiable, a need can be satisfied. Thus, desire underpins the ethical. I shall come to this later. Asymmetry denotes two opposed and unequal stand points between two individuals. In Levinasian lexicon, asymmetry implies “height”, a term that makes a divide between the subject and the Other, that is, the

Other always approaches the I from the dimension of height (ibid. 34). “Height” denotes unknowability, inequality, uncanniness, circumstantial /situational difference etc. Elsewhere, Levinas shades more lights on the notion of the height “this height is no longer the heavens but the Invisible is the very elevation of height and its nobility” (ibid. 35). Denoting unequal personages, the implication is that the I and the Other are simply different and lacks the knowledge of each other, each is absolute, thus the only relationship possible is the ethical explained by metaphysical desire.

Metaphysical desire translates to insatiability which is a metaphor for infinity of responsibility. Levinas means that there is no limit to accomplishing benevolent actions on behalf of the Other (widow, orphan, stranger, destitute). The ethical also justifies the asymmetry in the sense that this class of persons are incapable of any reciprocal gestures. They receive but cannot give in return. Ethical subjects give without ulterior motives or the intent to receive a pay back. In Levinas's notion of responsibility, it is on this asymmetry that the ethical resides.

Infinity and unconditionality of responsibility complement the absolute and asymmetry. The infinity of ethical responsibility is reposed on and explained by the metaphysics of desire. The implication of this for ethics is that ethical life and actions should neither expire nor be bounded in duration. It is simply unlimited. Infinity in relation to the face of the Other is further significant upon incomprehension. “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched- for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content” (ibid. 194). The above ideas defend the infinite construct with which Levinas characterizes the face and consequently the responsibility due to him. For him, the face is ungraspable for, grasping it truncates its infinity and thus, renders it an object of knowledge. Similarly, this knowledge will hinder infinite responsibility. To preserve his infinity as well as absoluteness, the Other is infinitely transcendent, foreign, unknown to the subject. “The alterity of the Other is not simply recalcitrant to knowledge and caresses, it is a positive force; its positivity is moral rather than ontological or epistemological force” (Levinas, *Time* 15). The moral force here is the asymmetrical height and the destitution of the Other. This precisely is the crux of the ethical constitution of Levinas's notion of responsibility.

5. Conclusion: responsibility, ideal, real either/or

Levinasian ethics of responsibility showcases his passion for humanism via seemingly *irrational* defense of the Other. Irrational in the sense that the demands, descriptions and entailments of his vision of responsibility cannot always rationally be defended and practiced and neither could the I and the Other always fit into his descriptions. Levinas himself, sometimes describes his responsibility construct as utopian perhaps because it appears unrealistic and challenging in fulfilling its demands (Levinas, *Ethics* 100). Furthermore, Cohen notes “the subject is traumatized, loses its balance, its moderation, its recuperative powers, its autonomy, its principle and principles, is shaken out of its contemporaneity with the world and others owing to impact of a moral force” (Levinas, *Time* 15). This view captures the challenges of the Levinas's subject in bearing responsibility for the Other. Despite these challenges, Levinas is convinced about the importance of responsibility for liberating the Other and enhancing his welfare. This motive adds up to his notion of transcendence which he often identifies with Platonic dictum: “Good Beyond Being” (Perpich, *Caress* 40). To be good beyond being in Levinas popular expression means “to be otherwise than being” which invariably means being trans-ascendence - moving out of the self to an Other to accomplish selfless services on behalf of alterity. This mode of existence is often extolled by Levinas as “the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existence raises itself up to a higher existence but a departure from Being and from the categories which describe it: an ex-cendence” (Levinas, *Existence* 15). The departure from Being implies the selflessness of the departing being, (being otherwise) thus, turning his attention to promote the good of the Other. This is the ethical (humanitarianism) which this essay has established as the nexus between religion and ethics. Whether this ethical is ideal or real is not the contention rather the locus of the Levinas's notion of responsibility between religion and ethics. In what follows, ideal-real; religion- ethics could translate and inform our contemporary experience of responsibility that can translate to humanism.

The ideal is often theorized in almost all spheres of life and fields of human endeavors, but

the real is the often-sought-for. Parsing this with religion and ethics may not even scale through since the tenets of different religious beliefs are not always practiced by its adherents. What is important is to translate the ideal to the real both from the perspectives of religion and ethics. Specifically, the demands of Levinas's responsibility, whether one understands it from the point of view of religion or from ethics translates to a single objective – upholding the humanism of the Other and his flourishing.

The aim of religion could be two-folds, though essentially, it could be one -eschatological bliss. For, eschatological bliss must begin here and now and this implies that the ethical subject must be at service of the Other. Being at the service of the human Other then, gratifies both the means and end. As a means, it is an avenue through which the subject fulfils the Divine purpose for which he was created-to know, love and serve the Ultimate Being. And as an end, human wellbeing and flourishing in the world could be construed as a prefiguration of the eschatological bliss. Still more, religious beliefs tell us that for the true faithful, joy and happiness, contentment and fulfillment shall characterize their eternity.

Good life in the human society is the purpose ethics. Good life is the point of intersection between religion and ethics. Responsibility for the human Otherness points to this trajectory, it is the light that illumines the path to achieving this lofty motive. By responsibility, Levinas wants all to reconsider what it actually means and what it takes to be human. He does this by seemingly, completely abdicating the ego and prioritizing the Other. Being human implies responding to the Other here and now at the appearance of the Other, who is always in need of help. This is the point of romance, the nexus between religion and ethics.

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