

ETHICAL POLITICS AND MARGINALITY IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS

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Many critics of Levinas pointed out that there is no politics in his Philosophy. It is said that an ethical philosophy that cannot be exercised in politics is abstract. The aim of this paper then is to point out that politics is actually very central to Levinas' philosophical development. It is his serious critique of a totalizing politics that gave him the passion for an otherwise than a tyrannical politics but a politics that seriously considers the tears of the forgotten other – the marginalized. Levinas says, "Politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself." (Totality and Infinity). He therefore, calls for an ethical politics, one that is based on sociality and love.

INTRODUCTION

The paper starts with a personal experience of a demolition of a slum area where the author finds it as a concrete experience of a tyrannical and heartless politics that does not see the face of the marginalized other. Then, it presents briefly the Levinasian critique of the totalizing politics rooting it to the philosophy of being and identity. In its place, Levinas highlights the primacy of the ethical relation in philosophy and in politics. Such linkage is possible in what Levinas calls as the "third party" (*le tiers*). In Levinas' face-to-face encounter one is confronted not only by the irreducibility of the other but also by the virtual presence of all people, who by their irreducibility puts to question our totalizing and violent relation. He offers small acts of goodness that can be translated into political action like hospitality, solidarity intercultural and religious dialogue-listening.

I. LEVINASIAN ETHICS AND THE MARGINALIZED

I would like to begin with my very close and personal experience of a demolition of a squatters' area:

We had once a Franciscan community inserted in a slum area in Muñoz, Quezon City. A Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) was also organized there but unfortunately, a rich real state broker claimed to have owned the land. He never heard the voices of the slum dwellers. He ordered the violent demolition of the shanties.

Upon discovery of this plan, the Franciscan community in the area called for help from the student friars, the Inter-Congregational Theological Center (ICTC) students and brothers and nuns from some religious congregations. It was no other than a human barricade that we made. Women and children were placed in the frontlines covering the whole front area. The men together with the religious brothers, nuns and priests were behind the women and the children.

The demolition team arrived in a truck. There were around 30 of them, each carrying truncheons and tools for demolition. They were also escorted by two fully armed and military police squads. As they disembarked from the truck and started approaching our barricade, my heart beat so fast in fear upon seeing them ready to strike us. We prepared by binding our arms firmly together singing songs of hope while they started beating women and children in front of me. I was not hit by the beating but the sight of an old woman beaten by the police was most painful for me. I heard her shout, "*Maawa po kayo sa amin. Huwag n'yo pong gibain mga bahay namin!*"

As mothers and children cried and pleaded for mercy, they instead received beatings from hired goons with truncheons to threaten and push them. I was pushed back as the demolition team advanced forward. I saw more sights of violent beatings and heard cries of agony and pain. Then, from afar, we all heard a gunshot that made us all scream and scramble for safety. Slowly our human barricade loosened up, the demolition team rushed through us and started ripping off the brittle wooden walls of the houses behind us. We slowly drifted to the sides watching helplessly as they demolished the people's shanties. Any move from the men was met with armalites pointed at them. I remembered clearly, a little boy approached me crying. I tried to comfort him but his pleading echoed in the depths

of my heart with these words: “*Kuya, bakit kami sinasaktan? Bakit ginigiba ang mumunti naming dampa? Wala na nga pong makain, wala na nga kaming mga damit, mawawalan pa ng lupa’t bahay?*”

His cry and the cries of women and children rang endlessly in my heart. Yet, together with them, I too, was helpless and powerless. I felt I was like them, a little, unimportant poor man of the margins. But right there and then I realized what it means to be marginalized – voiceless, powerless and nobody! The poor slum dwellers, yes, the people whose faces I still remember, became nobody – anonymous before the indifferent and heartless law: squatting is a crime, it is robbery plain and simple.

To recall, one friar accused me that my questioning, reasoning or my judgment in favor of the slum-dwellers is anarchism, hence, irrational. This has also brought me back to an experience in the Philippines in 1992 when I reacted and wrote a letter to the Editor of the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI), a widely circulated English newspaper in the Philippines, upon reading an article calling “squatters” plain robbers (PDI, 8/30/92). In my response I turn back to the accusation for everybody to ask this question: “Today, in this poverty-stricken Philippines, to acquire more than we need is illegal and immoral! [...] Let us be ashamed to call ourselves law-abiding citizens and righteous ones for it is indeed scandalous to enjoy the beauty of this earth while many of our brothers and sisters are suffering. Instead, in front of the million poor, let us kneel in compunction and transform our stony hearts into hearts of compassion. We can understand then that anarchy is a mere effect of our initial massive robbery. The poor are only victims and their little sins are incomparable to the evil structures we have actually perpetrated.” (“Letter to the Editor,” Philippine Daily Inquirer, 14 September 1992).

Truly enough, any present political states would call this anarchism. But this is precisely the reason that I asked why is this politics, which is an exercise of rationality, heartless to the plight of the poor and simply call them anarchists, outlawed, *zingari*, robbers? But why does the world call the American occupation in Iraq a heroic act or is it? Yet, it is easy for the world to condemn the terrorists. But while their terroristic acts cannot be justified, has the world seriously confronted why there are terrorists in the first place? The question remains: Why

is politics heartless and violent? It is for this that I tirelessly search for a philosophy that can find a kind of reason for my irrationality, to find another “*arche*” rather than calling the poor anarchists. This I found in Levinas!

Levinas himself in the beginning line of *Totalité et infini* asked, “are we not duped by morality?” Indeed, politics, laws enshrined by the exercise of human rationalization, however noble its vision, is violent. The totalization in the ontology of politics justifies violence and war in the name of freedom and development. Such totalization and abstraction cannot feel the hunger of the poor. Indeed, for Levinas, we have been duped or deceived by rationalism and humanism. Levinas added that we have been bewitched and made crazy like Don Quixote. Yet, Don Quixote according to him discovered his bewitchment when he thought, in helplessness, about the multitudes in dire need and distress deprived of his aid and protection. But such a realization and hearing of the voice of the inflicted and the needy is disenchantment in itself.¹

Levinas, in his ethical philosophy has thrown back the question to present politics and philosophy as to whether after centuries of implementation it can still arrogantly claim and call itself rational or sane or admit in humility that it has not only been irrational and mad but a usurper and murderer! It is also very interesting to note that Levinas also played with the words anarchism with his an-archism. His philosophy is also accused of irrationalism and anarchism. However, in my studies I also found out that it is still rationality but beyond the totalizing rationality. He admitted it was but an-archic, the non-searching of foundation that only turns into sedimentation, an-archic as it only questions the autonomous freedom’s indifference and self-interestedness, an-archic as it is only an infinite invitation to responsibility. It is in this same way that Levinas exclaimed about the horror of Nazism, “Written by the victors, and meditating on the victories, western history and our philosophy of history announce the realization of a humanist ideal while ignoring the vanquished, the victims and the persecuted, as if they were of no significance. They denounce the violence through which this history was nonetheless achieved without being concerned by this contradiction. This is a

1. E. Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000 [1993]), 169.

humanism for the arrogant!”² It is to be noted however that Levinas distinguishes this humanism from the humanism of the suffering servant, one that is rid of any triumphalism.

Roger Burggraevve paraphrasing Levinas pointed out that Europe, which is built on the idea of universal rationality brought forth violence in the world: “Witness the outcome of these past centuries of glorious discourse on knowledge, whose embodiment politics pretends to guarantee: lust for power, religious war, nationalism and totalitarianism, political but nonetheless bloody fratricide, imperialism aimed at universality, human abuse and exploitation, until in this century with its two world wars, its suppression, genocide, holocaust, terrorism, unemployment, the endless misery of the third world, inexorable doctrines of fascism, national socialism, and the supreme paradox of the defense of the person enveloped in Stalinism”.³

I recall the faces and cries of the many victims of injustice and human rights violations as I write this article. For Levinas, the truly philosophical aspect of any philosophy is measured in its relevance. The greatest gift a philosophy can give is its associations with the preoccupations of today,⁴ the very preoccupations of many marginalized people in our country today.

Indeed, politics, left to itself, by necessity totalizes the Other by reducing him or her to abstract categories. In such abstraction the state cannot see persons and can be unjust and violent. But through Levinas’ ethics, politics is invited to see also more seriously “the tears of the Other”.⁵ In the wealthy man’s desire for profit, he arrogantly, disinterestedly and callously claims that his lavish needs were more important than the other who wish to simply live!

2. E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. S. Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990 [1963]), 170. With this kind of freedom there is no place for the marginalized and the powerless, see R. Burggraevve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2002), 80-81.

3. Burggraevve, *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love*, 81. See also E. Levinas, *Entre-Nous: On Thinking of the of the Other*, trans. M. Smith-B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 191.

4. Cf. Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: La vita e la traccia* trans. C. Polledri (Milano: Jaca Book, 2003).

5. E. Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. A. Peperzak et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

II. ETHICS AND POLITICS ⁶

Many critics⁷ have said that Levinas never really wrote very much about politics. He never gave any concrete maxims or formula on how society was to be administered. It is said that ethics that is not exercised in politics is abstract. One can say there is a *lacuna* in his writings on politics. The reason for this is very obvious. Levinas began his philosophizing as a critique against any totalizing systems in philosophy which are actually manifested in politics. In fact, both of his major philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, begin with a critique of the dominant and totalizing politics that caused war and violence.

Levinas' philosophy is dominated by a passionate critic against politics that has failed to see the humanity of the other. Here, he refers to what happened in the Holocaust and many other violent conflicts that happened during his time. For Levinas, totality reduces the ethical to the political. Such reduction would be destructive since 'politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself'.⁸

Levinas would consider this as the bankruptcy of Western philosophy. Western Philosophy is a rationalism that climaxes in irrationality. It is the height of autonomy. It encroaches on the freedom

6. Unless otherwise indicated, the thoughts here are generally reflected from Simon Critchley, *Introduction to the Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-28.

7. Charles Scott and C. Fred Alford based their critique on the fact that Levinas's ethics which is based so radically on transcendence would have no impact on the realm of politics. See C. Fred Alford, "Emmanuel Levinas and Political Theory: The Power of Powerlessness," (Presented at the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association, Washington D.C., September 2000) and Charles Scott, *On the Disadvantages of Ethics and Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1996). See also, Gilian Rose, *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Ed Wingenbach, "Liberating Responsibility: The Levinasian Ethics of Being and Time," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (1996): 29-45; Andrius Valevicius, *From the Other to the Totally Other: The Religious Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 89-91, 150; and Abner Weiss, "Ethics as Transcendence and the Contemporary World: A Response to Emmanuel Levinas," *Modern Jewish Ethics: Theory and Practice*, ed. Marvin Fox, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 147.

8. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Nijhof, 1969 [1961]), 300.

of others. It is a politics without a heart! He tried to retrieve for ethics its primary place in philosophy.

Levinasian ethics is seen as an infinite responsibility to the other person. It puts its emphasis on the non-totalizing relation with the other. It is a relation that is not reducible to comprehension. It is irreducible to an ontological relation with the other. According to Levinas, ontology has dominated philosophy from the time of Parmenides to Heidegger. Such ontology consists in suppressing or reducing all forms of otherness into the same. Levinas' ethics questions the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself. It is an ethics that criticizes spontaneity and freedom.

Hence, Levinasian ethics is not totally abstract. It is actually a critique of the existing politics. While he did not subscribe to political maxims and solutions which one could consider as his blind spot, we can still value how his ethics powerfully challenges the politics of today. Levinas gave emphasis to the primacy of ethics or the primacy of the inter-human relationship. In fact, he considered this as 'an irreducible structure upon which all structures rest.'⁹

He talked about a new subjectivity, a *sentient* subject, which means sensible, vulnerable, passive, a naked bareness, open to the pangs of both hunger and *eros*. Such a structure of subjectivity is experienced by the subject in its relation of responsibility. It is the other within, that in spite of itself, the other is calling it to respond. It is Dostoevsky's subject that is responsible to all and for all and nobody else, but it is always late in its responsibility. It is an experience of a demand that one cannot fully fulfill and cannot avoid. Hence, Levinasian ethics is a sensible ethics, a lived ethics, one that is committed to the other.

However, one can find Levinas' attempts to link his ethics to politics. He called this level the third party (*le tiers*).¹⁰ This third party is not the face of the other nor an *alter ego* but another Other who is *beside* or *behind* the immediate other here and now. It is other than the neighbor but like this neighbor before me, it also concerns and obligates me for exactly the same reasons as does this Other whose face and words reach me here and now. In Levinas' face-to-face

9. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.

10. The following discussion here on the third party can be seen in E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212-14 and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 156-62.

relation, in the other's face, one is confronted not only by the irreducibility of the other but also by the virtual presence of all men and women, who by their irreducibility demand respect. The very ethical relationship of inter-subjective asymmetry, not only demands an infinite respect for somebody who confronts me but also imposes a general care for all human others.

The third party, therefore, is all the others that make up society. The third shines in the face of the Other and its language is Justice. Here, for Levinas, politics was necessary. Our dedication to others, beyond our neighbor, can be realized in and through social organization. Politics shall assure that mutual respect, equality and justice are guaranteed.

But again, Levinas immediately has reminded us that the inspiration of such politics should find its source in the ethics of the face-to-face relation. Politics must find its source in the irreducible ethical responsibility. Responsibility should provide the very perspective to institute a more just world.

Adriaan Peperzaak explained, "All social tasks are consequences of, and preparations for, the possibility of the face to face relationships and good conversations. If they are not directed toward this end, collective measures lose their human meaning because they have forgotten or masked real faces and real speech. This forgetfulness is the beginning of tyranny."¹¹ Simon Critchley added, "While ethics without politics is abstract, politics without ethics is blind!"

Hence, Levinas' ethics does not result in apoliticism, ethical quietism or even pacifism. His ethics powerfully challenges politics to be ethical. In short, it is because of totalizing politics that Levinas retrieved the ethical in it so that a new politics would emerge, one that truly desires a more just society, one that is based on sociality and love.

The fact that ethics for him is first philosophy, particular consideration not only on the level of subjectivity but the ethical dimension of freedom has been made. What we have found however are only traces, but significant ones of Levinasian freedom over and against his critique of the totalizing philosophy.

11. A. Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Indiana, USA: Purdue University Press, 1993), 31.

The concrete faces of totalizing politics, liberalism and universalism continue to persevere in our world and history. Yet, Levinas has invited us to look at the history of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. For me, it is to constantly look at the haunting cry of a mother with her child beaten while defending her make-shift “home.” It is to feel the pain of the Filipino migrant forced to leave his loved ones because of poverty and lack of opportunities. Levinas, indeed, did not propose a blueprint for ethico-political action. He has invited us to go beyond the ethical the task of building a socio-political order of justice and peace but has warned us that it can be abstract and faceless. He has called us to respond freely and concretely with our small goodness, humbly recognizing that “there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other,”¹² hence, in a dis-interested freedom!

We shall continue in the following sections with the same perspective but more concretely focus on the possible politics in Levinas. It might be interesting to see how this Levinasian ethics be translated into politics.

III. ETHICAL POLITY: FROM ATHENS TO JERUSALEM OR JERUSALEM AS THE HEART OF ATHENS? ¹³

Levinas did not have ready-made politics to present. He had, however, ethics to offer to politics. He demanded a just polity. It can be said that his ethics is ethical for the sake of politics, that is, for the sake of a more just society. We have been discussing this crisis of politics as a paradox in the European liberal tradition. Europe desired peace, however, on the basis of truth. It wanted to unify all diversities into one. Every stranger had to assimilate himself to the so-called ideal of truth. All multiplicity had to return to the Platonic or the Neo-platonic idea of the One. While it desired a political order of peace founded on the ‘Greek wisdom’ of autonomy, freedom,

12. E. Levinas, *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 172.

13. The discussion here is based on Levinas’s article, “Peace and Proximity,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 161-169.

equality, reciprocity and solidarity, it had, however, often legitimized the violence of imperialism, colonialism and genocide even up to the extent of destroying the very earth that bears humanity. For Levinas, the domination of the category of totality in Greek philosophy is linked to the domination of totalizing forms of politics.

Levinas asked why this Hellenic love of wisdom translated itself into war and violence rather than love. Levinas wondered if it could ask if the paradoxical Hellenic peace of the European political order presupposed another order of peace. Couldn't the order of peace be located in the totality of the state or nation, but rather in relation to the other human being, an order of sociality and love? Maybe instead of philosophy as the "love of wisdom", philosophy should also have been the "wisdom of love"! In fact, sarcastically, Levinas mused on whether it might be good to exalt a new logic other than the Aristotelian one, a new philosophy other than the so-called civilized Hellenic and Western philosophy that in spite of its civility legitimized the domination and the murder of the other.

The new thought Levinas proposed was the centrality of ethics. This he called the first philosophy. The focus of this philosophy was not truth that absorbs alterity. Rather than truth at the center, truth that only desires to absorb alterity, Levinas radicalized the focus of the original ethical relations one has with the other! Instead of peace that resulted from the disappearance of alterity, Levinas insisted on peace that was brought about by the relation with alterity. He described this focus as the surplus of sociality and love! Ethical peace is a relation with the inassimilable, irreducible, absolutely unique other. It is a peace that does not rest. It is an incessant watch, an insomnia, always awakened by the demand of the other in infinite responsibility.

The relation he focused on is immediate and concrete, before the face of the other. It is not, an idea, a thought of or about the face but straightaway an event of extreme precariousness. It is a relation with a defenseless and nude face that immediately calls, assigns and concerns me. The face in its extreme precariousness, in its defenseless nudity therefore is not exclusively the human face but the destitute, the stranger, the widow, the orphan and the poor. The nudity and poverty of the face calls me to responsibility. It is the impossibility of abandoning the other faced with the mystery of death. The other is the neighbor for whom I am responsible! Here, peace is not focused

on uniting everyone to the truth. Here peace is focused on concrete actions of love of the neighbor. It is the peace of responsibility through proximity.

Levinas seemed to propose that since the Greek heritage had been problematic, it had to listen more to what the Hebrew heritage had to say and had to consider all the more the Biblical wisdom of unconditional or asymmetrical respect for the other human being. Such a heritage is rooted in the acknowledgement of peace as the responsibility for the other.

It is not, therefore, a departure from Athens to Jerusalem. Rather, it is finding a place for Jerusalem in Athens. Neither is it a shift of paradigm. It is simply a recognition that both Jerusalem, the heart, and Athens, the head, are simultaneously necessary for the constitution of a just polity. In *Transcendence and Height* Levinas stated, "Both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the *abstract* and slightly *anarchical* ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem are simultaneously necessary in order to suppress violence."¹⁴

For Levinas, the Hellenic paradigm is still necessary. The order of knowledge in politics has a role to play. His ethics reminds politics that in the first place it is the ethical order of human proximity that calls for the order of objectivity, truth and knowledge. In other words, it is ethics that calls for the order of politics. But political history has shown that politics has been done for its own sake. Politics forgot its an-archival beginning as well as its end. It is now time to remember both, the an-archival beginning and end of politics. Politics, as it exists, acts blindly as if it is simply a computer following general rules. Politics has to be taken back to its height, its transcendence which is found in the ethics of the face to face relation of everyday life.

Levinas's ethics is not the one we normally think of. It does not have a theory of justice or general principles that would be used to evolve a kind of social or political action. He repeatedly describes it mainly as an infinite responsibility to the other. It is not defined in ontological terms but as adjectives. Maybe he does so to be consistent with his non-totalizing method. Indeed, he wants his ethics to go

14. E. Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, 24.

beyond the theoretical structures of any account of justice or any socially instituted ethical code.

He describes several interesting little acts of goodness or banal acts of civility, hospitality, respect and solidarity in everyday life. I think this is what he calls, Jerusalem's *abstract* and slightly *anarchical* individualism. These individual little acts of goodness in daily life however banal or abstract are the sources of one's basic existential commitment to the other. It is this commitment and demand that should be presupposed before any moral theories. Without such passionate commitment, moral theories applied in politics can easily forget the human face of the other and so becomes violent! Below let us consider some of these banal acts of goodness that Levinas mentioned in his writings:

1. Hospitality and Welcome

These terms for Levinas are authentic language. They are ethical and societal language. Levinas pointed out that it is this responsibility for the other that activates the new "powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality."¹⁵ Friendship and hospitality are for Levinas always the essence itself of authentic language.¹⁶

These words took on a new profound meaning in Levinas. Welcome and hospitality are not simply putting oneself at another's disposal, making the other at home. It is not assimilation. Nor, worse still, a kind of concession based on separation-discrimination. But that very putting at someone's disposal is activated itself when the other in his uniqueness "bursts", "unmakes", "disorders the world", "worries and keeps me awake."¹⁷ It is not an act of spontaneous freedom or even a free choice to welcome the other. It is an imperative aroused through responsibility for others and justice.

Levinasian welcome and hospitality overcome such ethics of welcome that are based on equity as compensation and harmony among similars (because, as Aristotle affirms, the similar searches for the similar). Levinasian welcome is an encounter with the totally

15. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 205.

16. Cf. *Ibid*, 305.

17. E. Levinas, *Beyond the Verbe*, trans. G. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994 [1982]), 142.

diverse. It is the welcome given to a stranger, to another with all his unpredictability.

“The welcome given to the Stranger which the Bible tirelessly asks of us does not constitute a corollary of Judaism and its love of God, but it is the very content of faith. It is an undecidable responsibility. [...] Before appearing to the Jews as a fellow creature with convictions to be recognized or opposed, the Stranger is one towards whom one is obligated. The Jewish faith involves tolerance because, from the beginning, it has borne the entire weight of all other men.”¹⁸

This tolerance or this welcome, I believe, is a challenge to the present State of Israel as it seems to be intolerant to the Palestinians, the very strangers in its midst. To be Jewish in the Levinasian sense is not to claim justice and right for oneself but for the stranger! Levinas supported the creation of the State of Israel but he also went further by claiming this Jewish State “will have to incarnate the prophetic moral code and the idea of its peace.”¹⁹

However, I believe the Levinasian challenge of responsibility towards the neighbor is posed to both Palestine and Israel alike for no one can escape from such a command. Even the innocents are called to be responsible. Radically, he said that “the more innocent we are, the more we are responsible.”²⁰ It is much more radical than our silence to evil and injustice is our perpetration of it because Levinasian responsibility comes from a pre-political or an-archival foundation. Freedom and peace between Israel and Palestine can only happen in the real welcoming and hospitality of the Other in their midst!

2. Listening in Dialogue

Dialogue comes from the Greek word, *dia-logos* which means “conversation”.²¹ It is a communicative relation with the other characterized by reciprocity. The persons communicating in dialogue open themselves up. They turn toward each other. They accept the

18. E. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 173.

19. E. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, 194.

20. E. Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 291.

21. See Lidell, *A Lexicon*, abridged from *Lidell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*.

possibility of remaining transformed by these encounters.²² However, it shall be noted that Greek dialogue is founded and enacted on homologia rather than paralogia. We shall later show that Levinas preferred the word listening rather than dialogue. Hence, I have entitled this section as listening in dialogue in order to avoid homologia.

Dialogical communication can occur through an exchange of symbols (words, images, sounds, colors, objects, etc.). It can occur in and through events of profound communion. It is also an entering and staying in relationships which goes beyond the mediation of signs. It occurs immediately.

According to the neo-Hebrew philosophers, F. Rosenzweig, M. Buber and Levinas, man only exists in relationship. Such a relationship can be defined as response (responsibility) to the original appeal of the other: "You shall not commit murder!"²³

Our being part of the "community of communication", as affirmed by the philosopher K.O. Apel, is a logico-linguistic condition and a concrete condition of human existence. It is a logico-linguistic condition inasmuch as persons are consciously speaking existents. It is a concrete human condition when our speaking wants to be taken into consideration. Hence, communicative language establishes intersubjectivity. In communicative relations the condition of subjects cannot be put aside. Dialogue is opposed to monologue. The fundamental movement of monologue consists in shifting the attention to oneself (egocentrism). It is animated by a conditional and persuasive will. The other is not accepted in the particularity of its existence which is inserted in the space of the very "I", but is considered as a mere experience. In monologue, power is totally in the hands of the one who has the word. There is neither availability to asymmetrical nor even reciprocal relations. There is the conviction that one is the sole bearer of truth.²⁴

On the contrary, in dialogue there is the availability of listening and exchange. Dialogue does not give any presupposition to pre-

22. See H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 367-369; 387-388; 538-539.

23. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199.

24. See K. O. Apel, *The Ethics of Communication* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 43.

known truths but considers every position as related and an effort to communicate. It is open to relational occurrence of meaning. Power lies distributed between and among the participants of communication. Dialogue is disposed to lay the stereotypes on which many prejudices are based on the table. It stabilizes a confrontation between diverse points of view from which a rectification or a new equilibrium emerges. Dialogue is not mere complementarity.²⁵

Levinas, however, actually stressed the value of listening more than that of dialogue. Hence, dialogue without considering the call to authentic listening should be overcome. Here lies Levinas's difference from M. Buber. Buber in the *I-Thou* described and proposed an intersubjective relation. He did not sufficiently underline the distance, separation, or estrangement that exists between I and Thou. Levinas, substituting the *I-Thou* relation with the *I-Other* gave the primacy to the dimension of listening. If the other is other, the only way to start off with the other's presentation and visitation is listening.

Levinas incorporated listening in the words "passivity". Passivity is not totally or only listening or "receptivity". It is not so much an attitude but the subject's very mode of existence and bearing. It is a metaphysical category because the subject, being created, finds itself constituted in meaning. Its task is to discern and awaken this meaning.

"The face resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in the expression, sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp. [...] The face speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation incommensurate with a power exercised, be it enjoyment or knowledge."²⁶

The face is not "comprehensible". It is neither objectifiable nor reducible to a system. It is beyond structure. It is an event that shatters. Before it, the subject has neither role nor power but is put into crisis. It is trapped and it tumbles before the face. It is reserved in discussion and has a loss of identity. The "face" enters into our world, which originates from a "strange realm, that is, precisely from an absolute, which is, moreover, the very name of fundamental strangeness. The

25. Cf. H. M. Johnson, *Sociology: A Systematic Introduction* (New York: Harcourt, 1960), 5.

26. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197-98.

signification of a 'face' in its abstraction is in the literal sense of the word, extraordinary."²⁷

"This presence (of the face) consists in a coming toward us, in making an entrance. We may put it this way...the face is visitation."²⁸

The "entrance" of "the face" of the other is a judgement. "The presence of countenance thus signifies an inescapable order – a commandment – which puts an end to the detachment of consciousness. Consciousness is called into question. [...] The visitation consists in overturning the very egoism of the self; the 'face' unsaddles the intentionality which aims at it. [...] The self loses its sovereign coincidence with itself, its identification in which the consciousness returns triumphantly to itself for a kind of self-repose. Before the demand of the Other, the Self is exiled from this repose and it is not the consciousness, however glorious, of this exile."²⁹

Therefore, this is a 'paradoxical entrance' because the other enters as "teacher." Before the master, one listens. Listening, before pointing out "obedience" indicates the capacity to welcome. Welcome is possible when one emigrates from one's own idea and from one's experience. It is total disponibility to receive "other" perspectives.

"Listening", which renders possible and strengthens the relation with other, is not a mortification of the self. Rather, in this listening, the "I" is invested with its true identity. It is responsible. The "I" is called to respond. It is this assumption of responsibility and its effectiveness that gives birth to and "conceives" its very specific and original potentiality.

"Listening is not, however, a pure passive act but locates itself within a radical ethical attention. Man is an "awaiting", and in his waiting becomes attentive-to the other."³⁰

To say "ethics of the other" does not mean so much "ethics of giving and service", but it means most specially "ethics of obedience".

27. E. Levinas, *On the Trail of the Other*, trans. D. Hog, in *Philosophy Today* 10 (1966): 40. In this translation the word 'countenance' is used instead of 'face'. In recent translations the word 'face' is generally preferred. Hence, I use the word 'face' here to be consistent with contemporary translations. See Lingis's translation in *Deconstruction in Context* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 345-59, 352.

28. See Lingis's translation in *Deconstruction in Context*, 352.

29. See Lingis's translation in *Deconstruction in Context*, 352-3.

30. Baccarini, *La filosofia del dialogo da Buber e Levinas* (Assisi: Biblioteca pro Civitate Christiana, 1990), 166-167.

It is an ethics of listening. Obedience is here considered in its etymological sense. The word obedience, as we know, derives from the Latin, “*ob-audire*”. “*Ob*” is a preposition which means, in front of, before or on account of and, “*audire*”, a verb which means, to hear and listen to.

Furthermore, it can also mean to believe and to be called.³¹ Hence, *ob - audiens* can mean hearing or listening on account of, believing and being called-on account of. Hence, one obeys or follows because one listens to and is being called by someone on his account. Obedience therefore in this sense means “listening in profundity”. And so in this ethics, there is the constant attitude to gather all the stimulus and interpellations that hide from reality and from alterity. There is a continuous listening and response to a call. It is ethics that pushes one to continuously overcome and extend oneself. The ethics of the self is a static and presumptuous ethics. The ethics of alterity is dynamic. It always leads the self towards “new lands”.

3. Interculturality³²

The term “interculturality” refers to a kind of cultural interaction. While Levinas did not initiate the reflections on interculturality, we find that his very writings call for a kind of interculturality in a way that is much more profound than the contemporary reflections about it. We find very much of this in his, “*The Trace of the Other*” or “*On the Trail of the Other*”.³³

He was, however, preceded by the noteworthy reflections on tolerance by M. Lord of Montaigne in his *Essais*,³⁴ the studies on contemporary ethnology by C. Levi-Strauss,³⁵ on the rational other by M. Foucault³⁶ and the concept of individuality and difference in

31. See D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (London: Cassel Ltd., 1959).

32. See N. Pirotti, *La via obligata della interculturalità* (Bologna: EMI, 1995).

33. E. Levinas, *On the Trail of the Other*, trans. D. Hoy in *Philosophy Today* 10 (1966); see also “The Trace of the Other,” in *Deconstruction in Context*, trans. A. Lingis, 345-59.

34. See M. Eyquen of Montaigne, *The Essays of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio (London: Aldinettse, 1905).

35. See C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

36. M. Foucault, *Religion and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982).

Heidegger.³⁷ It is also only in these last decades, through the phenomenon of migration that the word “interculturality” has come to the fore not only in human pedagogical sciences but also in socio-political reflections.

Literally, “interculturality” means an encounter between diverse cultures where the prefix “inter” indicates exchange, but also clashes. But as a pedagogical process it aims to propagate the invitation to recognize differences and to see differences as resources. Interculturality presupposes the recognition of various cultures (multi-culture). Differences are a source of enrichment in and through human interaction. With the flow of migration, education to interculturality becomes not only necessary but an imperative.

Truly, Levinas’s reflections are relevant. These reflections call us not to transform the other to the Same but to recognize the total otherness of each one. Relating with the other from one’s perspective is truly violent. It is annihilating the other’s existence and alterity in my comprehension. Levinas calls us instead to go out of ourselves in order to enter into the other. It means putting the other as the point of departure of any relation. Indeed, here rings back again the appeal for a new conscience, which is illuminated by the other, one that is not of domination but, in fact, a way to justice and responsibility. This kind of conscience in interculturality, where the other in his otherness is truly recognized, promotes the value of individuality.

Hence, indeed as Levinas always alleged about any process of reduction and simplification of the other. It is only in this way that the other can be encountered not only in its alterity but also in its true individuality.

Indeed, the phenomenon of migration demands efforts for a new conscience of non-indifference. It overcomes the cultures of indifference and differences with the culture of non-in-indifference.

4. Interreligious Dialogue-Listening

Interreligious dialogue refers to the consciousness that the existing diverse religious traditions are capable of producing a common language and a message that it is possible to construct common

37. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

understanding. (Ecumenism refers to the dialogue between diverse Christian confessions with the purpose of constructing full communion among them).

The crisis of meaning, the ethical emergency, the global questions, the non-overcoming of the varied nationalistic ideologies, secularization, the models of life contrary to the dignity of humanity, the struggle for freedom and for the promotion of all human beings, all these challenge religions. Religions are in fact called to overcome exclusive or absolute visions. These exclusive or absolute visions have too often generated so many misunderstandings and “holy wars”. It is necessary that religions shed these absolutisms and universalisms in order to become instruments of fraternity, peace and justice.

The neo-Marxist philosopher E. Bloch, in considering the Bible, taught that there is a need to deconstruct all the theocratic elements in which God is seen as a transcendental monarch, a symbol of dominion of one person over another, of one people against another, of one culture over another. Such deconstruction should, however lead into the highlighting of those that actually inspire the whole biblical theme – the liberation from all kinds of oppression and from any kind of integralism.³⁸

This is indeed the great challenge of all religions at the threshold of the new millennium: religious fanaticism which is “born when the finite will of human affirmation absolutizes itself in the symbol of religion.” Humanity in this way pretends to speak and work in the name of God. It pretends to believe and pray but removes from God an absolute dimension by placing Him in one’s humanity. Humanity seeks to be absolute itself and at the very foundation it does not tolerate the Other, that is, God, who limits humanity and puts its demands in question.”³⁹

The scope of interreligious dialogue includes the rediscovery of the validity of one’s own religious tradition. It also includes the recognition of the truth of other traditions. As a consequence, there will be an enrichment of one another as religions confront some particular questions like the origin of life, the meaning of existence,

38. See E. Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity* (Oxford: Herder & Herder, 1977).

39. B. Welte, *Dal nulla al mistero assoluto* (Marietti: Casale Monferrato, 1985), 224-225.

the hope of the future beyond death, the reflections on suffering and evil, the values of love and justice and many others. Religions, in fact, can become privileged ways of knowing and respecting other peoples and cultures⁴⁰ in order to foster the values of solidarity, peace and justice.

The Levinasian philosophy of the ethical relation with the Other is truly contributive to this project. In fact, it can radically purify the motives of dialogue. The Other for Levinas is absolutely other and cannot be reduced to the same. Conflicts among religions are always caused by the tendency of one to dominate the other or the non-recognition of diversities.

Moreover, dialogue should be motivated by an asymmetrical and infinite concern for the other. This is a dis-interested concern for the other. It is kenotic (emptying of self-interest) in its relations. A relationship of superiority and aggressiveness is an obstacle to dialogue. That is why we have noted in the earlier section that Levinas would prefer listening rather than dialogue. In listening there is passivity and or receptivity of the infinite-Good. Dialogue can still be ambiguous. However, there are already studies on dialogue that focus implicitly and explicitly on the line of Levinas.

Last but not least, the Levinasian approach to the other in the concrete face to face relationship can avoid abstractness in dialogue. Dialogue is not between “religions” or theories and truths of religions but between people of living faith. Levinas noted some valuable characteristics that mark future relations among different religions: “Jewish and Christian relations [...] with the other forms of worship are characterized by respect and tolerance, but display none of the drama of a soul in torment as living out its truth, when faced with the fact that there are other truths lived out in the world....This interhuman fraternity outside religion, this respect shown to the other form of worship because it belongs to all fellow citizens, will remain the basis of all future relations with Christianity, which will be marked by an absence of contempt, indifference and even vindictiveness.”⁴¹

40. See John Paul II, *Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), n.35.

41. John Paul II, *On Social Concerns*, (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), n. 38.

This also presupposes a new way of looking at religion. My professor Sidney Mascarenhas is right when he says that all religions should consider themselves as God's way to men and not men's way to God! It is the "Ab-solute" who approaches men through many ways, not men who make the "absolute" their ways to the "Ab-solute", who always remains a "Trace."

5. Inter-subjectivity and Solidarity

With the Levinasian primacy of responsibility, solidarity takes a more solid meaning. It will ring with the many profound reflections of John Paul II on solidarity. Solidarity "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."⁴² What I stress here is what rings true with Levinas, that is, the persevering determination to be responsible for all, the stubborn responsibility. Levinas calls this the "non-interchangeability" of responsibility.⁴³

Solidarity should not be confused with mere assistance or the dole-outs of the rich to the needy. It is connected with the principle of responsibility, which "implies that every citizen also becomes consciously active and creatively participates in the promotion of the other and the common good."⁴⁴

In international relations, "interdependence must be transformed into solidarity, based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all.[...] Solidarity helps us to see the "other" – whether a person, people or nation – not just as some kind of instrument, ...to be exploited...but as our "neighbor," a "helper", to be made a sharer...in the banquet of life to which all are equally invited by God."⁴⁵

42. Cf. E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 135.

43. R. Dahrendorf, *Per un nuovo liberalismo* (Roma: Bari, Laterza, 1990), 97.

44. John Paul II, *On Social Concerns*, n. 39.

45. John Paul II, *On Social Concerns*, n. 39.

In this way, solidarity becomes the privileged way for peace and genuine development. “In fact, peace in the world is inconceivable, if, on the part of the responsible, the renunciation of any form of economic, military and political imperialism is not recognized.”⁴⁶

The encounter with the other (person, race, people, ethnic, sex, religion) may have the risk of becoming a violent encounter when one reduces the other within the confines of one’s own categories. It is, as Levinas said, assimilating and annihilating violence. It is therefore necessary that one opens up one’s glance to the manifestation and revelation of the mystery of the other that crosses the Face and, at the same time, announces itself.

Indeed, he who commits himself positively to the appeal of the Face founds the Good, which is to say peace and solidarity.⁴⁷ It is here that the encounter becomes possible and amazement can be transformed into friendship, love, responsibility. Here, differences are perceived as values and diversities become occasions for growth and asymmetric enrichment.

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46. Conferenza Episcopale Italiana-Commissione Ecclesiale Giustizia e Pace, *Stato sociale ed educazione alla socialità*, n. 46

47. See E. Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993), 134-135.