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Levinasian Ethics

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Abstract

We all are ethical in some sense or the other. Our society influences our ideas, thinking. Our social and political ideologies are based upon the problems we see around us. A question can be raised that do we really know what is being ethical? Or is ethical really ethical? Different people will define ethics in ways different from others. What is ethical for one may or may not be ethical for others. One of the continental philosopher Emmanuel Levinas provides us with an ethical theory whereby he talks about the “other”, the “infinite”, “same”, “finite”, and links it with our everyday experiences, history, beliefs and action. He calls ethics to be the first philosophy, such that ethics come before ontology, metaphysics, epistemology. While talking about ethics he mentions as to what he think of a society. He calls a society - the third party. The paper aims to discuss the conception of ethics according to Levinas. The paper also attempts to comprehend his idea of ‘other’ in relation to ‘same’.

Keywords: Levinas, other, same, finite, infinite

Introduction

We all are ethical in some sense or the other. Our society influences our ideas, thinking. Our social and political ideologies are based upon the problems we see around us. A question can be raised that do we really know what is being ethical? Or is ethical really ethical? Different people will define ethics in ways different from others. What is ethical for one may or may not be ethical for others. One of the continental philosopher Emmanuel Levinas provides us with an ethical theory whereby he talks about the “other”, the “infinite”, “same”, “finite”, and links it with our everyday experiences, history, beliefs and action. He calls ethics to be the first philosophy, such that ethics come before ontology, metaphysics, epistemology. While talking about ethics he mentions as to what he think of a society. He calls a society - the third party. The paper aims to discuss the conception of ethics according to Levinas. The paper also attempts to comprehend his idea of ‘other’ in relation to ‘same’.

Before we begin with his conception of ethics as to how according to him ethics would be defined, let us first have a look at the historical background, the system he is following and criticizing.

Historicity

Levinas in the preface of “*Totality and Infinity*” accepts that he follows the phenomenological method and criticizes the ontological tradition of philosophy. Descartes’ idea of infinity was very important for Levinas. Ontology in traditional metaphysical sense is Heideggerian concept of being. Though Levinas was influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, he does not accept their claim and follows a different method. According to Levinas, Heidegger is deconstructing metaphysics and is not talking about being in the metaphysical sense.

Levinas, following Plato, talks about two impulses of western tradition. These are “heteronomy”, which stands for aspiration, a movement from this world to another, to go beyond this world and is the characteristic of metaphysical and philosophical theology; and “autonomy”, which implies the ‘reduction of the other to the same’. This aspect of reduction of the other to same is ontology for Levinas. He says that the western world is more favorable towards autonomy, i.e., towards ontology. His basic critique of the western philosophical tradition –ontology- is that it is all about grasping the other, such that it is creating homogeneity. However, for Levinas the other is not merely about grasping.

According to him all philosophy is some kind of idealism such that it tries to know everything. This it does by reducing every “other” to the “same” with the help of cognition, perception and so on. Whether it is epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, all try to bring some kind of homogeneity in the world such that everything can be reduced to some real rational thing, just as Hegel says that – ‘the real is rational and rational is real’. Thus, the essence of everything is reason, such that, it is through reason, self, spirit, that we can know everything. The primary concern of philosophy is to know everything – as to what it is, why it is, how it is. This all is historically the work of philosophy according to Levinas. In Levinas’ formulation, “reason, which reduces the other, is appropriation and power” [1]. Levinas has problem with ontology particularly. For him ontology means reducing everything to “self”. And thus ethics is prior to ontology for him and thereby he comes to his idea of – “Ethics is the first philosophy”.

Self: The Same and the Other – Totality and Infinity

A question can be asked as to what this self is? There are two things- the “same” and the “other”. Levinas uses Plato’s terms from the *Sophists* and the *Timaeus*, the “same” and the “other” [2]. For Plato the same is the Self, I, Cogito. It is important to note at the outset that the same refers not only to the *res cogitans*, but also to its *cogitate* [3]. For Husserl, Same is such that it includes the intentional acts of consciousness (noesis) along with the intentional objects which gives meaning to those acts, which are constituted by consciousness (noemata) [4]. For Heidegger, Same includes not only *Dasein* but also the world, which is constitutive of Being of *Dasein* [5]. For him being and *Dasein* is fundamental mode of our existence. But for Levinas the other being prior to every thought, it is pre-mordial and thus it is the fundamental mode of our existence. Thus, the domain of same maintains a relation with otherness, but it is a relation in which the ‘I’, ego, or *Dasein* reduces the distance between the same and the other, in which their opposition fades [6], i.e., when I try to know you (Other), I am reducing you to me (I). Levinas has problem with such a reduction and says that the other is pure exteriority. This fundamental form of reduction to the same or the Self is called ‘egology’ by Levinas. Also this philosophy qua ontology, could be deciphered as the process of reduction of all other forms into the same such that the other is assimilated into the self or same in order to be known. This is precisely what Sartre call the ‘digestive philosophy’ against French neo-Kantianism, whereby the other is reduced to the same, absorbed into the self, ontology being the organ to grasp the other and creating a homogenous world.

Phenomenology is concerned with the appearances, first hand view, a knowledge whereby we set aside all metaphysical, ontological presuppositions about the object and try to understand the phenomena as it appears to us, such that the phenomenon is grasped as it appears in its pre-mordial appearance. However, for Levinas, the “other” cannot be known completely. Levinas says that the intentional objects has hidden layers that are unknown to us, and to unfold these horizons and provide a meaning to them, is called intentionality and to locate the “other” in the midst, is what he calls phenomenology. He says that the relation to the other is not an ontology.

Thus the same is the self, mind, thought, and reason; in one

sense or another, everything outside the self becomes the same as the self or spirit [7]. The same is the totality which refer to the world of appearances. The other is everything different or other than the same [8]. Other is the moral power. Western philosophy’s primary impulse is imperialistic, to reduce the other to the same, to think everything [9]. He calls the “ontology as the philosophy of power” as “imperialism”, because when I reduce the other to the self, then this is kind of imperialism that I is overpowering the Other, I is having control over the Other. Thus he calls it the imperialistic philosophy.

Thus he uses same and other in order to level a charge of condemnation against the western philosophy. Human Other is absolutely other which cannot be showed and this is the theological pre-supposition Levinas is posing.

Relation between the ‘Same’ and the ‘Other’ - Ethics

The same thus overwhelms the other [10]. The other calls the same into question. In Levinas’ words – ‘alterity’ of that which cannot be reduced to the same, that which escapes the cognitive powers of the knowing subject [11].

In “*Totality and Infinity*” he defines ethics as ‘the putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other.’ [12] This would imply that for Levinas ethics is a critique, in the sense that it is critical of liberty, spontaneity and cognitive emprise of the same which seeks to reduce the other to itself (same). The ethical would be the location of alterity, which he calls the ‘exteriority’, something which cannot be reduced to the same. It is here that he calls the other, the exterior and this exterior being is the face. This face is unconditioned, absolute, unjustified, infinite and being infinite, it breaches totality, thus it is pre-mordial and prior to everything in our life. It is the face of the other. He defines this face as, ‘the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the *idea of the other in me.*’ [13] When talking in a language within the transcendental sense, this face is what constitutes the basic possibilities or pre-condition for ethics. Thus for him ethics is simply a relation, whereby ‘I am is related to the face of the other (autrui)’, where the Other stands for the other human being who is my responsibility, whom I cannot kill, comprehend, evade, grasp or know completely. Thus ethics is not the simple overcoming or abandonment of ontology, but rather the deconstruction of the latter’s limits and its comprehensive claims to mastery [14]. Thus, “*Totality and Infinity*” powerfully articulates the non-ontological ‘experience’ of the face of the other in the language of ontology [15].

The other is not the object of comprehension, not the Other of knowledge which can be reduced to the self. It cannot be fully grasped, known or comprehended through knowlegde, reason, cognition etc. It is incomprehensible in its totality. The other is radically other, alterity or radical exteriority, and as human other it calls the I and its responsibility into question. The other is not the object of intentionality and the I is not conscious of the other as other. We are embedded beings and so we cannot know the other, since our thoughts are conditioned, because we are historically, socially, culturally embedded beings. Thus he tries to unfold and unveil that dimension which is already there, covered by our conditioned way of thinking. This is precisely where it departs from the ontology.

Levinas’ account of the other is metaphorical yet refers to our everyday experiences of pain, suffering, misery, poor and hungry. There is a radical departure from

phenomenological method, where he says that the other or face is not a phenomenon (like for Husserl, the intentional object are phenomenal objects), rather it is an *enigma* or a riddle that cannot be solved, it is infinitely infinite, it is transcendent, it is radically other, cannot be comprehended through reason, intellect or knowledge, such that the Other is a challenge and a command to what we see already given or customary and accepted, in some way a basic grounding or foundation for the ordinary. It is an *enigma* still it is something basic, something substantial.

Ethics as first philosophy could be understood as: my encounter with the other happens before I cognize the other, before my cognitive actions, before my understanding of the socially, culturally conditioned human, such that, that 'when I see you, I see your otherness, your alterity first, then I comprehend or understand you'. In other words it could be deciphered as, when I see you, I see myself as responsible to you, such that I see you first as 'human' then as a particular identity. All forms of conceptualization would come later, human encounter is prior. It is in this sense that the ethics is seen to be prior, and this is why he says that ethics is first philosophy since, according to him philosophy arise in part at least for 'moral reason'. But the commentators call it ethical metaphysics. He says, "my responsibility for the Other... *testifies* to Infinity"^[16], this implies that I bear a relationship to the Other within a certain conceptual framework and it is not because the Other has some magical powers residing in it but it is my ethical obligation to respond to the Other.

For example; I see a hungry person passing by my side while I was having my food. I would feel my responsibility towards the hungry person who is other to me. Levinas says that I should give my whole food to the Other without either dividing it or sharing it with the Other, then only the act would be ethical, this is so because the Other is more important than 'I' and the needs of the Other are prior to the needs of the 'I'. This Levinas calls the space of asymmetry. It is not a matter of sharing or dividing, but a matter of infinite demand, a demand we can never fulfill i.e., the demand to respond to the other. It means to recognize the other is to recognize the hunger and to recognize the other is to give. The other is important for the self because, "the other both 'challenges and commands' the I as a face through its 'nakedness and destitution'^[17]. Levinas calls this 'destitution – "humility" and the command as "height" such that when I experience the Other face to face, in the nakedness of the Other what I see is destitution of pain as a social and cultural being, poverty and this brings shame. When I see the other I see my responsibility towards the other. The other is homeless, destitution, hungry and yet above me and making an ethical claim on me. There is nothing that the other is responsible to. Only same or I is responsible for everything and would have to bear the weight of the whole world on its shoulders. It is the infinite ethical obligation which torments the same which it cannot escape.

But there arise a important question that if the other is radically other, totally different from I, then what kind of relationship exists between I and the Other. The face to face encounter is neither a cognitive experience nor can it be said or verbalized, so he uses metaphors for it. It is here that the desires come into the picture, a desire to satisfy, to help the Other. He says that the relation between I and Other is that of a metaphysical desire. A normal desire is the one which

can be satisfied, can be extinguished, like hunger would be satisfied with food, and so on, but a metaphysical desire is one which can never be satisfied. It is a never ending, never satisfying, never fulfilling desire. The more you go near, the more it grows and the worst it becomes. It is a kind of desire which is outside of oneself, yet it should not be understood as something "external" or something "not me". It is the desire of the 'absolutely other', not just 'something that is not me'. The desire of absolutely other is something 'foreign' to us. In the sense of a desire to help the Other also, the Other is infinite. It is the desire of the 'invisible'. Thus Levinas says that the metaphysical desire is beyond everything and can never be completed or accomplished. Absolutely other is the "object" of metaphysical desire which is invisible and completely exterior. He also says that to die for the other is metaphysics. He also talks about 'height' to represent the higher sense of the object of metaphysical desire – the other, which should be deciphered as the outcome or result of metaphysics.

Therefore we see few conclusions made by Levinas regarding the other person. These are:

- 1) Human other is the absolutely other who calls the self into question.
- 2) Other is not the object of intentionality. Self is not conscious of the other as other.
- 3) I welcomes the other.

Thus the Other is welcomed by I, as the Other would help the self or I to grow and develop itself and at the same time I is important for the Other because the Other is dependent upon I for its existence. This would mark the primacy of the self over the other.

Primacy of the Ethical

Levinas is of the view that the same always triumphs over the other and is enable to make room for the other. He says that the same is the basic need for the other to exist. This he calls the primacy of the same over the other. Same is required to call forth the other. At the same time the other is the pre-condition for the development and growth of the self or the same.

The Idea of the Infinite: Totality and Infinity

He introduced the idea of the 'infinite' in order to render God on a literal level which is conceptually inaccessible to us, something transcendent beyond which no one will be able to inquire further. But more generally the idea of the infinite is linked with his idea of the other, his view and definition of the other, where he follows Descartes' idea of infinity which is a-priori, thus the Other is infinite and wholly incomprehensible. The infinite cannot be totalized nor can it be embraced completely according to Levinas. The Other is outside the self and the self is the totality. When the Same or I experiences the Other, the Same would get to know that it is infinite.

In order to approach the self (totality), the Other (infinity) breaches the self (totality), i.e., the infinite is outside the totality and since infinity is all encompassing, it would breach the totality (an enclosed world view of the I), and when this breach would occur – this epiphany of the Other, the realization of the truth, an encounter with the Other, calls me into question, that I am responsible to the Other, and the Other would call my existence into question. This would lead to a form of shame in the Same, a sense of its own failure in generosity, i.e., "when I (same) realize who

and what I am in terms of the suffering or misery or need of the Other, I am disturbed.”^[18] It is the shame of injustice that I have done to the Other, shame of ethical responsibility I did not fulfill, the shame of my nakedness to my own self and this would disturb me that I am not alone, I do not have an individual existence apart from the world. For Levinas this comes before any ontology or metaphysics, because a basic relationship of responsibility towards Other is prior to all forms of conceptualizing and rationalizing. It is pre-mordial and the basis of everything else. At the same time when I encounter the Other, its alterity is never completely absorbed in me. There is non-totalizing relation between I and the Other.

We also see a parallel movement in Levinas’ argument. He says, “the Other who provokes this ethical movement in consciousness and who disturbs the good conscience if the Same’s coincidence with itself compromises a surplus which is inadequate to intentionality. Because of this inassimilable surplus, we have called the relation that binds the I to the Other (*Autru*) *the idea of the infinite*.”^[19] Thereby, thus the metaphor of infinity becomes apt to explore the otherness of the other, at the same time helps us to fix and develop our relationship to the Other. Alternatively, “we rediscover the Cartesian itinerary, which moves from the Cogito to the World by passing through the idea of the infinite to the world through the idea of the infinite.”^[20] This means that the idea of the infinite is asserted prior to the idea of the being and ontology. Levinas says that the “the idea of the infinite consists in grasping the ungraspable while nevertheless guaranteeing its status as ungraspable.”^[21] But such a statement only shows the contradiction because we want both to know and not to know what infinite stands for at the same time.

The infinite calls the ‘I’ into question. “The idea of the infinite is the social relationship.”^[22] Levinas calls it the “epiphany” of the face, and says that its logos or content is: “you shall not kill”^[23]. Thus, the face of the Other is the prohibition of murder. It is an engagement that “puts an end to the irresistible imperialism of the same and the I,” the resistance to murder^[24]. Therefore, it is the ‘first given moral consciousness.’^[25] Thus the grounding of the moral relation is the idea of infinity, which drives me to do good to the Other. In this sense, “moral consciousness is primary and the source of first philosophy.”^[26]

Ethics and Society

Levinas calls the society the third party. The third party represents the people who make up our society where we live and interact with each other. This third party or the social world is the “whole”, which is “indispensable” and thus constitutes the totality of our everyday social as well as political relationships with a motive to reduce the sufferings of the Other.

Levinas is of the view that this social world is what provides us with thoughts, rationality, judgment and also with philosophy. He says that there is always a third person such that, that third person is my Other and my neighbor. Within a society, our thinking, speaking, all social phenomenon should be such that they would help to serve the social motives, with special care towards the moral purposes.

Finally, Levinas put forward his last important point, that justice, law, state is what limits our responsibilities by subjecting them to valuations and comparisons as to whom I ought to serve, and whom I ought to restrict. Thus, while

our responsibilities are infinite and in itself unbounded, it is justice that limits it, and because of this “I separate myself from the idea of nonresistance to evil”^[27].

Freedom

Levinas criticizes the democratic liberalism because there is a dichotomy as it enchain us. This is visible when he talks about body, in the sense that our body is a part of our existence and still we are enchained to it, such that we cannot run through our body, cannot exist without and apart from our body. So the dichotomy is that we are a sort of a slave to our own bodies. In this sense he criticizes the freedom.

Criticism

One important criticism that can be leveled against Levinas is that how can an ethical relationship with a particular Other within the domain of moral rules or political principles be expressed. Levinas was undoubtedly was a phenomenologist but in what sense can we call him a phenomenologist as he himself was violating the rules of phenomenology by talking about God, religion etc.

Conclusion

Levinas articulates the primacy of the ethical, that is, the primacy of the inter-human relationship, ‘an irreducible structure upon which all the other structures rest.’^[28] For Levinas – excepting certain *instants merveilleux* (*H 94*) in the history of philosophy, notably the Good Beyond Being in Plato’s *Republic* stand the idea of infinity in Descartes’ *Meditations* – it is ethics that has been dissimulated within the philosophical tradition thus, rather than ethics being understood as a traditional and regional component of philosophical thinking, built upon the ground of an ontological or logocentric metaphysics, Levin Asian ethics is a ‘first philosophy’ that disrupts ontology or logocentrism^[29]. He thus says that the human life is a unity of totality and infinity^[30]. Another important conclusion that can be drawn from his idea of ethics is that for him language – discourse is prior.

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