Undergraduate Section – Commendation

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Levinas, a Voice Crying Out in the Wilderness: Heeding the Call of the Other

ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, problematises the primacy of ontological and epistemological inquiries associated with the ego and subjectivity. Philosophy usually seen as a love of wisdom is re-conceived as a wisdom of love. And as a result, Ethics becomes the new starting point for philosophical inquiry, rather than beginning with the traditional questions associated with the fields of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and logic.

BIOGRAPHY

Anthony Aitken is completing an extended major in philosophy with a minor in Religion. He completed his BA in 2009 and intends to pursue Honours and further postgraduate research in the same fields in the years to come. Continental Philosophy, Ethics, Philosophy of Language, Political Philosophy and the three Abrahamic Religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are his research interests.
LEVINAS, A VOICE CRYING OUT IN THE WILDERNESS: HEEDING THE CALL OF THE OTHER

Anthony AitkenSelf-esteem, self-respect, self-ish, self-preservation, self-loathing, self-conscious, self-control, self-sacrifice, self-denial, self-reliant: these common usage words depict thematic understandings-both positive and negative-of 'I'-dentity, subjectivity and the ego. The sheer volume of words associated with these themes signals the primacy of questions associated with ontology-the nature of being. Philosophically, ontology's preeminence is evidenced in Aristotle's determination of being qua being, Spinoza's conatus essendi (law of being), and Heidegger's search for the a priori conditions of the Being of beings; even Shakespeare's character, Hamlet, believed the question 'to be, or not to be' was a question of major importance. Furthermore, epistemology is also a form of ontology: the conceptual mastery and knowledge of objects in the world requires the 'knowing ego' to reduce every cognised object into an 'object for consciousness,' so that anything other to the ego can be transmuted or assimilated in 'the melting pot of Being.'

Emmanuel Levinas, in contrast, challenges the primacy of ontological and epistemological inquiries associated with the ego and subjectivity by shifting the focus of the question of being to the service of ethics and justice. In other words, Levinas problematises how a dominant conception of being has justified itself, which he believes has resulted in the perpetration of injustice, violence, detachment and impassivity against individuals who are exterior to our interior-selves. 
Subjectivity is re-conceived by Levinas as the 'responsibility for the other,' which requires the surrender of the sovereignty of the interior ego. The incarnation of subjectivity in the face-to-face relation with the other contests the origins and focus of philosophy. Ethics, usually seen as coming after the fields of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology and logic is given prime position in the philosophy of Levinas; the desire to possess wisdom and knowledge is displaced by a desire to possess wisdom of love. Levinas' philosophy, in my view, successfully challenges the primary understandings of the self and prepares a highway through our modern-day ethical wilderness.

In developing his view, Levinas' initially repudiates the presuppositions of western metaphysics: the rational pursuit of truth and meaning through the interrogation of Being, so that the real may be made immanent in reason. For example: Husserl's intentional self-consciousness, or 'egology,' attempts to comprehend how things in the world generate meaning and truth for humans; Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein seeks to understand and investigate the Da (there) of Sein (being), the ground of Being, or the concept of Being itself. Concerning for Levinas firstly, is that philosophical approaches, such as these, have led to 'acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing,' starving and oppressing the other. In justifying these acts, appeals are made to the higher task of developing knowledge (episteme) about Being or that the possession of a superior knowledge about Being validates the committing of these acts. Concealed within these justifications is a privileging of the ego: that 'I' may have 'my place in the sun,' that my desires may be gratified and that the sovereignty of my ego is maintained. Secondly, Levinas believes the domain of the ego has selfishly sought to appropriate or reduce all difference (otherness) to sameness. This occurs when the knower, in contemplation, grasps the object and unconceals its otherness, thereby making it known so that it can be appropriated for its own knowledge. He refers to the knowing, interior, sovereign, self (moi) of subjectivity, that carries out this appropriation and reduction of all difference, as the same (le Même, to auton)-a term borrowed from Plato's Sophist. This term attempts to linguistically depict in an overt way the actions of this self. Third, Levinas believes the relations between same and other have been totalised. In other words, the intersubjective relation between self and other has been regarded as an equal, reciprocal and a symmetrical relation. As a result, the ego conceives of the relation to the other from some God-like position, outside of that relation; an imagined, objective vantage point in which the ego becomes 'a theoretical spectator on the social world of which [it is] really part, and in which [it is] an agent.' But as Levinas and many critical theorists and feminist thinkers have recognized, 'there is no view from nowhere; every view is from somewhere.'

Levinas' alternative to the domain of the ego that has justified these three notions is to conceive of subjectivity as the openness or susceptibility to the other's call, the response called for by the other's existence. Subjectivity in Levinas' view is not based on the interior ego but is based on what is exterior to the ego. Thereby challenging all prior notions of subjectivity from which the vocabulary of the self has developed. As a result, the intent of philosophy is re-focused from what it means 'to be' to the ethical relation with the other. The word other in French is signified in two ways: autre and autrui. Autre means anything other to a person, i.e. a computer, desk or television, while autrui signifies a human other. Hence Levinas uses autrui to refer to whom the subject has the ethical relation. This understanding of a subject reduces the abstract ego in other philosophies to a singular form: a personalised 'me' who experiences the enigmatic and opaque call of the other. In Levinas' translated words: Subjectivity is not the Ego, but me. Levinas analogises this point, through i the Biblical story of Samuel. Summoned by the Lord, Samuel identifies himself by responding: “Here I am!” Hence, this is an event (Ereignis) where the subject arises, not in thinking i.e. Descartes ego cogito (I am, I
think), but in response to the other’s call. Furthermore, Samuel’s later response, ‘speak for your servant is listening,’ xxii also portrays, in my opinion, Levinas’ view that the subject is- from the start- subject to the other. Moving away from this analogy, the subject to the other is not conscious but is in the form of sensibility and sentence; the subject is sensitive or can perceive the vulnerability or passivity of the other that takes place ‘on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves.’ xxxiii Thus, subjectivity is not developed by self-introspection i.e. a knowing, interior ego, but by heeding the call of the other to an embodied, exterior self;

Levinas’ re-conception of subjectivity allows ethics to be the original source for philosophical questioning by emphasising a wisdom of love xxiv (sophy-philo), rather than the love (philia)- or lust?- of wisdom (sophia). This wisdom of love is neither focused on maintaining the ego’s place in the sun nor fixated on its own interior-interests, to the detriment of another. For Levinas, ethics - or the wisdom of love - emerges in the moment that the same (selfish self) is called into question for attempting to comprehend, or reduce otherness to sameness and elevate the ego’s own interests. In other words, the presence of the Other (i.e. a starving individual, someone being beaten up) forces the ego to look beyond its own interest and desires. xxx This exterior being, Levinas names the ‘face’ because of the ‘the way in which the other presents [them]self, exceeding the idea of the other in me.’ xxxiv Meaning another individual always exceeds a judgment about them because they are irreducible to comprehension or totalisation. In fact, Levinas asserts that ‘[e]thics is otherwise than knowledge’: it is beyond comprehension, knowledge, themes, concepts and epistemology. xxxv By incarnating ethics in the face of the other, ethics moves away from formal universalised maxims, xxxvi or the developing of virtue and good conscience. Rather ‘ethics is lived in the sensibility of an embodied exposure to the other. It is because the self is sensible, that is to say, vulnerable, passive, open to the pangs of both the hunger and eros, that it is worthy of ethics.” xxxvii This requires that we are responsive to the other, which will no doubt be challenging, demanding and traumatizing, but to choose not to be responsive, to shut out our ethical relation with the other, risks the recurrence of genocide, such as happened in the Shoah. xxxviii For Levinas, the Shoah occurred because the face of the other was unacknowledged; the Jewish other became a ‘faceless face in the crowd, someone whom the passer-by simply passes by, someone whose life or death is … a matter of indifference.’ xxxix In many respects, philosophy is complicit in these atrocities because it has been irresponsible to the other, in preference for developing abstract logical systems, or pursuing rational truth. Thus, Levinas believes philosophy can be concretely and personally responsive to the distressed cry of the other, through ethics being the beginning of philosophical questioning.

A second similar formulation, Levinas describes, is that the ethical responsibility to the other is an infinite relation. Levinas’ notion of the infinite is drawn from Descartes’ Third Meditation, between the res cogitans and the infinity of God. xxxxi Descartes’ thinking thing is able to conceive of the idea of the infinite (God), but realises the infinite surpasses all thought. In Levinas’ words: ‘In thinking infinity the I from the first thinks more than it thinks.’ xxxii Hence, Levinas is substituting the other as infinite in the place of God in Descartes’ argument. By treating the other as infinite ensures that the self does not attempt to comprehend, grasp or think of the other as an object, a thing that can be contained in an idea, or the thing that can be completely known. Because, as Levinas says ‘to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object.’ xxxviii This is similar to what was stated earlier: the face exceeds the idea that the self has of it, and can only be partially glimpsed; it is irreducible to comprehension and always surpasses any thoughts about it. Visually this could be portrayed like Moses’ encounter with Yahweh (God). Moses is only able to glimpse God partially because he is unable to absorb the full image of Yahweh, resulting in a relationship with the other that is infinite: unequal, asymmetrical and non-reciprocal. xxv The belief in reciprocal and symmetrical relations with the other is perpetuated by the illusion of sameness, born out of the totalisation and belief in an homogenous, universal subject. Individuals are inherently different as are their relations with each other, and all attempts at universal homogeneity usually lead to tyrannisation of individuals who do not conform to the dominant normative view. Thus, an ethical relation with the other in which the other is treated as infinite- unable to be comprehended or totalised- recognises the other even if they are ‘radically other’ (different) and assists them even if the other cannot reciprocate any assistance provided.

In conclusion, Levinas shows that the history of philosophy is not the forgetfulness of Being, as Heidegger believed, but the forgetfulness of the other. Philosophers have privileged the quest for truth, and wisdom, over the needs of others and addressing practical societal issues. Comparatively, this seems much like the tale of the philosopher Thales, who fell into a hole while gazing at the starry sky. Philosophers’ fixation with the big questions of life, or our attempt to appropriate all knowledge of the world has caused our own fall into a hole. Levinas’ ideas may show us how to re-focus our gaze from the infinity of the great unknown into the infinity contained in the face of the other by raising many challenging questions: Are we prepared to focus on attaining a wisdom of love rather than merely desiring to attain wisdom? Are we prepared to not close our ears and eyes to the exterior cry of the other? Are we prepared to not privilege our own interior call and focus on our ego-
interests, to the detriment of other individuals? Are we prepared to let go of the question ‘what about me?’ and instead focus wholly on the question, ‘what about the other?’ If humanity wakes from its self-focused slumber and responds to Levinas’ revelatory cry in the wilderness, to heed the call of the other, I believe we can begin the long trek towards creating a world empathetic to the needs of others. However I fear like many other radical voices his cry will only be heard in the wilderness. It will be rationalised away because this message cannot be appropriated by the knowing ego for the domination and manipulation of Being, such as to increase technological development or allow a company to capitalise on knowledge.

REFERENCES


iii Ibid., 81.


v Levinas, “Ethics,” 86.

vi Ibid., 4.

vii Ibid., 80, 82.

viii Ibid., 82.

ix Blaise Pascal quoted by Levinas, “Ethics,” 82.

x Levinas, “Ethics,” 82.

xi Ibid., 76.

xii Michael B. Smith, Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 37.


xiv Ibid.

xv Ibid.


xviii ‘La Subjectivité n’est pas le Moi, mais moi.’


xxi Ereignis is translated often as ‘an event.’ A recent translation of the word by Kenneth Maly and Parvis Emad translates the word as ‘enowning,’ that in connection with things that arise and appear, that they are arising ‘into their own.’

xxii 1 Samuel 3:10 (NRSV).


xxvi Levinas, Totality, 50.


xxviii i.e. Kant’s categorical imperatives.


xxx Hebrew word for Holocaust.


xxs Levinas, Totality, 53.

xxviii Levinas cited in Critchley “Introduction,” 14. Critchley’s emphasis has been maintained.

xxxi Levinas, Totality, 49.

xxv Exodus 33 (NRSV).